**Dealing with Everyday Discrimination**

**Produced by EDI Committee of the whole at the Department of Politics, International Relations, and Philosophy**

*This document is a brief summary of research on microaggression and everyday discrimination, and practical ways of dealing with both in a classroom. It is neither final nor definitive****.*** *It has been updated and revised after (1) a peer-review round by a representative sample of staff members at PIRP, and (2) department-wide feedback round. Some of the quotes and examples included in this document were taken from interviews with students which were undertaken at our department two years ago as part of the grounded research project. The organisers have ethics clearance to make use of its data.*

# First, definitions of microaggression and everyday discrimination:

**Microaggression** is deniable acts of discrimination that reinforce pathological stereotypes and inequitable social norms (Sue et al., 2007). **Everyday discrimination** is a broader concept which microaggression branches out from and thus overlaps with it. It tends to have a greater focus on discrete discriminatory experiences, sometimes including blatant acts of prejudice or unfair treatment, such as when a target (a person receiving a slight) is

treated with less courtesy or receives poorer service than others (Smith et al., 2022). This construct addresses forms of discrimination other than race, such as gender-, class-, age, neuro-diversity or disability-related discrimination (ibid.).

* Negative statements (e.g. “Asians are bad drivers”),
* Seemingly positive statements which typically stereotype racial identity (e.g. “I don’t see colour”; “you’re so articulate”; “where are you from?”)
* Phrases with racial connotations (e.g. “nitty gritty”; “not worth a tinker’s damn”; “giving me gyp”)
* Inaction (e.g. failing to offer aid to a person of colour in distress because “someone else will do it”)
* Actions (e.g. crossing the street to avoid walking past a black man)
* Being unseen in a conversation or a situation
* Being stared at
* Being treated as contaminated (e.g. a cashier putting change on the counter rather than in hand to avoid touching the person of colour).

Everyday discrimination would not generally involve direct physical harm, although, in certain cases, it may, and, in some cases, it leads to it (ibid.).

# More precise examples of everyday discrimination in a classroom:

* *Ascription of intelligence* – assuming someone is unintelligent or smarter than average based on their appearance, accent, gender, or disability.

**e.g.** “Constantly having to prove yourself, not only to the lecturers with your work, but to your counterparts. They almost expect you to behave in a certain way. And you need to constantly let them know that you’re not like that”.

* *Denial of gender, racial, or class reality* – dismissing claims that gender, race, or class were/are relevant to understanding someone’s experience, or intentionally ignoring someone’s pronouns and/or pronounced gender.
* *Denial or devaluing experience or culture* – assuming that others are like you, regardless of what they’ve gone through, and thus undermining or ignoring the existence of histories and cultures of other people. The alternative is not othering people based on these differences, ie. reducing them to their differences from you.
* *Making judgments about belonging* – assuming people are foreign or don’t speak

English well because of their appearance or disability; questioning someone’s

membership status such as “you don’t look disabled” or “you don’t seem that gay to me” or “if you were Jewish, shouldn’t you do x?”

* *Assumption of criminality* – guarding belongings more carefully when around certain groups or expressing fear of certain groups.
* *Assumption of immorality* – assuming that poor people, undereducated people, women, LGBTQIA+ people, or people of colour are more likely to be devious, untrustworthy, or unethical.

# How to deal with it?

It’s not straightforward, because of the many different contexts within which such

discrimination or microaggression occur. The advice below, however, can be followed in most instances:

1. *Inquire*: Show curiosity, not judgement. First, ask the student to clarify or further explain. This will give you more information about where they are coming from, and may also help the speaker to become aware of what they are saying. Give the benefit of the doubt where appropriate:

**e.g.** “I want to make sure I understood your point. Can you explain a bit more?” “Some would consider your point/statement/language/term loaded. So it would

be useful to explain what you mean a bit more”.

1. *Reframe*: Create a different way or perspective from which to view at a situation.

**e.g.** “Could there be another way to look at this?” “Let’s reframe this to explore other perspectives/interpretations. Consider for moment that… What if...?” “I’m wondering what message this is sending and how it’s being received. Do you

think you would have said this/drawn this conclusion if…”

1. *Identify*: Directly respond to student comment as problematic. Ask for, and/or state, the potential impact of such a statement or action on others. Explain potential impacts of specific language choices.

**e.g.** “The word X is a label that’s often objected to by those it’s used to describe because …” “I could easily imagine that your use of that metaphor would feel like an insult to people who …” “When I hear the phrase/word ‘X,’ it distracts me

from the other points you’re trying to make…”

1. *Allow for productive and thoughtful re-engagement*: Use discussion.

***e.*g.** “Does anyone have a different way of explaining this?” “What questions or concerns do others want to share?” “I want to understand better the range of perspectives about this in the class; please take out a page and write a couple of sentences about ...”.

1. *Revisit*: Sometimes one is caught by surprise, misses an opportunity, or wishes s/he could have a another attempt in response to a case of discrimination or “hot moment”. Even if the moment has passed, it’s okay to go back and address it later in class. Research indicates that an unaddressed instant of discrimination can leave just as much of a negative impact as the microaggression itself.

**e.g.** “I want to go back to something that was brought up in our class.” “Let’s rewind minutes.” “I think it would be worthwhile to revisit something that happened .”

1. *Check in*: in person, talk with the targeted student(s) after class. Let them know that you value their experiences and perspective and see if they have any suggestions about how to better support them in class.
* Regardless which steps you take from the list above*,* don’t give full attention to the deliverer of discrimination while ignoring the target(s). Always keep an eye on targets, allow them to engage in the process of diffusion/reframing if they are willing or ask you to. Don’t focus on debates about intent (of the micro-aggressor), what each person said, or determining who is right or wrong. It will defeat the

purpose of “acknowledgement” as a necessary first step for diffusion and reframing.

* Try to avoid responding with hostility. The implicit or explicit vilification reinforces discrimination as a defensive mechanism.
* Some instances require more immediate firmness. When micro-aggressive

questions or comments take a “trolling” form, as in the intentions are clear, there’s a pedagogical importance to firmly cut it short. This, of course, can be done without attacking the student, but firm resistance to harmful ideas is important.

# How to avoid (or reduce instances of) discrimination in your classroom?

Some of this might be obvious to most, if not all, of you. But it’s good to have them all in one place and think together of their utility in such situations.

* Don’t look to marginalised students/instructors to be experts on issues related to their presumed identity group.
* Be explicit about your classroom “code of conduct” as early as your first session. Set clear standard as early as week 1. Clearly elaborate on the difference between Hyde Park Corner kind of free speech and university campus standards.
* Monitor group activity closely, particularly in the first activity of a new group. Be mindful about who is speaking, internal dynamics of student groups, ensuring that groups change over the course of term if the dynamics are imbalanced.
* Recognise and reflect on your own biases, interactions, and behaviours.
* Accept that good intentions can still have harmful impacts. Everyday discrimination and microaggression are often unintentional.
* Consider reading more about implicit bias, microaggression, and everyday discrimination, and use the knowledge to speak more inclusive language (including

the examples and case studies used in the classroom), and inform and advice both staff and students accordingly.

* Invite students to offer clarification or ask questions when there is a potential communication issue. Don’t always solve miscommunication on your own.

**Key sources, and for more information:**

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