Recognising and Counteracting Racial Microaggressions:
advice for teaching staff

> This resource is intended to help you to:
> - Understand what a microaggression is
> - Understand the effect of microaggressions on student wellbeing and participation
> - Identify the most common forms of racial microaggression
> - Learn some practical ways to counteract microaggressions and create an inclusive environment for all students
> - Find further reading and resources

What are 'microaggresions?

"Everyday verbal, non-verbal and environmental slights, snubs or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory or negative message to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership" (Sue et al 2019). They are almost always the result of stereotyping of certain groups, which is learned through our social conditioning and we may be unaware of how these can affect others.

Microaggressions disproportionately affect Black and minority ethnic people, but women, disabled people and LGBTQ+ individuals and working class people (UK) are similarly affected. In the UK, the legacy of colonialism also contributes to negative attitudes and behaviours against people associated with former colonies.

They often take the form of:
- 'Off the cuff' remarks
- Exclusionary behaviours
- Questions or comments that reveal assumptions based on stereotypes
- Undermining in public
- Colour "blindness"
- Denial of individual prejudice
- Questioning lived experience

Quotes from students:

> *Students and staff overcheck my work (compared to white students) – it feels like it can't be correct unless verified.*
>
> *I've heard so many people tell me that I 'don't sound very Indian,' and it is a very weird comment because this is how I've always spoken my entire life, even back at home.*
>
> *I don't know how to describe it, but I can tell people are just 'uncomfortable', they don't act natural, they don't make eye contact*
>
> *I'm Scottish, I've got a Scottish accent but because I'm black everyone assumes I'm from London*

Effects of microaggressions on students

Black and minority ethnic people, disabled people and other under-represented groups are likely to experience microaggressions as a frequent and familiar aspect of their environment in the UK, both within wider society and the university. The effect of this is corrosive and creates an ongoing feeling of being regarded as a second-class citizen, inferior or even dangerous.

Each microaggression on its own can seem minor and trivial. However, the cumulative effect is devastating but invisible to others who do not attract them.

Known effects are:
- Loss of self-esteem
- Damage to the ability to thrive in an environment
- Mistrust of peers, staff and the institution
- Decreases participation and ability to study
- Increases student attrition

Quotes from students:

It puts you a box that you're trying to get out of - in a stereotypical box - it limits your social interaction with other students, because if you're stereotyped in a certain way people will expect you to behave in that frame.

If you find people who fit in that same box as you, you might as well just bond with them. And so you end up having this cluster of grad students, Asian students together so it's really hard to fit in with other groups.

Stereotypes make it hard for students to ask questions for example. I find it really hard, and I ask less questions because think I already look stupid and most people think the Africans aren't educated. It's not because I'm not educated that I ask questions, but because I obviously don't fully understand the topic. And I should be treated the same way intellectually, because we are both at the university and I didn't beg to come here. I got this place because I was worth it.

Microaggressions, I feel, always stem from stereotypes, which you think are the truth but they are not and so they come up as insult. So they aren't opening room for growth. Because if you see Africans as poor, they are dirty, there's a lot of diseases, they will always kind of see themselves that way. If you keep on asking me questions like "How come your English is so good?", " I like your wig" and stuff like that it just makes me feel like that's how I'm supposed to be - I'm not supposed to know English, I'm not supposed to be educated or something like that and it doesn't really bring room for growth or improvement at all.

Common Racial Microaggressions

Black and minority ethnic people (particularly those with darker skins).) are disproportionately affected by microaggressions. Remarks and behaviours, which might be experienced occasionally and brushed off as 'rude' or 'inconsiderate' by white people, are amplified by being a constant part of the affected person's daily experience. They are usually categorised into three groups:

Microassault
These are explicit racial derogations expressed verbally or non-verbally. For example:
- Racial slurs
  - 'N*****', 'P***' 'Coloured'
  - 'Oriental'
- 'Avoidant behaviour
  - Moving away
  - Leaving out of group discussions
- Displaying positive representations of white supremacy or colonialism or negative representations of people of colour
  - Swastikas
  - Images of subjugation

Quotes from Students:

> *people wouldn't want to be in the same group as me, because I talk differently or I look different.*
>
> *On the Unibus people would rather stand than sit down next to me*

Microinsult

These are a variety of subtle snubs, conveying a hidden insult to the recipient. Perpetrators are usually unaware they are speaking from bias. For example:
- "Your English is really good" (to someone who is Black or Asian British, Nigerian, American or to people perceived as speaking English as an additional language).
- "You are a credit to your people" (as if they are an exception to the rule)
- "You're Asian, how come you're not good at Maths?" (stereotyping)
- "You are intimidating/aggressive" (to black people)
- "You're very exotic" (intended compliment but experienced as racially based)
- "You Chinese students are too quiet"

Quotes from Students:

> *"Your English is really good." I hate it. I don't know any other language apart from English so what is the big deal? It's actually the main language in my country that we always speak*
>
> *There's these comments that people give they say 'oh, you're being an 'angry black woman'. Every human being in this world gets angry at some point and so like basically it means that it's just a thing that black women seem to find joy in?*

Microinvalidation

These are characterised by communications that negate or nullify the thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of a person of colour. They are often spoken from benign intentions but are experienced as invalidating or humiliating. For example:
- "I'm sure they didn't mean anything by that."
- "You're being oversensitive"
- "Your colour doesn't matter to me, everyone's human"
- "All lives matter"
- "You're imagining it"
- "Anyone can succeed if they work hard enough."
- "I have Black friends, I can't be racist"
- "You should try to fit in more"

Quotes from Students:

> *people have started saying that a lot; "I feel have to be very mindful, I have to think before I speak." And I feel that you should do that anyway.*

Counteracting microaggressions

Most people know that discrimination against under-represented or disadvantaged groups is counter to The Equality Act 2010, which stipulates that people should not be discriminated against on the basis of one or more of their protected characteristics.

However, we also have a duty to ensure that students who have protected characteristics are supported and welcomed into our academic community, fostering good relations between those who have a protected characteristic and those who don't. This means that we should always be alert to incidents where the welcome and good relationships are at risk. Microaggressions are the most common way racist attitudes are expressed on a daily basis, both online and face to face, so tackling them is very important. The university's Dignity and Respect Policy, section 3.1 outlines the responsibility of staff and students to "Identify and challenge unacceptable behaviour when it occurs, even if it is not directed at ourselves."

Microinterventions

If you witness or are told about a microaggression experienced by a student, there are some strategies you can take to intervene. How you do this depends on the context, and the safety of the victim should always be your first consideration.

- **Avoid singling out the victim** and drawing attention to them in front of others.
- **Make the "invisible" visible**: point out the underlying problematic attitude or make it safe for the student to do so.
- **Disarm the microaggression**: step in and stop or deflect. State your disagreement or reinforce the university's values and standards of conduct of your class. Focus on the perpetrator and avoid drawing attention to the victim.
- **Educate the offender**: help them to recognise their biases and explore their possible origin. Facilitate a conversation that emphasises shared aspirations and values between individuals without the need for stereotyping.
- **Seek external reinforcement or support**: Speak to a manager or other person in a leadership position. Contact the Respect at Edinburgh team for advice and help.

Micro-affirmations

You can foster good relations between your students and help them to build a supportive academic community through intentional practice. If you start off and continue to practice these small acts, this will help build an inclusive classroom culture for everyone.

- **Learn all students' names** – if you are not sure, ask them to help you pronounce them. Practice saying the name and/or make a note of the phonetic pronunciation.
- **Show interest in students**, ask them about their aspirations.
- **Affirm a student's potential** to succeed
- **Highlight the student's specific abilities** and progress to them and reinforce this through appreciative enquiry – help *them* to articulate their strengths and to build on them.
- **Validate their experiences** – believe them when they share their concerns or report incidents
- **Listen actively** – lean forwards and focus on the student.
- **Affirm their feelings**
- **Make clear statements about expected behaviours** and what will not be tolerated – state them and put them on the VLE

Educate yourself

People often ask Black and minority ethic people for advice about overcoming racism and prejudice. It might seem logical to ask a person of colour to educate you on anti-racism and how to effectively embrace and support diversity, but there are issues around doing this. One main issue is it's exhausting for people who experience prejudice to have to relive that constantly when there are so many resources available from which we can educate ourselves. Here are a few:

Me and White Supremacy: How to Recognise your Privilege, Combat Racism and Change the World: Layla F. Saad
Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race: Reni Eddo-Lodge
Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India: Shashi Tharoor
The Good Immigrant: 21 Writers Explore What it Means to be Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic in Britain Today: Edited by Nikesh Shukla
Biased: The New Science of Race and Inequality: Jennifer Eberhardt
The Clapback: How to Call Out Harmful Black Stereotypes: Elijah Lawal

Quote from Student:

> *I'm from Nigeria and like all people found it really, really hard... like the whole process of getting a visa, even a study visa to the UK is really complicated. That definitely affects people who genuinely just want to come here to pursue an education and get a degree. And when they do come to, to the so-called 'developed country', to the amazing Russell Group University called University of Edinburgh - we are being faced with racism! I'm faced with Islamophobia on top of that as well. It's SO disappointing because after all of that, you know, the tasks that we have to go through and then coming and still having to fight another battle.*

Review Your Teaching Materials – how to avoid microaggressions in pedagogy and create identity safety

Our aim should be to create an environment of 'identity safety' in which everyone can feel free to express their identity and feel it is of equal worth and value. It is the opposite of 'stereotype threat', which occurs when we feel that we are being judged against a stereotype that suggests our identity is problematic or devalued and we become vulnerable.

- Do your teaching materials portray different countries' cultures or ethnic groups in a poor light? Provide a more balanced view.
- Include resources (books, articles, audio and visual) by Black people and other people of colour, and make this explicit to raise awareness of their contribution to knowledge. Simply putting a photograph next to a citation on a powerpoint slide can be a start.
- Use Black History Month as an opportunity to enhance your curriculum through surfacing the contributions of Black people to your discipline, or how your discipline relates to their history. For example, the role of science or philosophy in racialising people and constructing fundamental ideas about who is 'human' or a 'citizen' that have negatively impacted Black people. Set student projects, e.g. a poster series of the history of Black people in the NHS for Nursing students.
- You can incorporate diverse identities and cultures into case studies, exemplars, and other learning materials.
- If your curriculum asks students to draw on their own experiences, they will benefit from you having some knowledge of their culture, wider readings or trends so that your guidance is academic, not based on popular views.

Quotes from Students:

> *They don't think about the images they use in lectures. I was in one about cannibalism and the teacher used a black cartoon to explain it. He could simply have used an animal, because otherwise it attaches blackness to animalistic behaviour. And showing children in Africa with really bad conditions or diseases – I just feel like it's porn and you wouldn't want your child to be up there looking like that so you probably shouldn't be showing pictures of them, especially when you're very sure that this wasn't taken with their consent.*
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> *I was the only black person in all four years of my degree programme... I wondered, where are the black artists in presentations, reading lists and so on? I had to research it all myself. And some of the feedback I got was downright offensive; relating my work to irrelevant black pop musicians when it was about my experience and history – and it was right in front of the whole class and because nobody really understands the effects of that, because they're all white, I felt really unsupported.*
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> *When I was doing my Master's we were a cohort of 30 students, out of which, I think, four or five students were Scottish, or from the UK. Everybody else was international and still we were studying Scottish perspectives of child development which made no sense to any of us, except those four students who were from the UK. I just feel like a university which is as diverse as Edinburgh and has a lot of international footfall should have a bit more diverse curriculum when it comes to things like that, because they are not just addressing students from the UK here. They know the university is an international university.*
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> *Students from other countries have to adjust to a whole new way of learning and it takes almost the entire length of the course to get over that communication gap, for the student to actually go to the professor and address their concerns. But I think if there could be practices of maybe having like icebreaker sessions or things like that where the professor may be a bit more humanising with students and it's not just for international students I think that goes for every student.*

This resource should only be a starting point. It was compiled from the following resources:

University Resources
- Anonymous reporting of bullying, harassment or discrimination for students: https://bit.ly/2ZrYpJi
- Respect at Edinburgh resource hub: https://bit.ly/30c8JUL

References:

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