TOOL: RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

Office of Equity and Inclusive Communities and Teaching & Learning Commons

Overview

This tool focused on providing background and contextual information on microaggressions as well as specific strategies and techniques for responding to microaggressions.

> **Reflective Pause**
>
> Reflect on your current experiences as it relates to this topic.
>
> Consider what you are looking forward to learning more of, or hope to be able to do more of, as you work towards developing anti-racist practices.

Goals

1. Faculty will develop a better understanding of microaggressions
2. Faculty will learn about best practices for addressing, preventing or responding to microaggressions.

Description

Microaggressions are offensive verbal or nonverbal actions, behaviours, and attitudes that intentionally or unintentionally target the identity or self-esteem of those against whom they are directed.

Context & Background

Sue et al. (2007) defines them as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural[sic], or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile,

derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color[sic]" (p. 271). They may include insensitive statements, questions, or assumptions about different aspects of someone's identity such as race, nationality, gender, sexuality, parental status, disability, socioeconomic background, mental health, or any other aspect (Washington, 2022).

While microaggressions are generally targeted at people or equity-denied groups from marginalized backgrounds, racial microaggressions are specifically targeted at people of colour or members of racialized groups. Despite the subtlety of their nature, these aggressions cause pernicious harm by denigrating, diminishing, or even traumatizing those who experience them both momentarily and overtime. Anyone could be a perpetrator or source of microaggression irrespective of their background, status, position, or level of education. However, perpetrators do not always carry out these aggressions on purpose or consciously.

According to Sue et al. (2007), "the invisible nature of acts of aversive racism prevents perpetrators from realizing and confronting (a) their own complicity in creating psychological dilemmas for minorities and (b) their role in creating disparities in employment, health care, and education" (p. 272). At the same time, victims or targets of microaggressions may be unaware, unprepared, and sometimes powerless or ill-equipped to respond to subtle micro-attacks appropriately. When this happens, it further exacerbates the impact of the aggression or violence experienced by them.

Forms of Microaggression

Previous research found that racial microaggressions manifest in three distinct forms as explained below (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274):

1. **A microassault** is an explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behaviour, or purposeful discriminatory actions.These types of microaggressions are more consciously and rarely expressed, and their occurrence is mostly limited to private situations where the aggressor or perpetrator feels they can get away with it.

2. **A microinsult** is characterized by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity. Microinsults represent subtle snubs, frequently unknown to the perpetrator, but clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient of colour. They can also occur nonverbally, as when a White teacher fails to acknowledge students of colour in the classroom or when a White supervisor seems distracted during a conversation with a Black employee by avoiding eye contact or turning away (Hinton, 2004).

3. **Microinvalidations** are characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of colour. When, for example, people of Asian background (born and raised in Canada) are complimented for speaking good English or are repeatedly asked where they were born, the effect is to negate their Canadian heritage and to convey that they are perpetual foreigners. When Black people

are told that "I don't see color[sic]" or "We are all human beings," the effect is to negate their experiences as racial/cultural beings (Helms, 1992).

Within post-secondary contexts, these aggressions may be perpetrated both inside and outside the classroom during interactions among students, instructional team members, and between instructors/ staff and students. Microaggressions which dismiss or trivialize the experiences or realities of historically disadvantaged people such as Indigenous, Black, or Asian students and instructors could happen during classroom and academic advising activities or other interactional encounters and experiences. They also reflect the historical and contemporary prevalence of structural and systemic racism and (neo) colonialism still at work in our environments. Understanding microaggressions, their impacts and how best to address or respond to them is an integral part of anti-racist pedagogy.

One key to addressing racial microaggressions effectively is the understanding that they thrive through attributional ambiguity (where there is a lack of clarity about the real intent of the perpetrator) around what is really said or meant (Wood, n.d.). Anti-racist educators are committed to recognizing, naming and addressing all forms of microaggressions, wherever they manifest. They are also adept at educating and supporting their students, and colleagues, to deal with them. This tool presents information, techniques and resources that will help prepare and equip members of instructional teams to respond to different types of microaggressions that occur in both curricular and extracurricular settings.

Considerations for Implementations

Tips on How to Respond

As an educator who supports anti-racist and inclusive education, it is your responsibility to constantly self-reflect and invest in educating yourself to be more adequately prepared when responding to instances of microaggressions in different contexts. It takes a discerning educator to recognize or decipher and combat subtle manifestations of aggression.

While there are a plethora of documented techniques and approaches (see the instructor resources section), the following basic steps or response techniques can be applied when addressing microaggressions.

Response Techniques

1) **R.A.V.E.N. Approach**

Another template or approach that can be used to deal with microaggressions is called the Raven Approach. In this 5-step approach that can be used in the classroom and other contexts, the following apply (Wood & Harris III, n.d.):

1. **Redirecting** the conversation or interaction
2. **Asking** probing questions
3. **Values** clarification
4. **Emphasizing** your own thoughts and feelings
5. Offering concrete **Next Steps**

Please peruse the source in the reference section for additional details and guidance on how to apply the R.A.V.E.N approach.

2) **Stop Race-Based Hate Response Outline**

If you find yourself in a situation where someone in your presence commits a microaggression, the following steps could be instrumental in addressing it (Stop Race-Based Hate, 2023):

1. **Recognize it**.

   ◦ Recognize that it has occurred and decipher what it meant.

2. **Name it**.

   ◦ Articulate that what has been said is racist and wrong, that you're not comfortable or agree with what was said. This makes it clear that you're not going to let this slide.

3. **Personalize it**.

   ◦ Express how the statement has made you feel. Personalize the impact as it relates to the person who said it.

4. **Explain why it is racist**.

   ◦ Explain why the statement is racist. Use an example. Pull from your own experience or previous anti-racist education. Reference and adapt scenarios and responses available in this tool or find other existing resources to support your response. Today, there is no shortage of anti-racist resources to help you.

5. **Describe impact**.

   ◦ Explain how hurtful and/or dangerous statements like these can be.

6. **Acknowledge your anti-racist allyship**.

   ◦ Share how and why you are working towards being an anti-racist ally. Invite the person to learn more and do the same.

7. **Reiterate own feelings about the statement**.

   ◦ Reiterate how hearing this statement from this specific person affects you.

8. **Call-to-action**.

   ◦ Provide a call-to-action and offer further support. Depending on the response you receive, engage in a conversation to try and learn how the person came to have their view, then reiterate and invite them to engage in anti-racist education.
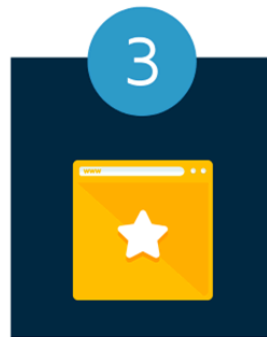
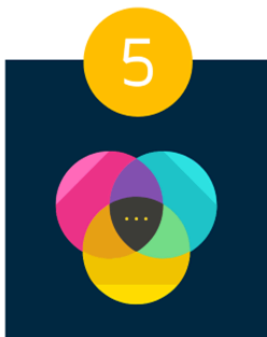## STOP Race-Based Hate Response Outline
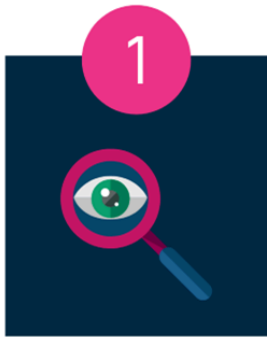
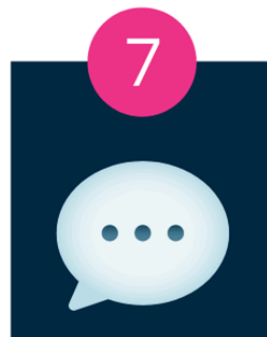**1** Recognize It

2 Name It

3 Personalize It

4 Explain Why It Is Racist

5 Describe Impact

6 Acknowledge Your Anti-Racist Allyship

7 Reiterate Own Feelings About the Statement

8 Call-to-Action

Infographic depicting the 8 steps of the Stop Race-Based Hate Response Outline. Adapted in 2024 by Daniel Benzimara from https://stopracebasedhate.ca/

Finally, when unsure about how to respond or where you feel the case is too complicated to handle on your own, please consult the [KPU Resources on Campus to Support Students and Staff](#) and/or the Office of Equity & Inclusive Communities (OEIC), for support.

Reflective Action Point

Reflect on your learning as you approach the end of this tool.

- What changes to your practice do you hope to implement?
- How can this tool support your anti-racist practice?

Instructor Resources

The content in the following resources address how microaggressions occur and what instructors and students might do to respond to them.

Video: [Microaggressions in the classroom (Video)](#) – This powerful 18-minute video deconstructs the meaning and effects of microaggressions that occur in classroom settings. It includes vivid examples shared from the direct and lived experiences of a diverse group of racialized students from different backgrounds

Article: [Anti-Anti-Black Racism Microaggression: What are microaggressions?](#) – Within the context of anti-Black racism, this explainer developed by George Brown College (Toronto, ON) describes the nature and types of microaggressions and brief tips on how to combat them

Website: [Critical response template on what to say and how to say it](#) – This resource presents practical information, tools, techniques and templates for addressing everyday racist statements and scenarios. The content provided here includes a critical response template, interactive message template, response outline, response example, and considerations for responding to racist comments. It was developed in Treaty 6 and 7—traditional and ancestral territories of the many First Nations and Métis in Alberta by the Stop Race Based Hate group

Document: [Responses to racist comments from the field](#) – This resource offers a variety of memorisable responses or replies that can be applied in different situations when responding to racist comments and stereotypes

Article: [How to respond to an offensive comment at work](#) – In this Harvard Business Review article categorized under the "managing conflicts" genre, Amy Gallo provides handy tips on how to respond to offensive comments, including a summary of the dos and don'ts, as well as two insightful case studies from which important lessons maybe extrapolated

TOOL: [KPU Resources on Campus to Support Students and Staff](#) – This includes a host of the resources and services offered by specific offices and centres at Kwantlen Polytechnic University that can assist students, instructors and staff members who need help dealing with microaggressions and their effects. Contact details are provided through which you can reach out to key personnel to provide you with professional and culturally appropriate support or counsel in line with current university policy

Webinar: [CCDI Recorded 1 Hour Webinar – Managing Micro-Aggressions (2020 Version)](#) – KPU employees have access to online courses and recorded webinars through the Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion (CCDI). To register for a license to access these resources, login to KPU's employee portal (SharePoint) and click [Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion](#).

Website: [Workplace Strategies for Mental Health](#) – This website provides further information and resources about Microaggressions, as well as connections to other areas such as implicit bias and intersectionality.

Guidance: [Sheridan College's Inclusive Language Guide "Tip Sheet"](#) on Indigenous peoples – provides a wealth of guidance and information on appropriate and inclusive language and terminology related to Indigenous peoples.

Guidance: [Sheridan College's Inclusive Language Guide "Tip Sheet"](#) – on gender identity and expression, and sexual orientation and sex characteristics, provides a wealth of guidance and information on appropriate and inclusive language and terminology related to gender and sexual identity.

Guidance: [Sheridan College's Inclusive Language Guide "Tip Sheet"](#) – on persons with disabilities, provides a wealth of guidance and information on appropriate and inclusive language and terminology related to disabilities.

Guidance: [Sheridan College's Inclusive Language Guide "Tip Sheet"](#) – on race and ethnicity, provides a wealth of guidance and information on appropriate and inclusive language and terminology related to race and ethnicity.

References

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- Wood, L. & Harris III, F. (n.d.). *R.A.V.E.N. approach for addressing microaggressions* [PowerPoint slide]. CORA Learning. https://www.ohsu.edu/sites/default/files/2020-06/RAVEN%20approach%20to%20microaggressions.pdf

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Media Attributions

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