

HOW DO I AVOID COMMITTING A MICROAGGRESSION AND HOW DO I RESPOND WHEN I HEAR ONE?

EDUCATE YOURSELF

Have you heard people say things like: “I don’t see race” or “I don’t care if he’s Black, White, or Purple, I treat everyone the same; I’m colorblind?” Maybe you’ve said these things. Understand that these types of sayings can be considered microaggressions.

What is a Microaggression?

The everyday verbal, physical, or environmental slight, snub, or insult, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicates derogatory or negative messages to target persons based on their marginalised group membership.

Definition source and more information on microaggressions [here](#).

Recognising Microaggressions and the Messages They Send¹

The first step in addressing microaggressions is to recognise when a microaggression has occurred and what message it may be sending. The context of the relationship and situation is critical. Below are common themes to which microaggressions attach.

| THEMES | MICROAGGRESSION EXAMPLES | MESSAGE |
|--|--|---|
| <p>Alien in One’s Own Land When Asian Americans, Latino Americans and others who look different or are named differently from the dominant culture are assumed to be foreign-born</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Where are you from or where were you born?” • “You speak English very well.” • “What are you? You’re so interesting looking!” • A person asking an Asian American or Latino American to teach them words in their native language. • Continuing to mispronounce the names of production crew members after they have corrected them time and time again. Not willing to listen closely and learn the pronunciation of a non-English based name. | <p>You are not a true American. You are a perpetual foreigner in your own country. Your ethnic/racial identity makes you exotic.</p> |
| <p>Ascription of Intelligence Assigning intelligence to a person of color or a woman based on his/her/their race/gender</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You are a credit to your race.” • “Wow! How did you become so good in math?” • To an Asian person, “You must be good in math, can you help me with this problem?” • To a woman of color: “I would have never guessed that you were a scientist.” | <p>People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites. All Asians are intelligent and good in math/science. It is unusual for a woman to have strong mathematical skills.</p> |
| <p>Color Blindness Statements that indicate that a White person does not want to or need to acknowledge race.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “When I look at you, I don’t see color.” • “There is only one race, the human race.” • “America is a melting pot.” • “I don’t believe in race.” • Denying the experiences of people of color by questioning the credibility/validity of their stories. | <p>Assimilate to the dominant culture. Denying the significance of a person of color’s racial/ethnic experience and history. Denying the individual as a racial/cultural being.</p> |

¹ Adapted from Sue, Derald Wing, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender and Sexual Orientation*, Wiley & Sons, 2010.
Source: https://academicaffairs.ucsc.edu/events/documents/Microaggressions_Examples_Arial_2014_11_12.pdf

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| <p>Criminality/Assumption of Criminal Status A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant based on his/her/their race.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A White man or woman clutches his/her purse or checks wallet as a Black or Latino person approaches. • A store owner following a customer of color around the store. • Someone crosses to the other side of the street to avoid a person of color. • While walking through the studio lot, a security guard approaches a production assistant of color to ask if they/she/he is lost, making the assumption that the person is trying to sneak into one of the sets. | <p>You are a criminal. You are going to steal/you are poor, you do not belong. You are dangerous.</p> |
| <p>Denial of Individual Racism/Sexism/Heterosexism A statement made when bias is denied.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I'm not racist. I have several Black friends." • "As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority." • "Well, I've never seen that happen. So..." • To a person of color: "Are you sure you were being followed in the store? I can't believe it." | <p>I could never be racist because I have friends of color. Your racial oppression is no different than my gender oppression. I can't be a racist. I'm like you. Denying the personal experience of individuals who experience bias.</p> |
| <p>Myth of Meritocracy Statements which assert that race or gender does not play a role in life successes, for example in issues surrounding opportunity and advancement</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "I believe the most qualified person should get the job." • "Of course he got the job even though he doesn't have as many credits — he's Black!" • "Men and women have equal opportunities for achievement." • "Gender plays no part in who we hire." • "Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough." • "Affirmative action is racist." | <p>People of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race. The playing field is even so if women cannot make it, the problem is with them. People of color are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder.</p> |
| <p>Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant/White culture are ideal/"normal".</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To an Asian, Latino or Native American: "Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal." "Speak up more." • Asking a Black person: "Why do you have to be so loud/animated? Just calm down." • "Why are you always angry?" anytime race is brought up in discussions. • Dismissing an individual who brings up race/culture. | <p>Assimilate to dominant culture. Leave your cultural baggage outside. There is no room for difference.</p> |
| <p>Second-Class Citizen Occurs when a target group member receives differential treatment from the power group; for example, being given preferential treatment as a consumer over a person of color.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Producer of color mistaken for the production assistant and asked to fetch coffee. • Not wanting to sit by someone because of his/her/their color. • Female doctor mistaken for a nurse. • Being ignored at a store counter as attention is given to the White customer. • Saying "You people..." • A crew member sends an email to another work colleague describing another individual as a "good Black producer." • Raising your voice or speaking slowly when addressing a blind person. • In the writer's room, the male writer speaks over the non-male writers. | <p>People of color are servants to Whites. They couldn't possibly occupy high status positions. Women occupy nurturing positions. Whites are more valued customers than people of color. You don't belong. You are a lesser being. A person with a disability is defined as lesser in all aspects of physical and mental functioning. The contributions of non-male writers are less worthy than the contributions of male writers.</p> |

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| Sexist/Heterosexist Language Terms that exclude or degrade women and LGBTQ+ persons | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of the pronoun “he” to refer to all people. • Being constantly reminded by a coworker that “we are only women.” • Being forced to choose Male or Female when completing onboarding forms. • Two options for relationship status: married or single. • A heterosexual man who often hangs out with his female friends more than his male friends is labeled as gay. | Male experience is universal. Female experience is invisible. LGBTQ+ categories are not recognised. LGBTQ+ partnerships are invisible. Men who do not fit male stereotypes are inferior. |
| Traditional Gender Role Prejudicing and Stereotyping Occurs when expectations of traditional roles or stereotypes are conveyed. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You’re a girl, you don’t have to be good at math.” • A person asks a woman her age and, upon hearing she is 31, looks quickly at her ring finger. • An executive producer asks a female cast member if she is planning on having children. • Shows surprise when a feminine woman turns out to be a lesbian. • Labeling an assertive female department head as a “_____” while describing a male counterpart as a “forceful leader.” | Women are less capable in math and science. Women should be married during child-bearing ages because that is their primary purpose. Women are out of line when they are aggressive. |

TALK ABOUT IT. OWN IT. INTERRUPT IT

What if you unintentionally commit a microaggression?

At some point or another, we’ve all said something-intentionally or not-hurtful. When these comments are racially charged and based on biased assumptions and learnings, it’s even more important to be able to recognise what we’ve said and how it was hurtful. And then we need to own up to it!

As stated in [A Guide to Responding to Microaggressions](#), “We need to admit when we commit microaggressions, learn from the wrongdoing, and apologise. We all make mistakes, consciously and not, and need to own up to them when we do.”

What if you witness a microaggression?

Speak up. One expert recommends memorising these three tactics from her list of [prepared statements](#).

- Ask for more clarification: “Could you say more about what you mean by that?” “How have you come to think that?”
- Separate intent from impact: “I know you didn’t realise this, but when you _____ (comment/behaviour), it was hurtful/offensive because _____. Instead you could _____ (different language or behaviour.)”
- Share your own process: “I noticed that you _____ (comment/behaviour). I used to do/say that too, but then I learned _____.”

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WHAT IF A MICROAGGRESSION IS DIRECTED AT YOU?

Follow [this guide](#) to effectively respond to microaggressions:

- **Don't accuse.** Focus on how the statement have impact you/made you feel.
- **Clarify.** Ensure you properly heard/understood what's been said. Ask for clarification.
- **1:1** A heartfelt 1:1 Will likely go further than calling someone out in a group setting.
- **Encourage empathy.** Propose imagining what things are like for the person/group that's been insulted. Encourage taking the perspectives of the other person/group.
- **Create a Constructive Dialogue.** Try not to lecture. Instead make the conversation about how you feel when you hear those comments.
- **Listen to other perspectives.** Challenging as it may be, a willingness to be open to all sides may engender the same response from others.

CHALLENGING BIAS TAKES PRACTICE

It's understandable to get flustered by microaggressions and hurtful remarks. Try role-playing different scenarios so you can be ready to respond in the moment. Having a few well-rehearsed phrases on hand can help you speak up when it counts most. [This guide](#) provides an extensive list of phrases and responses you can use. Here are some examples.

- **That's not funny to me. It sounds racist.**
- **What makes that joke funny?**
- **Let's be careful of our words. We respect all people here.**
- **Let me push on that a little...**
- **How do you think our/your....would feel if s/he heard you say/call her/him that**
- **I don't want to put you on the spot, but that comment makes me feel uncomfortable.**
- **Think about what you just said. If you really mean that, we need to talk.**