

Microaggressions and Microaffirmations Series **PART 1: Defining Microaggressions and Microaffirmations**

In 2015 the UC Office of the President held a workshop on fostering inclusive excellence for UC department chairs and deans. They published this list of example microaggressions, which subsequently received some backlash from across the political spectrum. This is an example of the highly political context in which microaggressions take shape and gain importance. Indeed, in a climate in which [overt demonstrations](#) of racist, homophobic, xenophobic, ableist and misogynist views are not uncommon on college campuses and elsewhere, awareness of more subtle forms of exclusion like microaggressions becomes increasingly important. What follows includes information to help instructors avoid microaggressions when possible, and identify and respond to them when they occur.

Defining Microaggressions

Although the term was first coined by Pierce in 1978, Sue et al. published a landmark 2007 study that defined microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative...slights and insults” (p. 271). Microaggressions are often unintentional or automatic, come from well-meaning people, and may leave everyone involved uncertain about what happened. However, it is more important to consider the way a person may experience a microaggression than it is to consider the intent behind the sentiment.

It is worth noting that the research on microaggressions is ongoing (Bartlett, 2017). Scott Lilienfeld (2017) argues that at this time psychologists are still unclear about the effects of microaggressions, and contends that efforts on many college campuses to train faculty, staff, and students on recognizing and mitigating microaggressions may do more harm than good. While Lilienfeld’s offers an important perspective, microaggressions do happen. In an effort to help you avoid potentially invalidating your students’ experiences, we provide this handout.

Microaffirmations

As a positive strategy to prevent microaggressions, you can use “microaffirmations,” or small acts that foster inclusion, listening, comfort, and support for people who may feel isolated or invisible in an environment (Rowe, 2008). These can include welcoming facial expressions, making concerted efforts to use students’ correct names, pronunciations, and pronouns, affirming students’ feelings and experiences, and rewarding positive behaviors. Consider using “affirming messages” such as these from Powell, Demetriou, and Fisher (2013):

- “I’m glad you’re here,”
- “I see you’re making progress in this area,”
- “I’m concerned about you. Please come visit me in office hours,”
- “What do you think you did well in this class/situation/assignment?”
- “What will you do differently next time?”
- “Have you thought about utilizing ____ (campus resource)? Many successful students find this resource helpful.”
- “I notice that you’re interested in _____. Have you considered participating in _____ (opportunity/program/organization)?”

Additional Resources

The following are a few additional resources that can help you understand and approach microaggressions:

- [“How to Be an Ally to Someone Experiencing Microaggressions”](#)
- [“Microaffirmations in Higher Ed Advising”](#)
- [The Microaggressions Project](#)
- [Recognizing Microaggressions and the Messages They Send](#)

- o From “[Fostering Inclusive Excellence: Strategies and Tools for Department Chairs and Deans.](#)” 2015.

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PART 2: Recognizing and Responding to Microaggressions

Over time, microaggressions can inhibit the academic performance of students as they experience increased feelings of discomfort, self-doubt, isolation, and emotional exhaustion (Solorzano et al., 2000); undue stress and feelings of exclusion (Yosso et al., 2009); hopelessness and even post-traumatic stress disorder (Nadal et al., 2011). Additionally, microaggressions can often be explained in ways that absolve the perpetrator of responsibility, implicitly delegitimizing the experience of the targeted person (Sue et al., 2007). This type of gaslighting, in which the person experiencing the microaggression is made to feel that they are imagining things or being “overly sensitive,” can be just as detrimental as the microaggression itself (Sue, 2010).

Recognizing Microaggressions and the Messages They Send

Before you can respond to a microaggression, it’s necessary to recognize that one has occurred. As noted above, in 2015 the UC Office of the President published “[Recognizing Microaggressions and the Messages They Send](#),” a list of example microaggressions. The following examples are excerpted from that list:

Microaggressions	Examples	Messages
Ascription of intelligence. Evaluates someone’s intelligence or aptitudes based on their race and gender.	(To a woman of color): “I would never have guessed you were a scientist!” Or “How did you get so good at math?”	People of color and/or women are not as intelligent and adept at math and science as whites and men.
Assumption of criminality/danger. Presumes a person of color to be dangerous, deviant or criminal because of their race.	A white person crosses the street to avoid a person of color, or a professor asks a young person of color in an academic building if they are lost, insinuating they may be trying to break in.	People of color don’t belong here, they are dangerous.
“Othering” cultural values and communication styles. Indicates that dominant values and communication styles are “normal” or ideal.	Structuring grading practices in such a way that only verbal participation is rewarded, failing to recognize cultural differences in communication styles, and varying levels of comfort with English verbal communication.	Assimilate to the dominant culture.
Second class citizen. Awards differential treatment.	Calling on men students more frequently than women students; mistaking a student of color for a service worker.	Men’s ideas are more important; people of color are destined to be servants.
Gender/sexuality exclusive language. Excludes women and LGBTQIA community.	Forms that only offer male/female choice for gender; use of the pronoun “he” to refer to all people.	There are only two acceptable genders; men are normative and women are derivative.

Responding to Microaggressions

Microaggressions can and do occur in the classroom. However, their occurrence can be an opportunity to stimulate potentially generative dialogues, though success in facilitating such conversations depends

strongly on instructors' abilities to recognize and respond to microaggressions in the first place (Sue et al., 2009). Below are some practical strategies to dealing with microaggressions perpetrated by students in the classroom:

Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Address the comment.	Ignoring these comments can be tempting, especially if you feel uncomfortable, but that will send the message that such comments are okay.
Decide if immediately pursuing the topic is in the best interest of the class.	If necessary, count to ten and take a deep breath. If you feel unprepared to engage the topic, tell the class that you will talk about it at the next class meeting. Then prepare in the meantime, and revisit the topic at the next opportunity.
If you decide to pursue it, legitimize the discussion.	Avoid changing the subject or dismissing topics of race, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, disability, etc. as they arise (unless you are clear that you will return to the topic in the near future). This dismissal is itself a type of microaggression against some students.
Use a direct approach to facilitating the discussion.	Don't be a passive observer, or let the class take over the discussion. Similarly, try not to expect students to be "representatives" speaking for their identity groups, or to make up for your lack of comfort or knowledge. The A.C.T.I.O.N. Framework (Souza, Ganote, & Cheung, 2016) is one method for effectively responding to microaggressions in your classroom.
Validate the feelings of your students.	Avoid questioning, dismissing, or playing down feelings that your students have about issues of difference and power. They are trusting you when they share their feelings.
Be willing to accept a different reality than your own.	It's likely that if you have a different background and circumstances than your students, and the stories, feelings, and views they share may not resonate with your own.
Consider sharing the ways in which you have been conditioned by the circumstances of your life and society.	Revealing yourself as "flawed" will encourage students to take risks by sharing their experiences and thoughts, and communicates courage in approaching conversations about difference and relationality.

Additional Resources

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- [The Microaggressions Project](#)
- [Recognizing Microaggressions and the Messages They Send](#)
 - From ["Fostering Inclusive Excellence: Strategies and Tools for Department Chairs and Deans."](#) 2015.

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