

## ***Micro-Aggressions, Micro-Resistance, and Ally Development in the Academy***

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### **What are micro-aggressions?**

Scholars define micro-aggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative . . . slights and insults” (Sue, Derald Wing, et al., "Racial Micro-aggressions in Everyday Life," *American Psychologist* 62.4 [2007]: 271-286).

### **What are micro-resistances?**

Micro-resistances are “incremental daily efforts to challenge white privilege” as well as other kinds of privilege based on gender, sexuality, class, etc. They help targeted people “cope with micro-aggressions” (Irey, Sayumi, "How Asian American Women Perceive and Move toward Leadership Roles in Community Colleges: A Study of Insider Counter Narratives," PhD Diss., University of Washington, 2013, p. 36).

### **What can targeted people do in the face of potential micro-aggressions?**

*Increase your personal and psychic strength by:*

- reminding yourself about what you value (Steele, Claude. *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*. New York: Norton, 2011),
- practicing self-care; as Audre Lorde wrote, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (*A Burst of Light: Essays*. New York: Firebrand, 1988. p. 131).
- taking power poses, especially before potentially stressful situations (Cuddy, Amy, “Your Body Language Shapes Who You Are,” [https://www.ted.com/talks/amy\\_cuddy\\_your\\_body\\_language\\_shapes\\_who\\_you\\_are?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are?language=en)), and
- thinking about the “bigger fish you have to fry” (Madsen, William, and Kevin Gillespie. *Collaborative Helping*. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2014. p. 147-48).

*Increase your social resources by:*

- building your network of mentors (Rockquemore, Kerry Ann, “When It Comes to Mentoring, the More the Merrier.” [chroniclevitae.com/news/326-when-it-comes-to-mentoring-the-more-the-merrier](http://chroniclevitae.com/news/326-when-it-comes-to-mentoring-the-more-the-merrier)), and
- practicing gratitude (Wood, Alex M., et al., "The Role of Gratitude in the Development of Social Support, Stress, and Depression." *Journal of Research in Personality*. 42 [2008]: 854-871).

*Speak up with communication strategies like:*

Open The Front Door to Communication (OTFD) to make transparent the nature and effects of micro-aggressions—adapted from Learning Forum (communication steps)

- *Observe*: Concrete, factual, and observable (not evaluative)
- *Think*: Thoughts based on observation (yours and/or theirs)
- *Feel*: Emotions “I feel (emotion).”
- *Desire*: Specific request or inquiries about desired outcome

Example:

“Let’s pause for a moment here. I noticed (Observe) some raised eyebrows and other nonverbals that make me think people might be reacting strongly to something that was said. I think (Think) we need to explore this because I feel uncomfortable (Feeling) moving forward with the discussion.

Following our ground rules, I am hoping someone can share (Desire) what they are thinking or feeling right now so we can have a productive conversation about this.”

(adapted from *Learning Forum*)

## **What can allies do to help colleagues facing micro-aggressions?**

*Become more informed and empathetic by*

- talking with and developing authentic relationships with your colleagues,
- raising your awareness of macro and micro-aggressions (Sue), and
- being on the lookout for your colleagues and offer resistance and/or affirmation if appropriate (Irey).

*Step in and speak up, depending on your style and the situation, by*

- supporting your colleague’s efforts at micro-resistance and self-efficacy (Irey; Miller, William R., and Stephen Rollnick. *Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change*. New York, NY : Guilford Press, 2013),
- giving micro-affirmations (i.e., “tiny acts of opening doors to opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring, and graceful acts of listening” (Scully, Maureen, and Mary Rowe, "Bystander Training within Organizations," *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association*. 2 July 2009: 89-95.;
- working behind-the-scenes on behalf of your colleagues (Irey), and
- performing OTFD.

## **Why does this matter?**

- The research shows us that dismissiveness, invisibility, and subjugation of faculty of color, women of all races and ethnicities, and LGBTQ faculty is pervasive in higher education, and
- not intervening is akin to “standing still on the walkway” as Beverly Daniel Tatum puts it in “Defining Racism.” *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* New York: Basic, 1997. p. 11-12.  
“Passive racist, sexist, heteronormative behavior, for example, is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made (e.g., no specific racist acts), but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same privileged destination as those who are actively walking” (i.e., those being overtly racist). So acting as an ally is a way to walk in the opposite direction of the moving walkway, a way to interrupt the cycle of isms so that social justice can be achieved.
- But of course none of us is giving up on macro-resistance. Micro-resistance can aid in survival until the revolution dawns.