MICROAGGRESSIONS IN OUR LIVES

“Microaggression” is a term that was coined in the 1970s and more recently used by Derald Wing Sue, a Columbia University professor, to describe the “brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities—whether intentional or unintentional—which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults to people from marginalized groups.” This lesson provides an opportunity for students to explore what microaggressions are, how they have experienced them and what can be done to counteract them.

Grade Level: grades 9–12

Common Core Anchor Standards: Reading, Writing, Language

Learning Objectives:

• Students will learn what microaggressions are and how they occur in our everyday lives
• Students will reflect on ways they have experienced microaggressions in their lives
• Students will explore ways to counteract microaggressions on an individual and society level
• Students will articulate (in writing) whether they believe it is useful or not to define and identify microaggressions


Vocabulary:

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. The word “microaggression” will be explored in depth. (See ADL’s “Glossary of Education Terms.”)

• Ambiguous
• Indignities
• Psychological
• Unconscious

• Awareness
• Marginalized
• Stereotype
• Unintentional

• Implication
• Microaggression
• Subtle
• Psychological
WHAT IS A MICROAGGRESSION?

1. Write the word microaggression on the board. Ask: Does anyone know what the word “microaggression” means? If no one knows, suggest that they divide the word into two words that they already know: micro (very small) and aggression (angry or violent behavior or feelings, or a forceful action or procedure) to see if they can guess its meaning.

2. Distribute the Microaggressions Definition handout or project it so everyone can see it. Have students read it silently and then read aloud. Share with students that the term “microaggressions” was coined in the 1970s. Derald Wing Sue, a Columbia University professor who did a study and wrote a book about microaggressions, defines them as:

“The everyday slights, indignities, put-downs and insults that people of color, women, LBGT populations and other marginalized people experience in their day-to-day interactions. A microaggression can appear to be a compliment but contain a “metacommunication” or hidden insult to the target group to which it is delivered. They are often outside the level of conscious awareness of the perpetrator, which means they can be unintentional. These messages may be sent verbally (“you speak good English”), nonverbally (clutching one’s purse more tightly) or environmentally (symbols like the confederate flag or using American Indian mascots).”

3. Ask students if there are any questions. Based on what they read, ask students to define microaggression in their own words. Then ask them to share a few examples of microaggressions.

VIDEO: MICROAGGRESSION IN EVERYDAYLIFE

View the 5-minute video Microaggressions in Everyday Life. After watching, ask the following questions to facilitate class discussion:

- What are some examples of microaggressions that were revealed in the video?
- What is the impact of microaggression?
- How are microaggressions communicated non-verbally?
- What group or groups of people are microaggressions directed toward?
- What can we do to combat microaggressions, according to Dr. Sue?
- What does it mean to “make the invisible visible?”

NOTE: An addendum to this lesson (updated 7/21/14) has been added to include a video activity using MTV’s Look Different campaign videos that represent microaggressions (see “MTV Videos on Microaggressions” below).

PHOTOS AND DISCUSSION

1. Display or project the six Visualizing Microaggressions Photos. Explain that the photos are from a larger photo exhibit that was recently created by a young photographer named Kiyun. Share with students that Kiyun asked her Fordham University friends to write down an instance of racial microaggression they have faced and then created a series of images of the students holding up placards with their microaggressions. The photos have been shared widely.
2. After viewing the photos, ask the following questions:
   - What did you observe in the photos?
   - How did you feel looking at these examples of microaggressions?
   - Did any of the photos resonate with you? If so, which ones and why?
   - Did seeing the photos make you think about microaggressions you have experienced or witnessed?

3. Use one of the placard statements such as "No, where are you really from?" to explore the microaggression and the corresponding message or underlying assumption.

4. Ask students: *What is the underlying assumption or message when someone asks, 'No, where are you really from'?* Use the *Underlying Assumptions of Microaggressions Chart* to record both the microaggression and the underlying assumption/message for each of the photos. You can do this as a whole class activity or have the students complete the chart individually and then discuss as a group. Examples are listed in the chart.

### TRIADS: MY EXPERIENCE WITH MICROAGGRESSIONS

1. Have students get into groups of three. Explain that you will ask them three questions and for each question, they will talk about it and each student will have one minute to respond to the question.

2. Begin by asking the following three questions, one at a time. Remind students about the definition of microaggression and that they should think about identity groups such as race, gender, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, age, etc.

   **NOTE TO TEACHER:** Encourage students to share to their level of comfort. Remind them to challenge themselves to share as fully as possible, but that if they don't feel comfortable sharing, they can pass.

   - Describe a time you experienced or witnessed a microaggression. What was the underlying assumption? How did you feel? What did you do?
   - Upon reflection, think about a time you may have committed a microaggression. What was the underlying message? How did you feel? What did you do?
   - What have you done or can you do to stop perpetuating microaggressions?

3. After the small group discussion, discuss as a class by asking:
   - Was it difficult or easy to think of a time you experienced or witnessed a microaggression?
   - What did you notice about your responses?
   - What is the impact of microaggressions on people (both target and perpetrator)?
   - Did you discover anything new by responding to the questions?

4. As an optional extension of this activity, have students record their microaggressions (from the activity above) on placards and then photograph each other while holding the placards. Use these photos to create a class Tumblr or a photography exhibit in school about microaggressions.
READING AND WRITING ACTIVITY

Have students spend 10–15 minutes reading “Acts of Microaggression,” an article which explores some of the pros and cons of defining and talking about microaggressions. After reading the article, have students write a persuasive essay on whether it is useful and/or relevant to define, identify and talk about microaggressions. Before starting to write, make sure students consider the parts of the persuasive essay process (see illustration below). Distribute the Persuasive Essay Organizer to each student to use as an organizer for pre-writing their essay.

PERSUASIVE ESSAY PROCESS

State your position: Is it helpful or not helpful to define, identify and talk about microaggressions?

Parts of the essay:
- Some background information about the issue
- What I would say to persuade others of this opinion
- Those who have a different opinion might say...
- In response, I would say...

ACTION

1. Ask students: What can we do to reduce or eliminate microaggressions, both as individuals and as a society?

2. Have a brainstorming session on students’ ideas. If they don’t come up with these on their own, review the following five things Dr. Sue says (in the video) that we should do on an individual level to counteract microaggression:
   - Learn from constant vigilance of your own biases and fears.
   - Experiential reality is important in interacting with people different than you in terms of race, culture and ethnicity.
   - Don’t be defensive.
   - Be open to discussing your own attitudes and biases and how they may have hurt others or revealed bias on your part.
   - Be an ally: stand personally against all forms of bias and discrimination.

3. Discuss what each of these mean and have students share personal experiences/stories.

CLOSING

Go around and have each student complete the following sentence: “One realization I had today about microaggressions is ________________.”

(ADDENDUM) MTV VIDEOS ON MICROAGGRESSIONS

MTV, with input from the Anti-Defamation League’s Education Division, produced 30-second videos as part of their MTV Look Different campaign. This campaign is to help erase the hidden racial, gender and anti-LGBT bias all around us.
1. Explain to students that they are going to watch seven short videos from MTV's Look Different Public Service Announcement (PSA) campaign. The PSA is designed to reveal the hidden pain young people experience when faced with racial and religion-based “microaggressions.” Each video shows an example of a microaggression.

**NOTE:** The location of the videos is also MTV's Look Different Tumblr site. Be sure to scroll through the entire web page to see all seven videos.

2. Distribute the Video Viewing Notes handout to each student. As students watch each video, instruct them to jot down notes, responding to the three questions listed on the handout: “How do you feel?”, “What's the message?” and “Can you relate?” They can also add any other thoughts each video in the “Other Thoughts” column. At the end of each video, give them a minute to complete their notes on the video they just watched.

3. After watching all of the videos, have students “turn and talk” to a person sitting next to them. They can discuss their thoughts and feelings about the videos and share their notes with each other.

4. After a few minutes of partner discussion, have a whole class discussion using the following questions:
   - How did you feel while watching the videos?
   - Did any of the videos really stand out for you?
   - Have you experienced a similar microaggression and if so, what happened?
   - Have you experienced a different kind of microaggression and if so, what happened?
   - What did the broken glass mean?
   - What can we do about microaggressions?

**Optional:** You may also want to have students look at the Look Different Tumblr, which helps young people break these comments down, shows them how to avoid making them and gives them tips on what they can do if they experience them.

**ADDITIONAL READING**

- [The Microaggressions Project Blog](http://www.microaggressionsproject.org)
- *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* by Derald Wing Sue (Wiley, 2010)
- *Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics, and Impact* by Derald Wing Sue (Wiley, 2010)
- “[College Campaigns Blogs Address Microaggressions](https://www.usatoday.com/story/education/2014/04/09/college-campaigns-blogs-address-microaggressions/10079703/)” (USA Today College, April 9, 2014)
# COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content Area/Standard</th>
<th>Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standard 1:</td>
<td>Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.</td>
</tr>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standard 1:</td>
<td>Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard 5:</td>
<td>Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Language</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standard 1:</td>
<td>Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard 2:</td>
<td>Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.</td>
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</table>
MICROAGGRESSIONS DEFINITION

Microaggressions are the everyday slights, indignities, put-downs and insults that people of color, women, LBGT populations and other marginalized people experience in their day-to-day interactions. Microaggressions can appear to be a compliment but contain a “metacommunication” or hidden insult to the target groups to which it is delivered. They are often outside the level of conscious awareness of the perpetrator, which means they can be unintentional.

These messages may be sent verbally (“you speak good English”), nonverbally (clutching one’s purse more tightly) or environmentally (symbols like the confederate flag or using American Indian mascots).

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1 The term microaggressions was coined in the 1970s. This definition is from Derald Wing Sue's Microaggressions in Everyday Life (4:24 mins., John Wiley & Sons, 2010); [www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJL2P0JsAS4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJL2P0JsAS4), accessed 2/18/14. Derald Wing Sue, a Columbia University professor who did a study and wrote a book on microaggressions.
VISUALIZING MICROAGGRESSIONS

PHOTO 1

“What ARE You?”
HUMAN.
Being biracial doesn’t make me a ‘what’.

VISUALIZING MICROAGGRESSIONS

PHOTO 2

VISUALIZING MICROAGGRESSIONS

PHOTO 3

VISUALIZING MICROAGGRESSIONS

PHOTO 4

“So, like, what are you?”

VISUALIZING MICROAGGRESSIONS

PHOTO 5

VISUALIZING MICROAGGRESSIONS

PHOTO 6

UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS OF MICROAGGRESSIONS CHART

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Microaggression</th>
<th>Underlying Assumption or Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“No, where are you really from?”</td>
<td>You are not American.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Where were you born?”</td>
<td>You are a foreigner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You speak good English for a .....”</td>
<td>You don’t belong here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You are a credit to your race.”</td>
<td>It is unusual for someone of your race to be intelligent and well-spoken.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You are so articulate.”</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
PERSUASIVE ESSAY ORGANIZER

Use this organizer to structure your essay before writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>State your opinion or position:</strong></th>
<th>Is it helpful or not helpful to define, identify and talk about microaggressions?</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some background information about the issue:</td>
<td>What I would say to persuade others of this opinion:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Those who have a different opinion might say:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>In response, I would say:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Is it helpful or not helpful to define, identify and talk about microaggressions?
VIDEO VIEWING NOTES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video</th>
<th>How do you feel?</th>
<th>What's the message?</th>
<th>Can you relate?</th>
<th>Other Thoughts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1: You're different for a black guy.</td>
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<tr>
<td>#2: How'd you get into that school?</td>
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<td>#3: What up, Bin Laden?</td>
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<td>#4: You don't look Jewish.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>How do you feel?</td>
<td>What's the message?</td>
<td>Can you relate?</td>
<td>Other Thoughts</td>
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<tr>
<td>#5: You're pretty for a dark girl.</td>
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<tr>
<td>#6: I can’t tell Asians apart.</td>
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<tr>
<td>#7: Your English is so good.</td>
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