Tool: Interrupting Microaggressions

MICROAGGRESSION EXAMPLE AND THEME	THIRD PARTY INTERVENTION EXAMPLE	COMMUNICATION APPROACH
Alien in One's Own Land To a Latino American: "Where are you from?" **Ascription of Intelligence** To an Asian person, "You're all good in math, can you help me with this problem?" **Color Blindness** "I don't believe in race."	"I'm just curious. What makes you ask that?" "I heard you say that all Asians are good in math. What makes you believe that?" "So, what do you believe in? Can you elaborate?"	**INQUIRE** Ask the speaker to elaborate. This will give you more information about where s/he is coming from, and may also help the speaker to become aware of what s/he is saying. **KEY PHRASES:** "Say more about that." "Can you elaborate on your point?" "It sounds like you have a strong opinion about this. Tell me why." "What is it about this that concerns you the most?"
Myth of Meritocracy "Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough." **Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles** Asking a Black person: "Why do you have to be so loud/animated? Just calm down."	"So you feel that everyone can succeed in this society if they work hard enough. Can you give me some examples?" "It appears you were uncomfortable when ___said that. I'm thinking that there are many styles to express ourselves. How we can honor all styles of expression—can we talk about that?"	**PARAPHRASE/REFLECT** Reflecting in one's own words the essence of what the speaker has said. Paraphrasing demonstrates understanding and reduces defensiveness of both you and the speaker. Restate briefly in your own words, rather than simply parroting the speaker. Reflect both content and feeling whenever possible. **KEY PHRASES:** "So, it sounds like you think…" "You're saying…You believe…"
Second-Class Citizen You notice that your female colleague is being frequently interrupted during a committee meeting. **Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles** To a woman of color: "I would have never guessed that you were a scientist."	Responder addressing the group: "_____ brings up a good point. I didn't get a chance to hear all of it. Can _____repeat it?" "I'm wondering what message this is sending her. Do you think you would have said this to a white male?"	**REFRAME** Create a different way to look at a situation. **KEY PHRASES:** "What would happen if…." "Could there be another way to look at this…" "Let's reframe this…" "How would you feel if this happened to your____..."
Second-Class Citizen Saying "You people…." **Use of Heterosexist Language** Saying "That's so gay."	"I was so upset by that remark that I shut down and couldn't hear anything else." "When I hear that remark, I'm offended too, because I feel that it marginalizes an entire group of people that I work with."	**USE IMPACT AND "I" STATEMENTS** A clear, nonthreatening way to directly address these issues is to focus on oneself rather than on the person. It communicates the impact of a situation while avoiding blaming or accusing the other and reduces defensiveness. **KEY PHRASES:** "I felt_____(*feelings*) when you said or did _____ (*comment or behavior*), and it _____ (*describe the impact on you*)."
Second-Class Citizen A woman who is talked over. Making a racist, sexist or homophobic joke.	She responds: "I would like to participate, but I need you to let me finish my thought." "I didn't think this was funny. I would like you to stop."	**USE PREFERENCE STATEMENTS** Clearly communicating one's preferences rather than stating them as demands or having others guess what is needed. **KEY PHRASES:** "What I'd like is…" "It would be helpful to me if…."

Adapted from Kenney, G. (2014). *Interrupting Microaggressions*, College of the Holy Cross, Diversity Leadership & Education. Accessed on-line, October 2014. Kraybill, R. (2008). "*Cooperation Skills,"* in Armster, M. and Amstutz, L., (Eds.), *Conflict Transformation and Restorative Justice Manual,* 5th Edition, pp. 116-117. LeBaron, M. (2008). "*The Open Question,"* in Armster, M. and Amstutz, L., (Eds.), *Conflict Transformation and Restorative Justice Manual,* 5th Edition, pp. 123-124. Peavey, F. (2003). "*Strategic Questions as a Tool for Rebellion,"* in Brady, M., (Ed.), *The Wisdom of Listening,* Boston: Wisdom Publ., pp. 168-189.

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Color Blindness "When I look at you, I don't see color." **Myth of Meritocracy** "Of course he'll get tenure, even though he hasn't published much—he's Black!"	"So you don't see color. Tell me more about your perspective. I'd also like to invite others to weigh in." "So you believe that _____will get tenure just because of his race. Let's open this up to see what others think."	**RE-DIRECT** Shift the focus to a different person or topic. (Particularly helpful when someone is asked to speak for his/her entire race, cultural group, etc.) **KEY PHRASES:** "Let's shift the conversation…" "Let's open up this question to others…."
Myth of Meritocracy In a committee meeting: "Gender plays no part in who we hire." "Of course she'll get tenure, even though she hasn't published much—she's Native American!" **Second-Class Citizen** In class, an instructor tends to call on male students more frequently than female ones.	"How might we examine our implicit bias to ensure that gender plays no part in this and we have a fair process? What do we need to be aware of?" "How does what you just said honor our colleague?" "What impact do you think this has on the class dynamics? What would you need to approach this situation differently next time?"	**USE STRATEGIC QUESTIONS** It is the skill of asking questions that will make a difference. A strategic question creates motion and options, avoids "why" and "yes or no" answers, is empowering to the receiver, and allows for difficult questions to be considered. Because of these qualities, a strategic question can lead to transformation. Useful in problem-solving, difficult situations, and change efforts. **KEY PHRASES:** "What would allow you…" "What could you do differently…." "What would happen if you considered the impact on…"
Traditional Gender Role Prejudicing and Stereotyping In the lab, an adviser asks a female student if she is planning to have children while in postdoctoral training.	To the adviser: "I wanted to go back to a question you asked _____ yesterday about her plans for a family. I'm wondering what made you ask that question and what message it might have sent to her." To the student: "I heard what your advisor said to you yesterday. I thought it was inappropriate and I just wanted to check in with you."	**REVISIT** Even if the moment of a microaggression has passed, go back and address it. Research indicates that an unaddressed microaggression can leave just as much of a negative impact as the microaggression itself. **KEY PHRASES:** "I want to go back to something that was brought up in our conversation/meeting/class …." "Let's rewind ___minutes…"

CONSIDERATIONS:

- The communication approaches are most effective when used in combination with one another, e.g., using impact and preference statements, using inquiry and paraphrasing together, etc.
- Separate the person from the action or behavior. Instead of saying "you're racist", try saying "that could be perceived as a racist remark." Being called a racist puts someone on the defensive and can be considered "fighting words."
- Avoid starting questions with "Why"—it puts people on the defensive. Instead try "how" "what made you ….."
- When addressing a microaggression, try to avoid using the pronoun "you" too often—it can leave people feeling defensive and blamed. Use "I" statements describing the impact on you instead or refer to the action indirectly, e.g., "when _____ was said…" or "when_____happened…"
- How you say it is as critical as what you say, e.g., tone of voice, body language, etc. The message has to be conveyed with respect for the other person, even if one is having a strong negative reaction to what's been said. So it is helpful to think about your intention when interrupting a microaggression—e.g., do you want that person to understand the impact of his/her action, or stop his/her behavior, or make the person feel guilty, etc. Your intention and the manner in which you execute your intention make a difference.
- Sometimes humor can defuse a tense situation.

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