THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

RECOGNISING AND COUNTERACTING MICROAGGRESSIONS AGAINST STUDENTS FROM LOW SOCIOECONOMIC or WORKING-CLASS BACKGROUNDS

A Resource for Academics

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Recognising and Counteracting Microaggressions against students from low socioeconomic or working-class backgrounds

This resource is intended to help you to:

- Understand what a microaggression is
- Understand the effect of microaggressions on student wellbeing and participation
- Identify common forms of microaggression experienced by students from low socioeconomic or working-class backgrounds
- Learn some practical ways to counteract microaggressions and create an inclusive environment for all students
- Find further reading and resources

This resource was created through a combination of existing research and interviews with students identifying as working-class/low socioeconomic status at the University of Edinburgh. Throughout the document the terms 'working-class' and 'low socioeconomic' backgrounds are used interchangeably.

What are 'microaggressions?

"Everyday verbal, non-verbal 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" (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.

They often take the form of:
- Casual remarks
- Exclusionary behaviours
- Questions or comments that reveal assumptions based on stereotypes
- Undermining in public
- Assumptions about shared cultural experiences

Most of the research literature on microaggressions is focused on racial microaggressions, but the term is now being generalised to the lived social experience of other underrepresented and/or marginalised groups.

Social Class in the UK today

Although many young people are less aware of a class structure operating within the UK today, the legacy of the traditional British class system (Upper, Middle and Working class) remains a feature of our society. Nowadays, socio-economic groups are more complex, relating to a mixture of wealth (earned or inherited), earning power, type of work, as well as education. The Great British Class Survey 2011 (BBC and LSE) identified 7 classes ranging from a prosperous 'elite' to a poor 'precariat.

Income inequality in the UK has increased enormously over the past 50 years, which means that people in the highest income groups have massively different lives and life opportunities to those in the lowest. The UK has the 7th most unequal incomes of 30 countries in the developed world. The top fifth have nearly 60% of the country's wealth, the bottom fifth have only 1%.

In the past, your social class largely determined the type of work you went into, partly because the types of work were representative of a different kind of economy, based on manufacturing and associated industries, such as mining. People tended to be labourers, managers and professionals like teachers, or company owners. There was little movement between classes. Changes in the late twentieth and twenty-first century have created massive changes in the economy with vastly different workplaces. Changes in education gave young people the opportunity to choose a career, rather than slot into class expectations.

One thing that has not changed, is that people who come from the elite (6% of UK population) still have a much greater chance of becoming financially successful and take on leadership positions regardless of educational attainment. Coming from a rich and privileged background does give you a massive advantage over others. This is due to a variety of factors, such as elite education, travel abroad, ability to access rich cultural experiences and parental networks and support. For the next socio-economic grouping, the 'established middle class' (25% of UK population), having a university degree is the norm and considered the way to attain and maintain wealth and income. Although they do not have elite, privileged backgrounds (where actual ability or education is less important), they tend to use their money to provide their children with similar rich cultural experiences and parental support as well as the best possible education.

Being Working Class at an elite university

Research into the experience of students with low socioeconomic status in the UK and the US has shown that they face particular challenges at elite universities where they tend to be a small minority, on average 5-10% of the student population (Reay, Crozier & Clayton 2009). There are some common challenges that these students face, such as feeling that they don't belong or don't 'fit in', increased risk of depression and academic anxiety.

However, working-class students bring with them many positive attributes. For example, they tend to be highly motivated with strong independent study skills and excellent self-regulation of learning. Research shows, however, that these existing qualities are often threatened and damaged through their First Year experience, particularly in the classroom. For these students, going to university was not a constant expectation throughout their life, but mostly contemplated in the later stages of secondary education, due to teacher encouragement or through career ambitions (careers that require a degree). Reay et al describe this as "making dreams come true rather than doing what everyone like me does" (2009).

> I'm the first person in my family to go to uni. But the others have been told about university from a very young age. It feels familiar before they even get there.

At the University of Edinburgh, students who come from middle to lower socio-economic backgrounds are in a minority. However, in the wider UK society, they are the majority. When we talk to our students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, we find that they were completely unprepared for the experience of being 'othered' because of their background, leading to a strong sense that they did not 'belong' at university. This is a different experience from people with protected characteristics, such as race, disability and LGBTQ+ who have already experienced prejudice and discrimination, and while disappointing to encounter it at university, there is some familiarity with the issue.

> I guess I knew I was working-class but I'm not sure how much it was really present to me when I was living at home. Like so many people I know from home, it was only going to uni that made us realise how working-class we are. It's so weird being isolated, surrounded by middle class and privileged people. Now I just assume I'm going to be surrounded by people who are better off than me.

Commonly experienced microaggressions

The literature on racial microaggressions identifies three main types of microaggression: microassault, microinsult and microinvalidation. The main forms encountered by working-class students at the University are microinsults and microinvalidation.

Microinsult

These are a variety of subtle snubs, conveying a hidden insult to the recipient. These might not be intentional and may be verbal or non-verbal. Unlike students with visible difference or protected characteristics, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds may simply not have been encountered by students who were in selective and private schools and there may a lack of consciousness about how they might be affected by remarks or behaviours. Working-class students who have come through widening participation routes may be perceived as less capable

because of adjustments made to admission requirements, if it is not understood how socio-cultural advantage and disadvantage can affect individual attainment.

I've had people say to me, "you can't be working-class because you're at university", as if having a superior intellect and being working-class can't go together.

Microinvalidation

These are characterised by communications that negate or nullify the thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of underrepresented groups. For working-class students, this might be expressed as disbelief about or minimising their home reality or the challenges they face due to fewer resources. The current neoliberal focus on the individual, decontextualised and separate from social, economic and historic forces can mask the real struggles faced by some of our students. Well-meaning attempts to identify with economic or social challenges from students with financial cushions or safety-nets can be jarring and invalidating.

They really don't understand that their idea of financial difficulties is not the same as mine. They'll say they know what it's like, or that they've struggled with money, but that's not true, they don't have a clue. It's not just about my Dad not having a brilliant wage, it's that without the wage, there's nothing to fall back on.

Different cultural experiences

Sociologists talk about people having different forms of 'capital', i.e., the assets that they bring. Although assets usually refer to material assets like money or property, another form is described as 'cultural capital'. This is being familiar with certain cultural norms, practices and experiences of your social group, which make you recognisably part of that group. As mentioned previously, parents and schools with greater means, will value and provide cultural experiences associated with their peers because they are perceived to confer social status.

I was in class and the lecturer was talking about the Tate Museums and I looked around and saw people nodding and it was obvious they assumed we'd all been to them. I've never even been to London let alone to all these museums. It made me feel like a bit of an imposter, I didn't really belong.

People from private schools or grammar schools seem used to having a more equal relationship with their teachers and parents and more used to approaching them and asking questions or speaking up in class.

My Dad has never read a book, he's actually proud of that. I wasn't read to as a child – I hadn't read a book properly till I was 15.

Different educational experiences

As a Scottish student I did Advanced Higher and Higher Maths, whereas most other students did A levels and in A level you do a lot more than in Advanced Higher Maths, so I think there's a bit of a divide there in terms of knowledge, but that's just how the curriculum works.

The UK school sector is very varied, but it is generally recognised that fee-paying schools and selective/grammar schools (where they still exist) are often chosen by parents as an optimal route to higher education and admissions to elite universities suggest there is a correlation, though not necessarily one based on the merit/s of the individual student. There are differences in curriculum, classroom sizes and practices, as well as social and cultural activities and opportunities, from state schools. These can contribute to the experience of being an imposter or inferior.

This quote also points to a common theme when talking to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds; that of apparent confidence and entitlement to be heard.

In a tutorial or a seminar when you're in a group of people the voices that you've heard are definitely the ones that have been in private school and they're very much comfortable in a small group setting because that's what they used to. At my state school that was hard in a class of 30 with one teacher at the front.

This reticence to speak up, in contrast with more privileged students, is also mirrored in online teaching.

Other students seem to get a new lease of life when they're behind the keyboard, they are constantly writing in the chat, sending jokes to the lecturer and stuff like that. I literally would never put a message in the chat because I'm so stressed about what I say and how I type it.

Different family support

One of the major differences experienced by working-class students was in terms of family support, particularly in terms of lack of parental familiarity with HE, and in some cases, hostility towards it.

I was asking my friends to look over an essay for me and they suggested showing my parents. And they were shocked when I said my parents wouldn't even know what half of these things mean, because their English isn't that good as they're immigrants. Their assumption that their experience is the same as everyone else's is really off-putting.

Invalidation or shaming by more privileged students

Sometimes working-class students are inadvertently or deliberately shamed by more privileged students. For example, for their clothing, lack of knowledge or regional accent, but also by thoughtless remarks. There are some unfortunate myths which are associated with different social groups. For example, there is an idea that if you have more wealth and property, it means you are more intelligent or hard-working. However, there is no evidence that this is true. Similarly, their lived experiences may be invalidated by students who do not comprehend how different (and more precarious) working-class students' home and family life might be.

We were discussing inheritance tax in class and people have explicitly said that they have more money because they 'just worked harder': "We deserve it because we just really, really worked hard for that". And they said to me, "maybe if your parents had worked harder at school they could have done a little better". My father is a manual labourer, but I don't think he works any less hard than their Dad at his desk job.

When you first meet someone that power dynamic in terms of your social background is an instantaneous thing. There's an assumption about certain cultural things. You can see where they put their gaze, on my shoes or bag, for example. I think for students from working-class backgrounds, that really undermines your confidence.

I wonder sometimes if they feel guilty about feeling privileged. In a lecture with about 300 people, a professor asked first generation students to put up their hands and barely more than five of us did. One boy who did, his parents *had* gone to university but he told us he'd put his hand up because he felt bad that there were so few of us!

The fragility of the first year

As previously mentioned, most students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are shocked by the experience of discovering their background makes them different to other students. They have often come from schools or colleges where their superior academic prowess was evident, and they had gained greater confidence in their ability to study and achieve good grades. To a certain extent, discovering that you are not the cleverest person in the class is a common experience for most students coming to an elite university but because the confidence of working-class students is less well-established it is also more fragile. Being at university is also higher stakes – it is a 'dream come true' and so the more casual, less concerned approach of some student peers can be disturbing. Rather than being recognised by staff for their existing qualities, they are often made to feel deficient for things outside of their control, such as previous educational shortcomings or lack of cultural experiences.

The image of the standard student, how they ought to 'look', 'sound' and behave like can be influenced by biased assumptions about the characteristics of knowers and academic knowledge producers.

In order to navigate these challenges, students can adopt strategies which further damage their self-belief or result in mental health problems.

In first year when I started to realise that I was different class-wise, I started to distort my personality. In group work and other social situations I would automatically turn into a person who was more reserved, hiding in the background and having to do that all the time was extremely draining. Yes, I got accepted with lower grades, I come from an immigrant background and I still made it here, but having to lay all your cards on the table when you're meeting someone for the first time is extremely difficult.

I grew up in Edinburgh and hadn't realised how many English people are here at the University. Coming from an all Scottish state school I became a minority within a minority Scottish student population and it was a huge shock because I grew up being able to relate to other Scottish working-class students and then all of a sudden I had to find things to relate to with someone whose Dad's a PhD professor and works at the Smithsonian or something – the difference is HUGE.

I spent most of my first year trying to make myself palatable; toning down my accent, only talking about things like politics and taking a backseat in class. And I got to a point in the second semester and I realised it wasn't getting me anywhere either. After a particularly bruising experience in class where I felt ganged up on by some private school boys, I decided I was going to leave but my Mum said, "this is the rest of your life, grow up, you better deal with now rather than learning when you're in the workforce" and I thought, she's right.

Counteracting microaggressions

Class or economic status is not a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010 in the same way that race or LGBTQ+ are but this does not mean that we should not extend the same freedom from discrimination to working-class students.

We have a duty to ensure that students are supported and welcomed into our academic community, fostering good relations between those who have certain protected characteristics 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 a lived experience of being 'othered' or discriminated against are experience, 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, but also take the opportunity to check-in with the victim, at the very least it can be reassuring to hear that someone else noticed what happened and that they wanted to help/offer support.
- 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.
- Ask for and respect people's pronouns – do not make assumptions when enquiring about partners
- 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

Review your teaching

Here are some ways to avoid microaggressions in pedagogy and create 'identity safety'; a culture where a person's identity does not make them vulnerable to discrimination or negativity.

- Avoid assumptions about prior learning and experiences (especially cultural) which could leave students feeling inadequate or deficient. For example, avoid phrases like 'as you all know' or referring to books or places as if everyone is familiar with them. If certain reading is essential, make sure that students can access it through the library, rather than having to buy it.

> For my first essay for English Lit I was writing about Paradise Lost, which I'd never heard of before coming to uni and another girl said, "Oh I'm just going to send my Dad the essay because he did his PhD on it, so I'll just get his advice."

- Give time to early development of teacher and classmate interactions to increase integration and belonging. Demystify the academic teacher and environment.
- Give as much positive feedback as possible, highlighting when students' contributions were relevant, interesting, thought-provoking etc. and focus on conveying confidence in academic ability. This can be especially powerful if sent as an email after a class.

- Try to give space for less confident students to speak and actively make space for them in discussions by asking more confident students to wait.

> They just seem to have the confidence to talk more. They seem to have this 'private school confidence' and be willing to speak for 10 minutes and feel that they know what they're saying and taking up space.

- Create a clear and accessible environment, for example by being explicit about the rationale behind the design of a teaching session and expectations for participation and behaviour.

- When you talk about requirements, assessment and expectations, break everything down into accessible language and provide detailed, practical guidance, especially in the first year.

- Encourage students to seek support for subject or study-related queries. Working-class students are often unsure of the validity of their questions or how staff might respond to them.

- Where possible, provide reading lists or recommended activities prior to transitions: before joining the university and when transitioning into the next year.

- When setting up activities, field trips and travel, consider from the outset how to make these economically accessible for students from low socio-economic backgrounds and explore the University's funding opportunities.

- Create opportunities for students to belong to the discipline – for example, encouraging them to join or create a club or society associated with your field or undertake a group project.

- Reflect on your assumptions about what a student 'should' be like or the kind of student you want in your classroom. How much of that is associated with behaviours of students from higher socio-economic backgrounds?

> When I came to uni I wanted to write for the student paper and join the student theatre but it took me two years to get the confidence to do it as I wasn't sure I had the qualifications. But then there are people who literally just come to uni thinking, the world is my oyster of course they want to hear from me.

- Personal tutors can help students by being sympathetic to the difficulties and challenges working-class students face through 'acculturative stress' – dealing with culture shock, developing a bi-cultural identity and code switching between cultures, and emphasising these challenges are separate to their academic ability or capacity to succeed in academia.

University Resources

The University of Edinburgh Widening Participation team provide a comprehensive set of resources for staff which include guides on how to help students succeed and progress. The team can help you to develop a local strategy to meet the University's four strands of its Widening Participation Strategy:

- Aspiration and early engagement
- Support to get in
- Support to Succeed
- Support to Progress

Find out more: https://www.ed.ac.uk/student-recruitment/widening-participation/strategy
Download the guides here: http://wpguides.ed.ac.uk/
The Principal's Go Abroad Fund: https://www.ed.ac.uk/news/students/2016/principal-s-go-abroad-fund
Anonymous reporting of bullying, harassment or discrimination for students: https://bit.ly/2ZrYpJi
Respect at Edinburgh resource hub: https://bit.ly/30c8JUL
Tackling Elitism https://www.therattlecap.com/post/classism-elitist-microaggressions-and-alienation-scottish-students-at-the-university-of-edinburgh

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