

# Micromessages

Communication subtleties that influence how a message is received.

- Tone
- Inflection
- Nonverbal
- Timing—lack of response

*Individuals send 40–150 micromessages to each other in an average 10-minute conversation.*

## Two Types of Micromessages

1. **Positive micromessages are called microadvantages.**
  - Positive micromessages build confidence in the recipient.
  - Used cumulatively, they can spark creativity, leadership, and exceptional performance.
2. **Negative micromessages are called microinequities.**
  - These are subtle, often subconscious signals that are sent in messages that are negative and can result in the person feeling devalued.
  - Microinequities are cumulative, subtle messages that occur when signals create a negative bias.

# Microinequities

A collective pattern of small, subtle messages, frequently semi-conscious or even unconscious, that devalue, discourage, and ultimately impair performance in the workplace.

1. An employee has a name that is difficult to pronounce. In meetings, when introducing her to groups, and when speaking face-to-face, her manager consistently mispronounces it.
2. In meetings, the manager always begins by talking about his favorite sports team and leading a spirited discussion about sports before getting down to the business of the meeting.
3. A promising MBA candidate for a job has already impressed everyone in his telephone screening interviews. He arrives for his day of interviews with his hair styled in long dreadlocks. One of the interviewers calls HR later and says, "Good skills, but he'd never fit in here."

## Tool: Recognizing Microaggressions and the Messages They Send

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership (from *Diversity in the Classroom*, UCLA Diversity & Faculty Development, 2014). **The first step in addressing microaggressions is to recognize 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
<b>Alien in One's Own Land</b> When Asian Americans, Latino Americans and others who look different or are named differently from the dominant culture are assumed to be foreign-born	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Where are you from or where were you born?"</li> <li>• "You speak English very well."</li> <li>• "What are you? You're so interesting looking!"</li> <li>• A person asking an Asian American or Latino American to teach them words in their native language.</li> <li>• Continuing to mispronounce the names of students after students have corrected the person time and time again. Not willing to listen closely and learn the pronunciation of a non-English based name.</li> </ul>	You are not a true American.  You are a perpetual foreigner in your own country.  Your ethnic/racial identity makes you exotic.
<b>Ascription of Intelligence</b> Assigning intelligence to a person of color or a woman based on his/her race/gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "You are a credit to your race."</li> <li>• "Wow! How did you become so good in math?"</li> <li>• To an Asian person, "You must be good in math, can you help me with this problem?"</li> <li>• To a woman of color: "I would have never guessed that you were a scientist."</li> </ul>	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.
<b>Color Blindness</b> Statements that indicate that a White person does not want to or need to acknowledge race.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "When I look at you, I don't see color."</li> <li>• "There is only one race, the human race."</li> <li>• "America is a melting pot."</li> <li>• "I don't believe in race."</li> <li>• Denying the experiences of students by questioning the credibility /validity of their stories.</li> </ul>	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.
<b>Criminality/Assumption of Criminal Status</b> A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant based on his/her race.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A White man or woman clutches his/her purse or checks wallet as a Black or Latino person approaches.</li> <li>• A store owner following a customer of color around the store.</li> <li>• Someone crosses to the other side of the street to avoid a person of color.</li> <li>• While walking through the halls of the Chemistry building, a professor approaches a post-doctoral student of color to ask if she/he is lost, making the assumption that the person is trying to break into one of the labs.</li> </ul>	You are a criminal.  You are going to steal/you are poor, you do not belong.  You are dangerous.
<b>Denial of Individual Racism/Sexism/Heterosexism</b> A statement made when bias is denied.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I'm not racist. I have several Black friends."</li> <li>• "As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority."</li> <li>• To a person of color: "Are you sure you were being followed in the store? I can't believe it."</li> </ul>	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.
<b>Myth of Meritocracy</b> Statements which assert that race or gender does not play a role in life successes, for example in issues like faculty demographics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I believe the most qualified person should get the job."</li> <li>• "Of course he'll get tenure, even though he hasn't published much—he's Black!"</li> <li>• "Men and women have equal opportunities for achievement."</li> <li>• "Gender plays no part in who we hire."</li> <li>• "America is the land of opportunity."</li> <li>• "Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough."</li> <li>• "Affirmative action is racist."</li> </ul>	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.

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<b>Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles</b> The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant/White culture are ideal/"normal".	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To an Asian, Latino or Native American: <i>"Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal."</i> <i>"Speak up more."</i></li> <li>Asking a Black person: <i>"Why do you have to be so loud/animated? Just calm down."</i></li> <li><i>"Why are you always angry?"</i> anytime race is brought up in the classroom discussion.</li> <li>Dismissing an individual who brings up race/culture in work/school setting.</li> </ul>	Assimilate to dominant culture.  Leave your cultural baggage outside. There is no room for difference.
<b>Second-Class Citizen</b> 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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Faculty of color mistaken for a service worker.</li> <li>Not wanting to sit by someone because of his/her color.</li> <li>Female doctor mistaken for a nurse.</li> <li>Being ignored at a store counter as attention is given to the White customer.</li> <li>Saying <i>"You people..."</i></li> <li>An advisor assigns a Black post-doctoral student to escort a visiting scientist of the same race even though there are other non-Black scientists in this person's specific area of research.</li> <li>An advisor sends an email to another work colleague describing another individual as a "good Black scientist."</li> <li>Raising your voice or speaking slowly when addressing a blind student.</li> <li>In class, an instructor tends to call on male students more frequently than female ones.</li> </ul>	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 female students are less worthy than the contributions of male students.
<b>Sexist/Heterosexist Language</b> Terms that exclude or degrade women and LGBT persons.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use of the pronoun "he" to refer to all people.</li> <li>Being constantly reminded by a coworker that <i>"we are only women."</i></li> <li>Being forced to choose Male or Female when completing basic forms.</li> <li>Two options for relationship status: married or single.</li> <li>A heterosexual man who often hangs out with his female friends more than his male friends is labeled as gay.</li> </ul>	Male experience is universal. Female experience is invisible.  LGBT categories are not recognized. LGBT partnerships are invisible.  Men who do not fit male stereotypes are inferior.
<b>Traditional Gender Role Prejudicing and Stereotyping</b> Occurs when expectations of traditional roles or stereotypes are conveyed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When a female student asks a male professor for extra help on an engineering assignment, he asks <i>"What do you need to work on this for anyway?"</i></li> <li><i>"You're a girl, you don't have to be good at math."</i></li> <li>A person asks a woman her age and, upon hearing she is 31, looks quickly at her ring finger.</li> <li>An advisor asks a female student if she is planning on having children while in postdoctoral training.</li> <li>Shows surprise when a feminine woman turns out to be a lesbian.</li> <li>Labeling an assertive female committee chair/dean as a "b____," while describing a male counterpart as a "forceful leader."</li> </ul>	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.

## Find the Microinequities or Microaggressions

Decode the following statements for undercover offenses. These are statements that may not have been meant offensively but could be interpreted that way. Who are these situations or statements potentially offensive to and why?

1. Sam's attempt to engage more diverse engineering candidates who didn't have typical Silicon Valley educations or résumés in the hiring process triggered a laundry list of objections from colleagues. When Sam proposed a task force to focus on onboarding and welcoming minority tech talent into the firm, he got an earful in a tense conversation with his boss, who said to Sam, "Diversity is fine, but we don't want to lower the bar."
2. "I know Joe is gay, but he's different. I don't think of him that way."
3. "If they're in this country, they should learn how to speak the language."
4. A single mother needs to leave early to go pick up her child every day from day care. At a team meeting to get buy-in and support, a single female says, "I understand having to go pick up your kid, but I have things that I'd like to do, too. After all, you chose to be a mother. I didn't."
5. In an impatient tone of voice, a 26 year old says to a 50-something person, "Just give me your phone. I'll do it for you. Way faster."
6. "I'm color blind. We are all one race . . . the human race."
7. Your employee tells you she is transgender and will start wearing women's clothes to work. You ask, "When did you decide you were a woman?"
8. "I don't even think of you as Mexican."
9. "We need to impose a dress code banning tattoos at work. What will the customers think?"
10. "When my boss walks into the office, he says, 'Hello, girls,' to my coworker and me but will address each man by name."
11. "I'm Muslim, and during the month of Ramadan, I fast every day between sunrise and sunset, including workdays. No one else on my IT team is Muslim, so I explain to my boss and my team that I won't be eating or drinking at work and they say they understand. We're on an intense project deadline, so we have a daily lunch meeting. I can stand it when they eat cold sandwiches, but they order pizza. Hot, aromatic pizza. And one of the women always offers me a slice, saying, 'C'mon, eat some. It'll boost your energy. One slice isn't going to hurt!'"
12. "My white American coworker said to me: 'You're really good at this job, but it bothers me when people like you come to this country and take jobs from real Americans.' I asked him where he thought I was from, and he said, 'Mexico.'"

I said, 'Nope, born and raised in the USA.'"

13. "My colleague at work constantly refers to our two Taiwanese-born coworkers as the 'Asian Import/Export Business.' He calls them Peking and Duck."
14. "Today I opened the cabinet in my private office to find that one of my coworkers left a bottle of Febreze pet odor eliminator. I have a service dog that comes to work with me. I keep my dog immaculately clean."
15. "Blond jokes really upset me because I can't tell you how many times I've been told I'm smart for a blond girl."
16. "One of my coworkers continues to mispronounce my name after I have corrected him time and time again."
17. "My team consists of seven men and two women (I'm one of them). Whenever I speak up and offer a suggestion or an idea in a meeting, I get interrupted. It's a challenge for me to get myself heard in a meeting, and I think they need to hear it. My boss does nothing about it."
18. "Of course he'll get tenure, even though he hasn't published much because he's black."
19. "A white executive says to his 200 assembled employees, 'I worked my way up here by working hard. You've got the same opportunities I had. It's a level playing field. Just work your ass off, and you'll succeed.'"
20. "A blind man says, 'I can't tell you how often people raise their voice when talking to me.'"

### Steps to Managing Microinequities

<b>Step 1:</b>	Analyze what happened.
<b>Step 2:</b>	What did I feel about what happened?
<b>Step 3:</b>	How did I interpret the other person's behavior _____ (so that I had this) _____ (feeling)?
<b>Step 4:</b>	How do I want to work with this person? How do I want the other person to work with me? What's my intention with this person? How important is the relationship to me?
<b>Step 5:</b>	Let the other person know you experienced his/her comments or actions as a microinequity. Evaluate the intention or reinterpret the behavior and change the way you feel about what happened or decide to do nothing.



## ***Microaggressions and Microaffirmations Series*** **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:

<b>Microaggressions</b>	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Messages</b>
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:





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

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

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