

Discussing Race Issues in the Workplace

Background

Racism adds an enormous amount of stress and increased behavioral health risks in the African American community. The New York State Office of Mental Health (NYS OMH) acknowledges the historic and current racially based pressures on our Black employees. This guide is intended to support supervisors with engaging employees on the topics of race, racism and discrimination. The goal is to continue to provide an environment of diversity, inclusivity and opportunity for all OMH's employees regardless of their racial/ethnic backgrounds.

What Is Racial Discrimination?

Racial discrimination occurs when an individual is treated differently based on their actual or perceived race. Racial discrimination also includes discrimination based upon skin color.

Discussion Tips

As supervisors we often find ourselves in situations involving the topics of race, racism and racial discrimination, and feel ill-prepared to engage in these discussions with those we supervise. Below are some helpful tips to consider when these situations arise:

Start by Asking Yourself

What is the purpose of the conversation and the nature of the issue you will be addressing?

Make sure to stay focused during the conversation. It's often tempting to stray from the subject to lighten the mood— doing so puts you at risk of invalidating the concerns of the individual you are having the discussion with.

Avoid Unconscious Bias

Understanding everyone has biases that affect the way they engage in discussions on race, utilize tools such as the [Harvard Implicit Bias test](#) and challenge yourself to overcome biases using available tools such as [The Space2 Model Of Mindful Inclusion](#) and [University of California, San Francisco's Strategies to Address Unconscious Bias](#).

Avoid Microaggressions

When engaged in these conversations, understand and avoid microaggressions. Microaggressions are intentional or unintentional verbal or nonverbal behaviors that occur in everyday interactions. They are often unacknowledged, and casually degrade, demean, or put down someone who is part of a group (for instance, a gender, race, or ethnic group). See "[Tool: Recognizing Microaggressions and the Messages They Send](#)" on page 3.

Create Supportive Dialogue

Use supportive phrases that can be used to help you approach the subject of race and racial discrimination and ensure a constructive outcome such as:

- “I understand you have a belief that a single mother will not be right for this role” (Acknowledges feelings.)
- “Am I missing something as I am still unclear as to how this has come about?” (Clarifies and avoids assumptions.)
- “When you say, you feel discriminated against, help me understand what you mean by that?” (Explores feelings.)
- “What would a better situation look like for you?” (Seeks solutions.)

Create a Safe Place for Difficult Conversations

Discuss staff views and experiences relating to racism in a safe, non-judgmental environment. Accept that a single conversation is unlikely to holistically or sustainably ‘solve’ racism in your facility; rather, it is an important part of a longer process to alleviate discrimination.

Do not focus on arguing facts, be a respectful listener without participating unproductive dialogue.

Personalize One-on-One Discussions

Difficult conversations should be in person or use video technology whenever possible. This allows the supervisor and employee to see important nonverbal cues. Managers should always let staff know they are approachable, and employees need to feel comfortable when discussing their thoughts and beliefs.

Don’t Try to Handle Certain Conversations Alone

If the topic of conversation is highly sensitive, use discretion about when you should include additional support (e.g. Human Resources, your supervisor).

Do remind the employee of available resources, such as the Employee Assistance Program coordinator (EAP). Remember, the EAP is there as a resource for you and your employees. Use your EAP to prepare for these difficult conversations.

Don’t Forget to Follow-up

Be sure to check in with the employee after the conversation and follow up on any decisions that were made in the discussion.

Resources for Staff and Managers

OMH’s Office of Diversity and Inclusion

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Tool: Recognizing Microaggressions and the Messages They Send

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership (*from Diversity in the Classroom, UCLA Diversity & Faculty Development, 2014*).

The first step in addressing microaggressions is to recognize when a microaggression has occurred and what message it may be sending. The context of the relationship and situation is critical.

Below are common themes to which microaggressions attach:

Alien in One’s Own Land

When Asian Americans, Latino Americans and others who look different or are named differently from the dominant culture are assumed to be foreign-born.

Microaggression Examples	Message
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Where are you from or where were you born?”; “You speak English very well.”; “What are you? You look so interesting!” 	You are not a true American.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A person asking an Asian American or Latino American to teach them words in their native language. 	You are a foreigner in your own country.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuing to mispronounce names after being corrected time and time again. Not willing to listen closely and learn the pronunciation of a non-English based name. 	Your ethnic/racial identity makes you exotic.

Ascription of Intelligence

Assigning intelligence to a person of color or a woman based on his/her race/gender.

Microaggression Examples	Message
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You are a credit to your race.”; “Wow! How did you become so good in math?” 	People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To an Asian person: “You must be good in math, can you help me with this problem?” 	All Asians are intelligent and good in math/science.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To a woman of color: “I would have never guessed that you were a scientist.” 	It is unusual for a woman to have strong mathematical skills.

Color Blindness

Statements that indicate that a White person does not want to or need to acknowledge race.

Microaggression Examples	Message
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “When I look at you, I don’t see color.” 	Assimilate to the dominant culture.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “There is only one race, the human race.”; “America is a melting pot.”; “I don’t believe in race.” 	Denying the significance of a person of color’s racial/ethnic experience and history.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Denying the experiences of people of color by questioning the credibility/validity of their stories. 	Denying the individual as a racial/cultural being.

Criminality/Assumption of Criminal Status

A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant based on his/her race.

Microaggression Examples	Message
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A White man or woman clutches his/her purse or checks wallet as a Black or Latino person approaches. 	You are a criminal.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A store owner follows a customer of color around the store. 	You are going to steal. You are poor. You do not belong.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Someone crosses to the other side of the street to avoid a person of color. • While walking through the halls of the Chemistry building, a professor approaches a post-doctoral student of color to ask if she/he is lost, making the assumption that the person is trying to break into one of the labs. 	You are dangerous.

Racism/Sexism/Heterosexism

A statement made when bias is denied.

Microaggression Examples	Message
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I’m not racist. I have several Black friends.” 	I could never be racist because I have friends of color.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority.” 	Your racial oppression is no different than my gender oppression. I can’t be a racist. I’m like you.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To a person of color: “Are you sure you were being followed in the store? I can’t believe it.” 	Denying the personal experience of individuals who experience bias.

Myth of Meritocracy

Statements which assert that race or gender does not play a role in life successes, for example in issues like workplace demographics.

Microaggression Examples	Message
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I believe the most qualified person should get the job.”; “Of course he’ll get tenure, even though he hasn’t published much, he’s Black!” 	People of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Men and women have equal opportunities for advancement.”; “Gender plays no part in who we hire.” 	The playing field is even; If women cannot advance, the problem is theirs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “America is the land of opportunity.”; “Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough.”; “Affirmative action is racist.” 	People of color are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder.

Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles

The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant/White culture are ideal/”normal”.

Microaggression Examples	Message
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To an Asian, Latino or Native American: “Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal.” “Speak up more.” 	Assimilate to dominant culture.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To a Black Person: “Why are you so loud/animated? Calm down.” 	Leave your cultural baggage outside.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Why are you always angry?” Anytime race is discussed. • Dismissing an individual who brings up race/culture. 	There is no room for difference.

Second-Class Citizen

Occurs when a target group member receives differential treatment from the power group; for example, being given preferential treatment as a consumer over a person of color.

Microaggression Examples	Message
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff of color mistaken for a service worker. • Not wanting to sit by someone because of his/her color. 	People of color are servants to Whites. They couldn't possibly occupy high status positions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Female doctor mistaken for a nurse. 	Women occupy nurturing positions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being ignored at a store counter while attention is given to the White customer. 	White customers are more valued than people of color.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saying "You people..." • An advisor assigns a Black post-doctoral student to escort a visiting scientist of the same race around campus, even though there are other non-Black scientists in the visitor's specific area of research available. • An advisor sends an email to another work colleague describing another individual as a "good Black scientist." 	You don't belong. You are a lesser being.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raising your voice or speaking slowly when addressing a blind student. 	A person with a disability is defined as lesser in all aspects of physical and mental functioning.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In class, an instructor tends to call on male students more frequently than female ones. 	The contributions of female students are less worthy than the contributions of male students.

Sexist/Heterosexist Language

Terms that exclude or degrade women and LGBT persons.

Microaggression Examples	Message
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of the pronoun "he" to refer to all people. 	Male experience is universal.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being constantly reminded by a coworker that "we are only women." 	Female experience is invisible.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being forced to choose Male or Female when completing basic forms. 	LGBT categories are not recognized.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two options for relationship status: married or single. 	LGBT partnerships are invisible.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A heterosexual man who often hangs out with his female friends more than his male friends is labeled as gay. 	Men who do not fit male stereotypes are inferior.

Traditional Gender Role

Prejudicing and Stereotyping occurs when expectations of traditional roles or stereotypes are conveyed.

Microaggression Examples	Message
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When a female student asks a male professor for extra help on an engineering assignment, he asks: "What do you need to work on this for anyway? You're a girl, you don't have to be good at math." 	Women are less capable in math and science.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A person asks a woman her age and, upon hearing she is 31, looks quickly at her ring finger. • An advisor asks a female student if she is planning on having children while in postdoctoral training. • Shows surprise when a feminine woman turns out to be a lesbian. 	Women should be married during child-bearing ages because that is their primary purpose.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Labeling an assertive female committee chair/dean as a "b_ _ _ _," while describing a male counterpart as a "forceful leader." 	Women are out of line when they are aggressive.

Adapted from Sue, Derald Wing, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender and Sexual Orientation*, Wiley & Sons, 2010.