



# RECOGNIZING MICROAGGRESSIONS ACTIVITY

## DESCRIPTION

The topic of microaggressions can feel overwhelming and frustrating if we only imagine it as creating a list of things we can and cannot say.

According to psychologist Derald Wing Sue, PhD, microaggressions are “the everyday slights, indignities, put downs and insults that people of color, women, LGBT populations or those who are marginalized experience in their day-to-day interactions with people.” Microaggressions often manifest through indirect, subtle, or unintentional behaviors or statements that do not necessarily reflect malicious intent, but can still create a hostile or discriminatory environment for groups or individuals.

When microaggressions surface, they are like the tip of the iceberg showing us the hidden implicit and explicit beliefs of individuals and the culture of our environments. In order to affectively address them, we must learn to recognize the stories of deficit, power and separation that inform the surface statements and actions. If we never get beneath the surface of these, our superficial language may change, (i.e. people don't say things in front of each other anymore), but the beliefs and cultures that support them remain intact.

## SUGGESTED USES

The first document is a guide the city of Cambridge, MA created to support its policies around microaggressions by naming not only the microaggressions, but highlighting the context or stories that lie beneath them. The second document helps us identify common microaggressions in the classroom. Use these documents to stimulate discussion about and practice recognizing microaggressions with the following suggested prompts:

1. What microaggression examples were familiar to you? What was new or surprising to you? What underlying “messages” were you familiar with?
2. Why is it important to understand the context and the message and not just the surface language?
3. Identify some of the underlying messages of the common classroom microaggressions.
4. As a group, identify and discuss some of the common microaggressions that occur in your environment. What beliefs inform them? How does the culture of your environment perpetuate them?

## GO DEEPER WITH EPOCH

If you are interested in deepening your understanding of why this activity and others like it need to become more mainstream, we would recommend exploring our online learning modules and our Conversation Starter Cards to practice building your Compassionate Dialogue skills.

For more information, please explore our [online education portal](#) or visit [Tools of the Trade](#) on our [website](#) for this and other free resources.

## Examples of Verbal and Non-Verbal Microaggressions

Microaggression	Theme	Implicit Bias/Context	Impact/Message
"Where are you from?" "Where were you born?" "You speak good English."	<b>Alien in own land</b>	When Asian Americans and Latino Americans are assumed to be foreign-born.	You are not American. You are a foreigner.
"You are a credit to your race." "You are so articulate." Asking an Asian person to help with a Math or Science problem.	<b>Ascription of Intelligence</b> Assigning intelligence to a person of color on the basis of their race.	People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites. All Asians are intelligent and good in Math/Sciences.	It is unusual for someone of your race to be intelligent.
"When I look at you, I don't see color." "America is a melting pot." "There is only one race, the human race." "All lives matter."	<b>Color Blindness</b> Statements that indicate that a White person does not want to acknowledge race.	Since race doesn't have an affect on me (white person) I can't see why we can't all get along.	Denying a person of color's racial/ethnic experiences. You must assimilate/acculturate to the dominant culture. Denying the individual as a racial/cultural being.
A White man or woman clutching their purse or checking their wallet as a Black or Latinx person approaches or passes. A store owner following a customer of color around the store. Crossing the street when a person of color approaches.	<b>Criminality</b> Assumption of criminal status on the basis of race.	A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant on the basis of their race.	You are a criminal. You are going to steal. You are poor. You do not belong. You are dangerous.
"Don't you want a family?" "Have you ever had real sex?" "So, who is the man in the relationship?"	<b>Heteronormativity</b>	That people who aren't in heterosexual relationships are unable to have a family. Assumes that they all relationships must fall along heteronormative lines.	You're relationship isn't real. You can't be fulfilled. You must pick a side.
"You're going to stay home with the kids right?" "What she's trying to say is..." "You should smile more."	<b>Sexism</b>	That women must fall into gendered roles from the 1950's. That male affect, presence, behavior is the standard and everything else is contrary to.	You shouldn't be working. You're a failure as a woman. You're not good enough. You're not being listening to and valued.

Microaggression	Theme	Implicit Bias/Context	Impact/Message
<p>"You have a mental illness, but you seem so normal."</p> <p>"Why don't you just get out of bed and get some fresh air."</p>	<b>Invalidation of Severity of Mental Illness</b>	<p>That mental illness looks/behaves a certain way.</p> <p>General misunderstanding of the effects that mental illness can have.</p>	<p>You must not be hurting that much. It must not be that bad.</p> <p>Why can't you get over this?</p>
<p>"Oh! I wouldn't think you live here."</p> <p>"Oh you haven't been to Europe, you really should go."</p>	<b>Classism</b>	<p>Assuming someone doesn't live in a certain neighborhood because of how they look, talk, act.</p> <p>Assuming that everyone has means to travel.</p>	<p>You don't belong.</p> <p>You're not going to lead a fulfilling life.</p>
<p>Washington Redskins</p> <p>Robert E. Lee High School</p> <p>College rooms and hallways with pictures of predominantly White heterosexual upper class males.</p>	<b>Environmental</b>	Assumes that harm cannot take place by names or visuals.	<p>You don't belong.</p> <p>You're not welcome here.</p>

<p>"You're just being too sensitive."</p> <p>Eye rolling.</p> <p>"You're always so difficult."</p>	<p><i>Dismissive reactions that occur when bringing up that a microaggression has taken place.</i></p>
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# Examples of Microaggressions in the Classroom

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*Microaggressions: everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.*

— Derald Wing Sue, Ph.D.

Microaggressions may be based on socioeconomic status, disability, gender, gender expression or identity, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, nationality, or religion. These insults or insensitivities may be exhibited by students or adults within the school community – keep that in mind when considering each example. *As reported and documented by students*, the following are offered as examples for reflection in an effort to raise awareness and sensitivity toward creating more inclusive and supportive classroom and school environments.

- Failing to learn to pronounce or continuing to mispronounce the names of students after they have corrected you.
- Scheduling tests and project due dates on religious or cultural holidays.
- Disregarding religious traditions or their details. [Ex. Impacts of fasting]
- Setting low expectations for students from particular groups, neighborhoods, or feeder patterns.
- Calling on, engaging and validating one gender, class, or race of students while ignoring other students during class.
- Assigning student tasks or roles that reinforce particular gender roles or don't allow all students flexibility across roles and responses.
- Anticipating students' emotional responses based on gender, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity.
- Using inappropriate humor in class that degrades students from different groups.
- Expressing racially charged political opinions in class assuming that the targets of those opinions do not exist in class.
- Using the term "illegals" to reference undocumented students.
- Hosting debates in class that place students from groups who may represent a minority opinion in class in a difficult position.
- Singling students out in class because of their backgrounds.
- Expecting students of any particular group to 'represent' the perspectives of others of their race, gender, etc. in class discussions or debates.
- Denying the experiences of students by questioning the credibility and validity of their stories.
- Assigning class projects or creating classroom or school procedures that are heterosexist, sexist, racist, or promote other oppressions, even inadvertently.
- Using sexist language.

**cont.**

- Using heteronormative metaphors or examples in class.
- Assuming the gender of any student.
- Continuing to misuse pronouns even after a student, transgender or not, indicates their preferred gender pronoun.
- Assigning projects that ignore differences in socioeconomic class status and inadvertently
- penalize students with fewer financial resources.
- Excluding students from accessing student activities due to high financial costs.
- Assuming all students have access to and are proficient in the use of computers and applications for communications about school activities and academic work.
- Assuming that students of particular ethnicities must speak another language or must not speak English.
- Complimenting non-white students on their use of “good English.”
- Discouraging students from working on projects that explore their own social identities.
- Asking people with hidden disabilities to identify themselves in class.
- Forcing students with non-obvious disabilities to “out” themselves or discuss them publically.
- Ignoring student-to-student microaggressions, even when the interaction is not course-related.
- Making assumptions about students and their backgrounds.
- Featuring pictures of students of only one ethnicity or gender on the school website.
- Having students engage in required reading where the protagonists are always white.

Most examples taken, with slight adaptations, from ***Microaggressions in the Classroom*** University of Denver, Center for Multicultural Excellence, by former students Joel Portman, Tuyen Trisa Bui and Javier Ogaz; and Dr Jesús Treviño, former Associate Provost for Multicultural Excellence

Additional examples from recommended resource:  
***Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation***, by Derald Wing Sue, Ph.D.

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