THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

RECOGNISING AND COUNTERACTING SEXUALITY-BASED MICROAGGRESSIONS

A Resource for Academics

Rayya Ghul and Katie Nicoll Baines in consultation with students from the University of Edinburgh

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Table of Contents

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Recognising and Counteracting Sexuality Based Microaggressions

This resource is intended to help you to:

- Understand what a microaggression is
- Understand sexuality and the roots of sexuality-based microaggressions
- Identify the most common forms of sexuality-based microaggression
- Learning some practical ways to counteract microaggressions and create and inclusive environment for all students
- Find further reading and resources

What are 'microaggressions?

"Everyday verbal, non-verbal and environmental slights, snubs or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory or negative message to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership" (Sue et al 2019). They are almost always the result of stereotyping of certain groups, which is learned through our social conditioning and we may be unaware of how these can affect others.

They often take the form of:

- Casual remarks
- Exclusionary behaviours
- Questions or comments that reveal assumptions based on stereotypes
- Undermining in public
- Marginalising or erasing queer identities
- Denial of individual prejudice
- Questioning lived experience

"There's sort of a 'heterosexualisation' of gay couples, they assume there's going to be one that is more masculine and one that's more feminine"

What is sexuality?

Sexuality is commonly thought of as an orientation towards either opposite sex (heterosexual) or same sex (homosexual) relationships or both (bisexual). This, however, does not fully represent the lived experience of people who would not describe themselves as heterosexual. Bisexual people experience sexual/romantic attraction to more than one sex or gender. Historically bisexuality would have been defined as attraction to men and women, but we now understand this binary understanding of sex and gender to be limited. Pansexual people are attracted to any sex or gender identity. Asexual people may not experience sexual attraction, though this does not necessarily mean asexual people don't have sex. This is not an exhaustive list of terminology for sexual identities and these definitions evolve over time and are often very personal to the individual. Many people are comfortable with a fluidity between these sexual expressions and do not feel the need to conform to one or any. The word 'queer', having once been an insult, it is now often a preferred description that takes in all these possibilities. For brevity, this resource will use the word 'queer' but acknowledges that not all people will use this for themselves.

This can all seem like a lot of new information to heterosexual people who have never had to think about or explain their own relationship to sexual attraction. The word 'heteronormativity' has been used to describe the way that societies deliberately or unthinkingly promote heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation to a greater or lesser degree. In the UK, although views about queerness have become liberalised, especially with the advent of same-sex marriage, it is still a heteronormative society and this continues to affect the experience of queer people.

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Roots of Sexuality-based Microaggressions

It is useful to consider the socio-cultural and historical factors which influence people's unconscious thinking and behaviour towards queer individuals. Many of these attitudes are rooted in unconscious misogyny and the stereotypical ideals of 'maleness' and 'femaleness'. Despite many of these being historical, some still strongly influence the views of individuals and can make them feel entitled to force their opinions on queer people.

1. Many religions have traditional views of homosexuality that give rise to the idea of it being 'immoral'.
2. In medical and psychological disciplines, minority sexualities have been the subject of categorisation, investigation and ontological claims. These have all been carried out with the underlying assumption that heterosexuality is the 'norm', rather than simply a majority. This has given rise to the idea that any sexuality other than heterosexuality is 'abnormal', 'aberrant' or 'deviant'.
3. Further, academic research has often focused on whether queerness is real from biological or psychological perspectives which gives rise to ideas that people might be 'confused', 'in a phase' or mistakenly described as a 'lifestyle choice'.
4. Sexualities apart from heterosexual have been pathologised and seen as psychiatric illnesses and individuals have been forced to undergo violent and abusive treatment. This gives rise to the idea that queerness is 'sick'.
5. Male homosexuality was a criminal offence, subject to life imprisonment in parts of the UK until 1980. In many countries, male and female homosexuality still incurs a death penalty. This gives rise to ideas of 'risk' and 'danger.'
6. Although considered unacceptable, lesbianism was never criminalised in the UK, the famous myth being that Queen Victoria said "women do not do such things." While this appears benign, it has encouraged the idea that lesbianism is somehow 'imagined' or 'not real'.
7. This is further compounded by the unfair and inaccurate conflation of homosexuality with paedophilia which gives rise to the idea of being 'predatory'.
8. Media portrayals of queer individuals or groups have misrepresented and caricatured them. This has given rise to stereotypical ideas about appearance, behaviour and culture. Queer people are presented as 'objects of pity', 'objects of fun', 'predatory' or 'hypersexual' and fetishised commodities for the sexual pleasure of heterosexual people.
9. Education about queer sexuality has been banned (Section 28), excluded or inadequate which gives rise to ignorance and susceptibility to stereotype and misinformation.
10. There is a history of some queer people 'coding' their identity through styles of dress, particularly when being out might be dangerous. This has contributed to stereotypical ideas about how queer people look and behave and inappropriate appropriation of what was an important cultural resource.

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All of this makes the lived experience of queer people complicated as they navigate their social context where they do not know what kinds of ideas might be influencing any person they encounter. It gives rise to increased caution in talking about oneself, being selective of who one confides in, allowing others to assume they are heterosexual – all sensible precautions, but ones which lead to feelings of having to partially or wholly erase an important part of oneself. This is stressful and exhausting.

University might be a place where many young people can embrace their sexual identity, but equally a place that feel unsafe. In addition to experiencing queerphobic abuse, some students may also have been disowned by their family or feel that they are at risk if their family knew they are queer. Therefore, they may be particularly vulnerable to financial pressures and homelessness.

"If you go to a [counsellor] to talk about feeling sad and say, I broke up with my partner, they very often want to focus about the same gender nature of that relationship rather than the fact that you had a very sad breakup and you're very upset."

"When you receive a lot of weird comments about who you are and who you are is something that you can in any way shape or form hide, it sort of encourages you to hide that and go back in the closet and don't really tell people about these things at all. You start being really careful about how you refer to your partners and what you say to people, sort of self-policing."

"I'm a very liberal Catholic, and when [queer] people find out, they can't imagine how the two things can co-exist, that I'm making life harder for myself, and then many Catholics are very negative towards me, so it feels like they're each asking me to give up one part of myself and I can't so it's really hard to feel supported in both my communities."

"The problem with microaggressions and the way queer people are talked about in society as inferior to heterosexuals, is it roots in people's minds and can develop into bigger things like parents disowning their children because they're gay."

Effects of microaggressions on students

Despite massive changes in social attitudes towards gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer and other minority sexualities in the past forty years in many countries, as well as significant changes in legislation, such as same-sex marriage, individuals still experience discrimination and regular microaggressions from others. The effect of this is corrosive and creates an ongoing feeling of being regarded as inferior, abnormal or even dangerous.

Each microaggression on its own can seem minor and trivial. However, the cumulative effect is devastating but invisible to others who do not attract them.
Known effects are:

- Loss of self-esteem, feelings of exhaustion
- Damage to the ability to thrive in an environment
- Mistrust of peers, staff and the institution
- Decreases participation and ability to study
- Increases student attrition

"I feel a little bit less confident about going to staff with my problems if they're not wearing like the LGBTQ rainbow lanyard. That lanyard actually makes me feel that my sexuality is not going to be taken negatively, especially by staff you're supposed to be able to go to for help."

"It triggers your internalized homophobia, if that makes sense, because sometimes I doubt if my feelings and like my identities are valid because I feel if I can hide them maybe I should hide them - because what's the point of being [queer] if I can just ignore it? It has triggered a lot of confusion inside me. So that also leads to loss of self esteem."

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Common Sexuality-based Microaggressions

Microassault

These are explicit derogations expressed verbally or non-verbally. For example:

- Hate speech
- 'faggot', 'dyke'
- Avoidant behaviour
- Moving away
- Leaving out of group discussions
- Laughing and pointing
- Negative representations
- Gay men are predatory
- Queer women are sex objects for heterosexual men
- Bisexuals are either invisible or fickle

"Once I tell people I'm not entirely straight, some of my female friends worry I'm going to fall in love with them. Just because I'm attracted to my own gender doesn't mean that I will be attracted to them"

"People talk about it as if it's a self-harming choice when really the harm comes from the outside, from people trying to discourage me, not from myself."

Microinvalidation

These are characterised by communications that negate or nullify the thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of minority sexualities. They can be spoken from benign intentions but are experienced as invalidating or humiliating. They often diminish the personhood or gender.

- "You're being oversensitive"
- "You're just confused", "It's just a phase"
- "You're not a real man"
- "Why do you have to flaunt it?"
- "I'm not homophobic, but..."
- "You can do want you want, but I don't approve of it"
- "How can you be queer if you've never had sex with a member of the same sex?"

"there's what I call a 'weird curiosity' because of the association with sex, some people feel entitled to ask about really intimate details of relationships that they would never do to heterosexuals. It's really offensive."

"there's this thing where it's sexy to be a lesbian or bi woman, but to be a gay man is disgusting. I get so fed up of it."

Microinsult

These are a variety of subtle snubs, conveying a hidden in sult to the recipient. There is often an assumption on the part of the heterosexual person that they have an entitlement to facts about private life and relationship details of queer sexualities which underlines the unconscious view of them as abnormal, immoral or weak characters.

- "You don't sound/look gay"
- "It can't be real sex unless it's with the 'opposite' sex"
- "Being bisexual is greedy, you just want the best of both worlds"
- "How did you turn gay?"
- "Aren't you making life hard for yourself?"
- "Which one of you is the 'guy'?"
- "Oh – do I have to worry about you fancying me now?"

"I've experienced the idea of denying femininity in women who love women and denying masculinity in men who love men - it's almost like or like you can't be a proper man or proper woman, if you're attracted to the same gender."

Counteracting microaggressions

Most people know that discrimination against under-represented or disadvantaged groups is counter to The Equality Act 2010, which stipulates that people should not be discriminated against on the basis of one or more of their protected characteristics.
However, we also have a duty to ensure that students who have protected characteristics are supported and welcomed into our academic community, fostering good relations between those who have certain protected characteristics and those who don't. This means that we should always be alert to incidents where the welcome and good relationships are at risk. Microaggressions are the most common way queerphobic attitudes are expressed on a daily basis, both online and face to face, so tackling them is very important. The university's Dignity and Respect Policy, section 3.1 outlines the responsibility of staff and students to "Identify and challenge unacceptable behaviour when it occurs, even if it is not directed at ourselves."

Microinterventions

If you witness or are told about a microaggression experienced by a student, there are some strategies you can take to intervene. How you do this depends on the context, and the safety of the victim should always be your first consideration.

- Avoid singling out the victim and drawing attention to them in front of others, but also take the opportunity to check-in with the victim, at the very least it can be reassuring to hear that someone else noticed what happened and that they wanted to help/offer support.
- Make the "invisible" visible: point out the underlying problematic attitude or make it safe for the student to do so.
- Disarm the microaggression: step in and stop or deflect. State your disagreement or reinforce the university's values and standards of conduct of your class. Focus on the perpetrator and avoid drawing attention to the victim.
- Educate the offender: help them to recognise their biases and explore their possible origin. Facilitate a conversation that emphasises shared aspirations and values between individuals without the need for stereotyping.
- Seek external reinforcement or support: Speak to a manager or other person in a leadership position. Contact the Respect at Edinburgh team for advice and help.

Micro-affirmations

You can foster good relations between your students and help them to build a supportive academic community through intentional practice. If you start off and continue to practice these small acts, this will help build an inclusive classroom culture for everyone.

- Learn all students' names – if you are not sure, ask them to help you pronounce them. Practice saying the name and/or make a note of the phonetic pronunciation.
- Ask for and respect people's pronouns – do not make assumptions when enquiring about partners
- Show interest in students, ask them about their aspirations.
- Affirm a student's potential to succeed
- Highlight the student's specific abilities and progress to them and reinforce this through appreciative enquiry – help them to articulate their strengths and to build on them.
- Validate their experiences – believe them when they share their concerns or report incidents
- Listen actively – lean forwards and focus on the student.
- Affirm their feelings
- Make clear statements about expected behaviours and what will not be tolerated – state them and put them on the VLE

Educate yourself

To gain a greater insight into the lives, experiences and history of people with non-heterosexual sexualities, here are some places to start learning:

A Timeline of LGBT history in the United Kingdom
Sapphistries: A global history of love between women – Leila J. Rupp
A Gay History of Britain: Love and sex between men since the Middle Ages – Matt Cook
A History of Bixexuality – Steven Angelides
Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past – Editors: Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus & George Chauncy, Jr.
Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches – Audre Lorde
The Bi-ble: Essays and Narratives About Bisexuality – Ellen Desmond and Lauren Nickodemus
The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies – Vito Russo

Review Your Teaching

How to avoid microaggressions in pedagogy and create identity safety

- Create strong staff-student partnerships to work together to improve inclusion. For example, Chemunity at the University of Edinburgh
- Wear a rainbow lanyard or other visible sign that you are safe for queer people – continue to do this when you teach online.
- Do your teaching materials portray queer sexualities in a poor light? Provide a more balanced view.
- Use Pride Month as an opportunity to enhance your curriculum through surfacing the contributions of queer people to your discipline, or how your discipline relates to their history. For example, the powerful role of medicine, religion or psychology in constructing fundamental ideas about who is 'normal' or 'morally good' that have negatively impacted queer people. Set student projects, e.g. a timeline of gay liberation for Law students or Sociology students.
- You can incorporate diverse identities and cultures into case studies, exemplars, and other learning materials but avoid 'excusing', 'straightwashing' or erasing queer identities.
- If your curriculum asks students to draw on their own experiences, consider whether this might require them to 'out' themselves, e.g. writing about love, relationships, family structures.
- Remember that laws and attitudes towards queer people vary enormously from country to country and in some cases may pose extreme risk and mortal danger to them. Your students may come from countries where the latter is the case or worry about visiting them. Ensure any placement or year abroad plans are made with this in mind.
- Join the Staff Pride Network for LGBT+ Colleagues and Allies. The SPN has strong ties with the student community and other LGBT+ organisations that support young people. They also run regular events that will educate you about different LGBT+ identities and can work with you to develop curriculum and other resources.

"When the base assumption of society is that you're not okay, then, you need to maybe find a way of communicating to make sure that people know that you are an okay person to talk to. One thing that I've noticed is people putting the pronouns in their bio in emails. it's a really easy thing to do for people but it's also much less about the pronouns themselves and more about, oh this person isn't going to be weird if I say something about these things."

"I asked about my year abroad [in a country with severe penalties] in relation to my sexuality and the response I got was, "well the death penalty is rarely enforced, don't worry about it."

"Something as simple as asking a student to 'talk about your family' means they might have to out themselves in some way and they might not want to, and even if they come out to you as a lecturer, that doesn't mean you can talk about it with the class or other staff."

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"One of the lecturers pointed out, "this is homoerotic, not homosexual poetry" so I asked what the difference was and they couldn't tell me – it was the academic equivalent of 'no homo' (straight male code for: not to be mistaken for homosexual). They refer to sex between and older and younger man as 'pederasty' but don't call sex between an old man and younger woman as 'paedophilia', so it shows the knowledge they draw on or produce is queerphobic."

"It would be great to know there are queer people working in my field, living role models, especially because in the media people like me are often sick, dying, drug addicts, being murdered. There are very few positive and successful role models and I'd like to know this famous professor or researcher is also gay. Essentially it would be nice to have role models who aren't corpses."

This resource should only be a starting point. It was compiled from the following resources:

University Resources

Anonymous reporting of bullying, harassment or discrimination for students: https://bit.ly/2ZrYpJi
Respect at Edinburgh resource hub: https://bit.ly/30c8JUL
Staff Pride Network: https://www.ed.ac.uk/equality-diversity/edi-groups/staffpride-network

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