

# Not Just Words: Macro-Level Impact of Microaggressions



**2019 NATIONAL SCHOOL BASED MENTAL HEALTH CONFERENCE  
AUSTIN, TEXAS**

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**FERNBROOK FAMILY CENTER**

# Agenda



- Introductions
- Identity, intersectionality, systems of oppression
- Implicit Bias
- Microaggressions
- Recommendations and techniques for reducing microaggressions during assessment and treatment
- Closing Discussion

# Learning Objectives



- Understand and openly discuss topics of privilege, oppression, and intersectionality.
- Create awareness surrounding the common occurrences of microaggressions.
- Explore techniques to reduce microaggressions during assessment and treatment.

# Anticipated Benefits



- The participant will be able to demonstrate an understanding of privilege, oppression, and intersectionality.
- The participant will be able to become aware of and discuss their own implicit and explicit biases in order to better serve and advocate for clients/students.
- The participant will be able to demonstrate techniques to minimize the occurrence of microaggressions during assessment and treatment, and ways to respond when someone has been microaggressive in order to enhance cultural responsiveness to provide safe academic and clinical spaces.

# Introductions



- Monique Sledd, M.A., LPCCC (she/her)
- Amy Anderson, M.A. (she/her)
- Icebreaker

# What We Do

- Fernbrook Family Center is in southeastern Minnesota.
- Provide services to children and families in a total of 12 counties with 6 county office locations



# Service Area



# What We Do



- Outpatient Psychotherapy (individual, family, group)
- Children's Therapeutic Services and Supports (CTSS)
  - Outpatient Psychotherapy, Skills Services, Day Treatment, and Mental Health Behavioral Aide
  - Primary programs include: home and community, School Linked Mental Health (SLMH), and Early Childhood Mental Health (ECMH)
- Adult Rehabilitative Mental Health Services (ARMHS)
- Mental Health Targeted Case Management



# Identity, Intersectionality, and Systems of Oppression

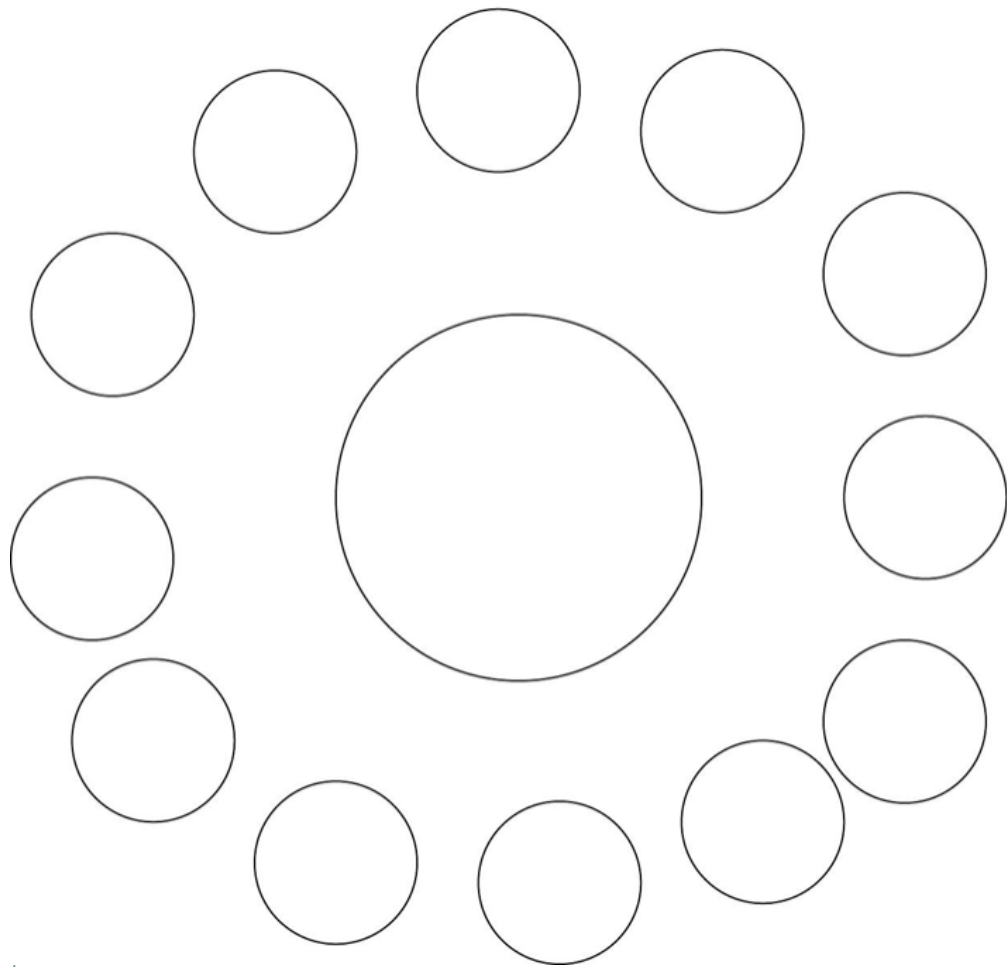


# What is “Identity?”

**Identity** – a person’s self-definition as a separate and distinct individual, including behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes; essentially, “who we are.”

**Social Identity** – the part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.

- How we explain “who we are” within the context of our social group and upbringing.



## EcoMap Activity

# EcoMap Activity



- 1) How is your identity different from the way people might perceive you?
- 1) How has it felt to be able to stand up and challenge a stereotype you have encountered?
- 1) How are stereotypes connected to the kinds of social interactions you encounter on a day-to-day basis, in your personal and/or work life?
- 1) What do you do to combat stereotypes in your life?

# Cultural Identity Formation



## Stages of cultural identity:

- ◆ Unexamined cultural identity
- ◆ Cultural identity search
- ◆ Cultural identity achievement

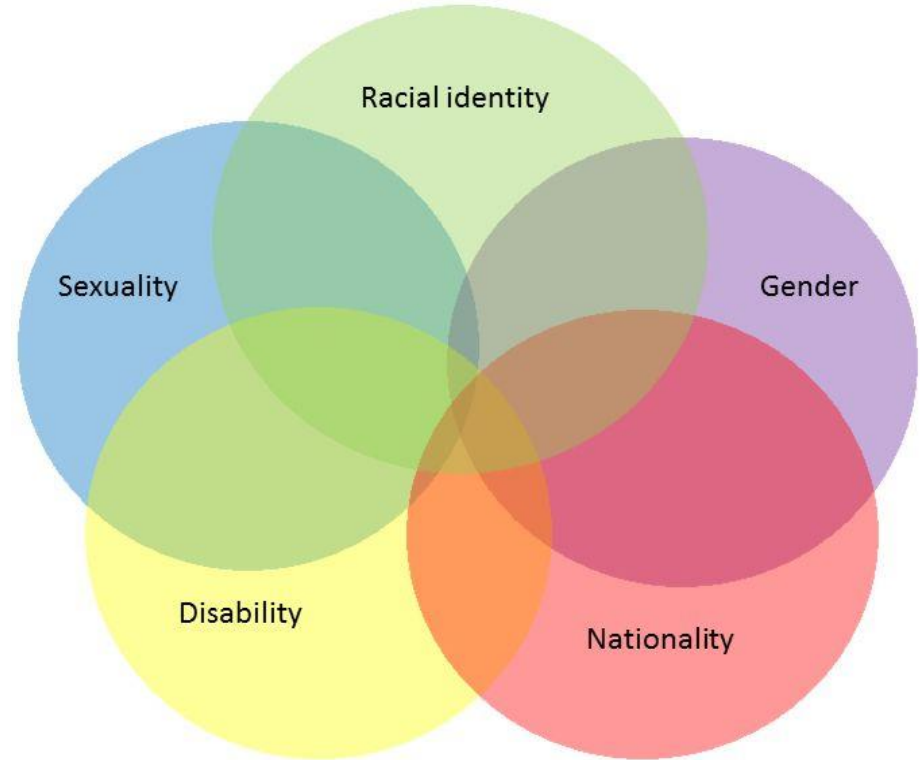
## Three components of cultural identity:

- ◆ Cultural knowledge
- ◆ Category Label
- ◆ Social Connections

# Intersectionality



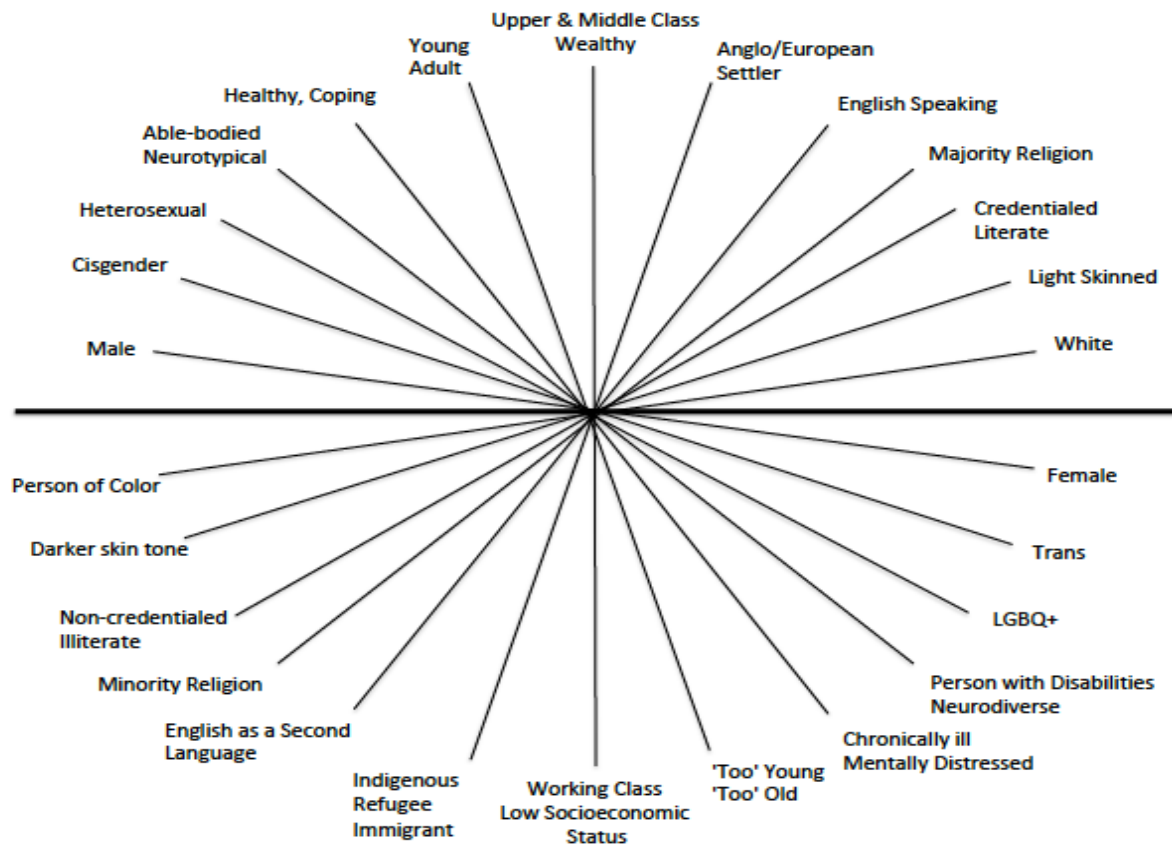
- Incorporates the vast array of cultural, structural, sociobiological, economic, and social contexts by which individuals are shaped and with which they identify.
- Individuals are located within a range of social groups whose structural inequalities result in marginalized identities.
- Unlike unidimensional identity models, intersectionality addresses “the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarity of sameness”.



Types of Oppression	Target Group
Racism	People of color
Classism	Impoverished; poor; working class
Sexism	Women; female-identified individuals
Cissexism/ Cisgenderism	Gender variant, non-binary, and trans* people
Heterosexism	LGBTQIA+ people
Ableism	People with physical and/or mental disabilities
Ageism	People of a certain chronological age

**Others include:**  
sizeism,  
lookism,  
colorism,  
nativism,  
colonialism...

# Privileged Identities



# Oppressed Identities

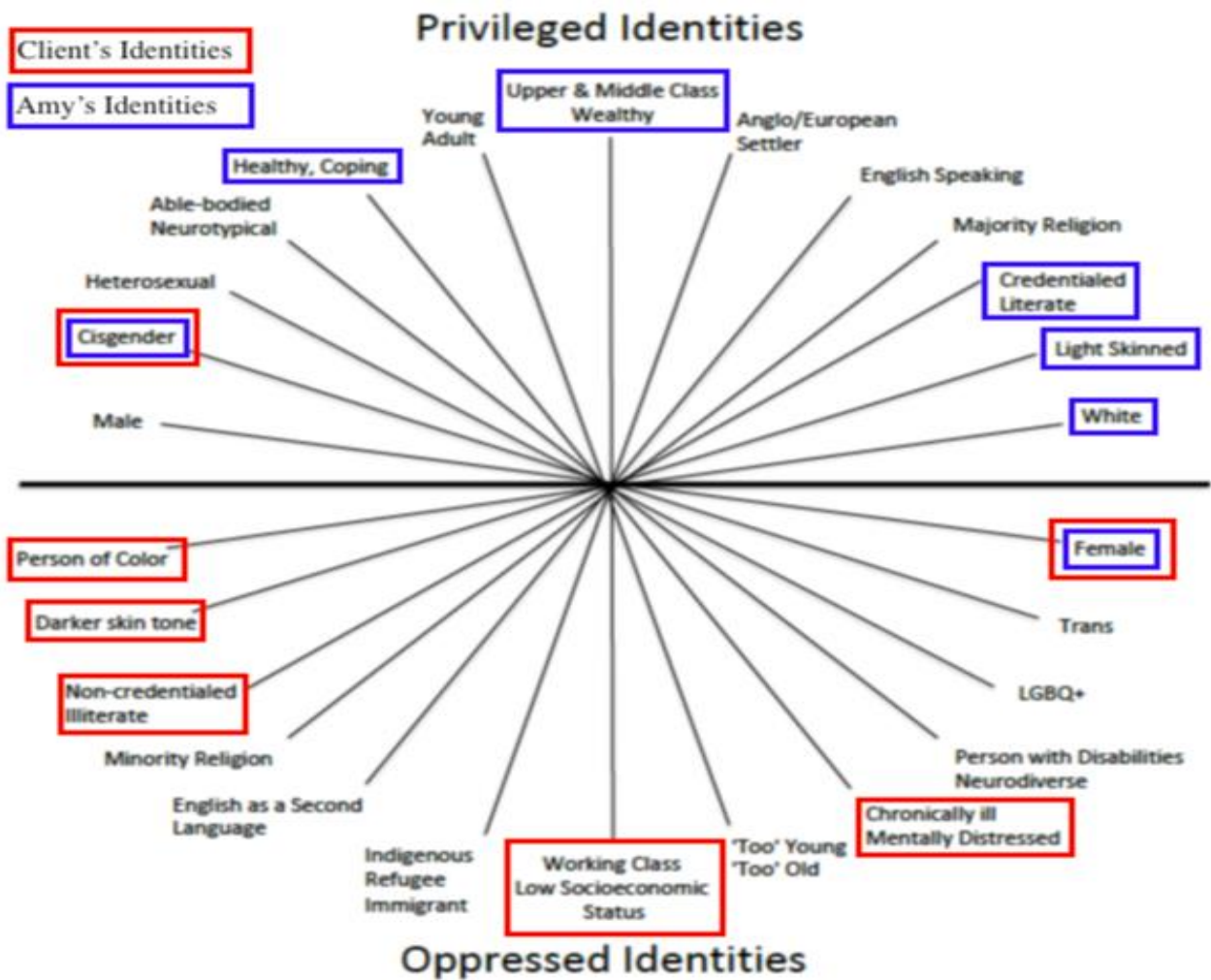
Adapted from Kathryn Pauly Morgan 'Describing the Emperor's New Clothes: Three Myths of Education [In]Equality'  
The Gender Question in Education: Theory, Pedagogy & politics, Ann Diller et al., Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996



# Intersecting Axis of Privilege and Oppression



- ◆ How does your positioning differ from one of your clients/students?
- ◆ How might your positioning impact the care you provide to the client/students?



Client's Identities

Amy's Identities

Healthy, Coping

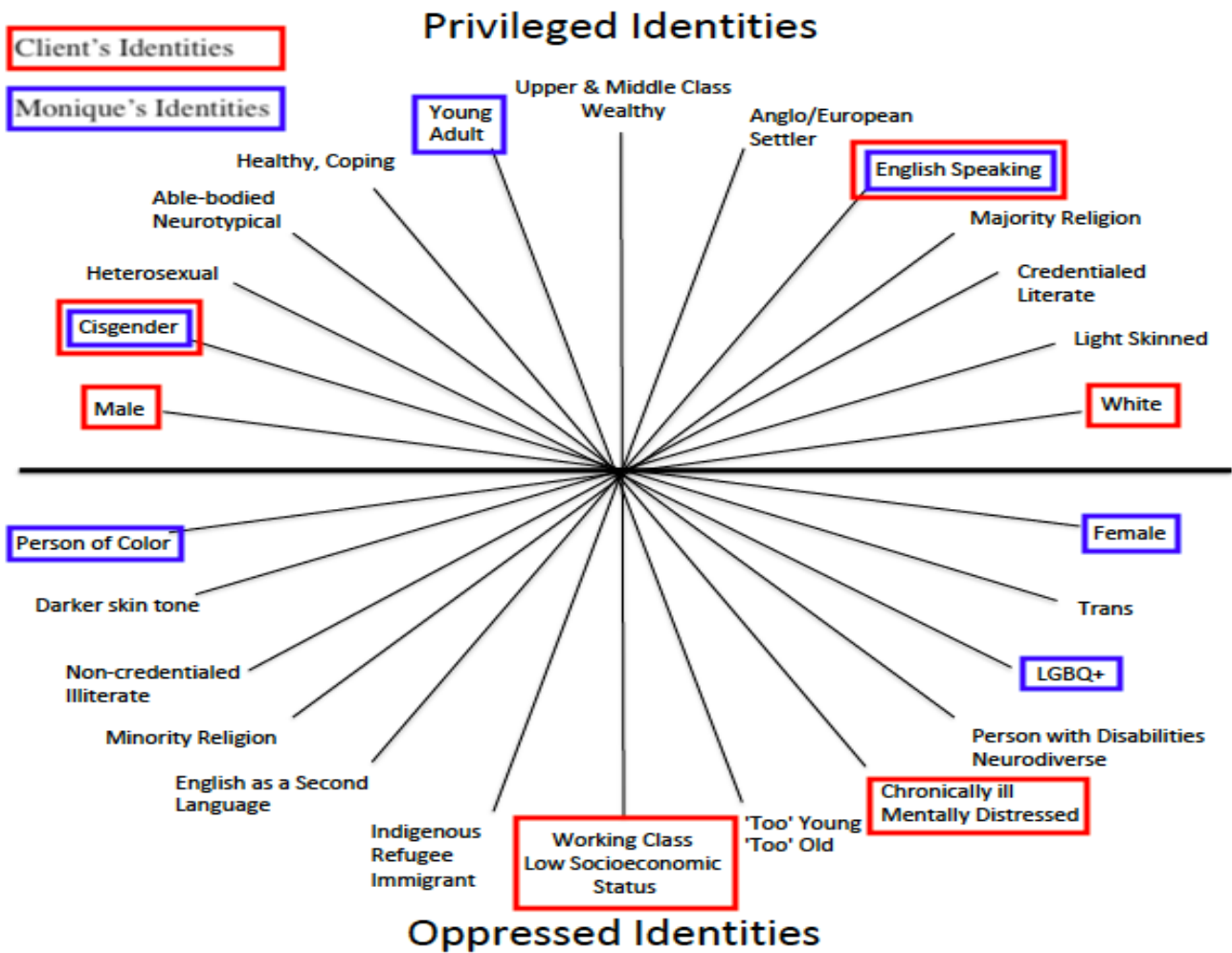
Cisgender

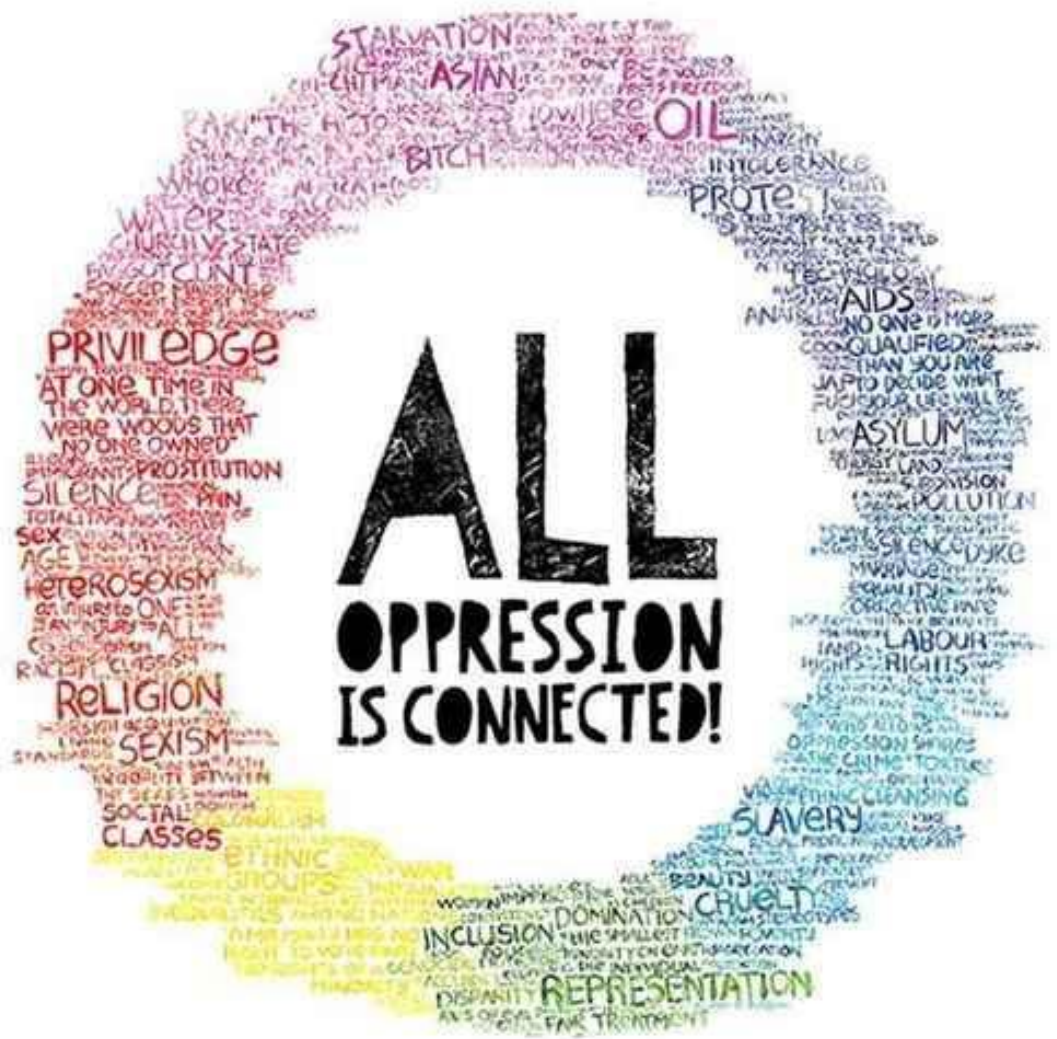
Person of Color

Darker skin tone

Non-credentialed Illiterate

Chronic Ill Mentally Distressed





# Implicit Bias: A Conscious Discussion of Unconscious Actions



# Explicit Bias



Attitudes and beliefs (positive or negative) that we **consciously or deliberately** hold and express about a person or group.

# Implicit Bias



Attitudes and beliefs (positive or negative) about other people, ideas, issues, or institutions that occur **outside of our conscious** awareness and control, which affect our opinions and behavior.

# Implicit Bias



An **Implicit Bias** is a preference for OR prejudice against a person or group of people.



# Implicit Bias



Operates at the **subconscious level**. We are  
**NOT** aware that we have them.

# Implicit Bias



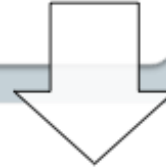
Triggered **automatically** through the **rapid association** of people/groups/objects and our attitudes AND stereotypes about them.

The human brain takes in **11 million bits** of information a second, but is consciously aware of only 40. The brain cannot effectively process 11 million bits of information a second so it takes **mental shortcuts**.

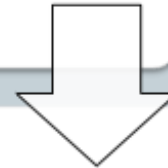
# Development of Implicit Bias



These associations tend to develop at an early age through exposure to direct and indirect messages.



Receive these messages from family/friends, media, institutions, perception of social value, and personal experiences.



Self-reinforcing: our refusal to talk about and confront issues reinforces implicit bias.

# Implicit Bias



Can run **contrary to our stated beliefs and attitudes**. We can say that we believe in equity (and truly believe it). But then behave in ways that are biased and discriminatory.

# Implicit Bias



Implicit biases  
are pervasive.  
Everyone  
possesses them.

Generally tend to  
hold implicit  
biases that favor  
our own in-group.

# Implicit Bias



**Are malleable.** The biases and associations we have formed can be “unlearned” and replaced with new mental associations.

# Confirmation Bias



Confirmation bias is our subconscious tendency to seek and interpret information and other evidence in ways that **affirm our existing beliefs**, ideas, expectations, and/or hypotheses. Confirmation bias is both affected by and feeds our implicit biases.

# Example of Confirmation Bias



- ◆ In 2014, a legal research memo from a hypothetical third year litigation associate that focused on the issue of trade secrets in internet start-ups was sent to 60 partners from 22 different law firms.
- ◆ The memo deliberately included different errors, 7 of which were minor spelling/grammar errors, 6 of which were substantive technical writing errors, and 5 of which were errors in fact.
- ◆ All of the partners received the same memo, but half received a memo that stated the associate was African American while the other half received a memo that stated the associate was Caucasian.



# Feedback on the Memo



## Caucasian Thomas Meyer's Memo

- Averaged a 4.1 out of 5.0 rating
- Average errors identified:
  - 2.9 spelling/grammar
  - 4.1 technical writing
  - 3.2 errors in facts

## African American Thomas Meyer's Memo

- Averaged a 3.2 out of 5.0 rating
- Average errors identified:
  - 5.8 spelling/grammar
  - 4.9 technical writing
  - 3.9 errors in facts

# Consequences of Implicit Bias



**Provider bias is one documented contributor to health care inequalities.**

Providers may “fill in the gaps,” with beliefs associated with a client’s social group.

Providers tend to be more likely to rely on stereotypes for “out-group members” or people who do not look or act like them.

Providers unconsciously favor those who feel to be similar to themselves, regardless of their conscious beliefs.

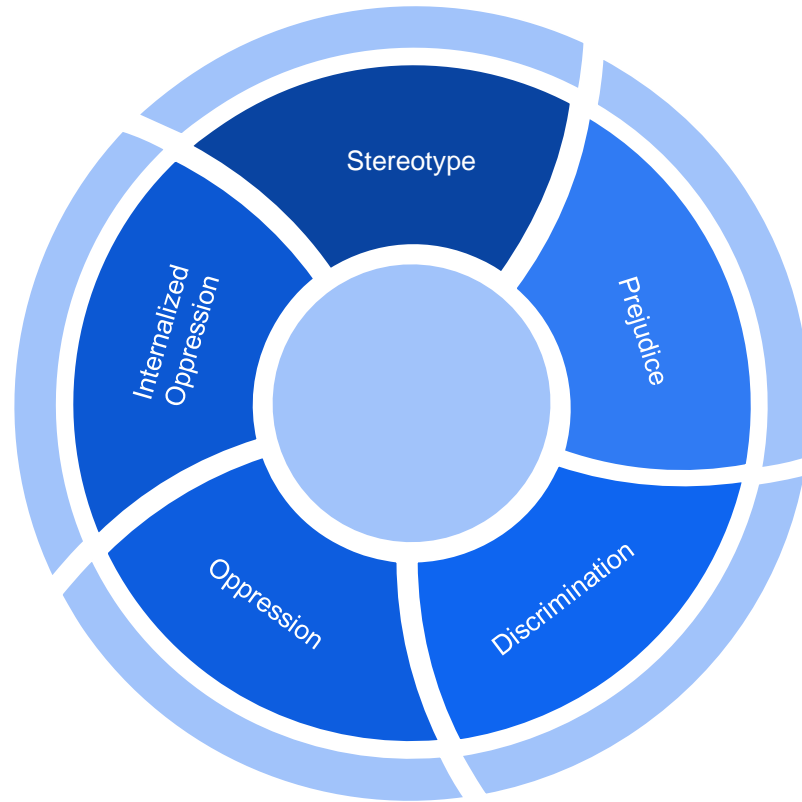
# Consequences of Implicit Bias



Implicit bias can affect providers':

- Client-centered communication
- Question-asking in clinical interview (and thus information gained)
- Diagnostic decision-making
- Symptom management
- Treatment recommendations
- Referral to specialty care
- Interpersonal behavior predictive of patient trust, satisfaction and adherence
- Implicit bias can often lead to engaging in microaggressions.

# Cycle of Systematic Oppression



# Impact of Systematic Oppressions



## Internal:

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Decreased sense of safety
- Decreased self-esteem
- Implications of abnormality
- Internalized guilt, discomfort, confusion, and shame
- Stereotype threat
- Imposter syndrome

## External:

- Sadness
- Panic attacks
- “Tantrums”
- Defiance/insubordination
- Social isolation
- Self-medication and/or self-harm
- High risk behaviors

# Potential Risks in Oppressed Groups



- **Stereotype threat**- situational predicament in which people are or feel themselves to be at risk of confirming negative stereotypes about their social group.
  - ◆ Affects stereotyped individuals' achievement and identity.
- **Imposter Syndrome**- a pervasive feeling of self-doubt, insecurity, or fraudulence despite often overwhelming evidence to the contrary.
  - ◆ It strikes smart, successful individuals. It often rears its head after an especially notable accomplishment, like admission to a prestigious university, public acclaim, winning an award, or earning a promotion.
  - ◆ Doesn't discriminate; although minorities and women are hardest-hit.

# A Class Divided



## A Class Divided

- The day after Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated (1968), Jane Elliot, a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher in a small town in Iowa, began a two-day experiment to teach the students about discrimination, racism, and prejudice.
- This video follows the events of those days and brings back the students in 1985 to recall their experiences.
- Content warning: use of racial slurs, discussion of violence

# Microaggressions





# What are Microaggressions?



- Microaggressions are the subtle ways in which body language and verbal language convey oppressive ideology about power or privilege against marginalized identities.

# What are Microaggressions?



- Brief and commonplace exchanges that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults.
  - Attack, insult, or invalidation
  - Verbal, nonverbal, visual, behavioral, or environmental slights
  - Often automatic and unintentional, but could be intentional
  - The casual degradation of any marginalized group

# If Microaggressions Happened to White People

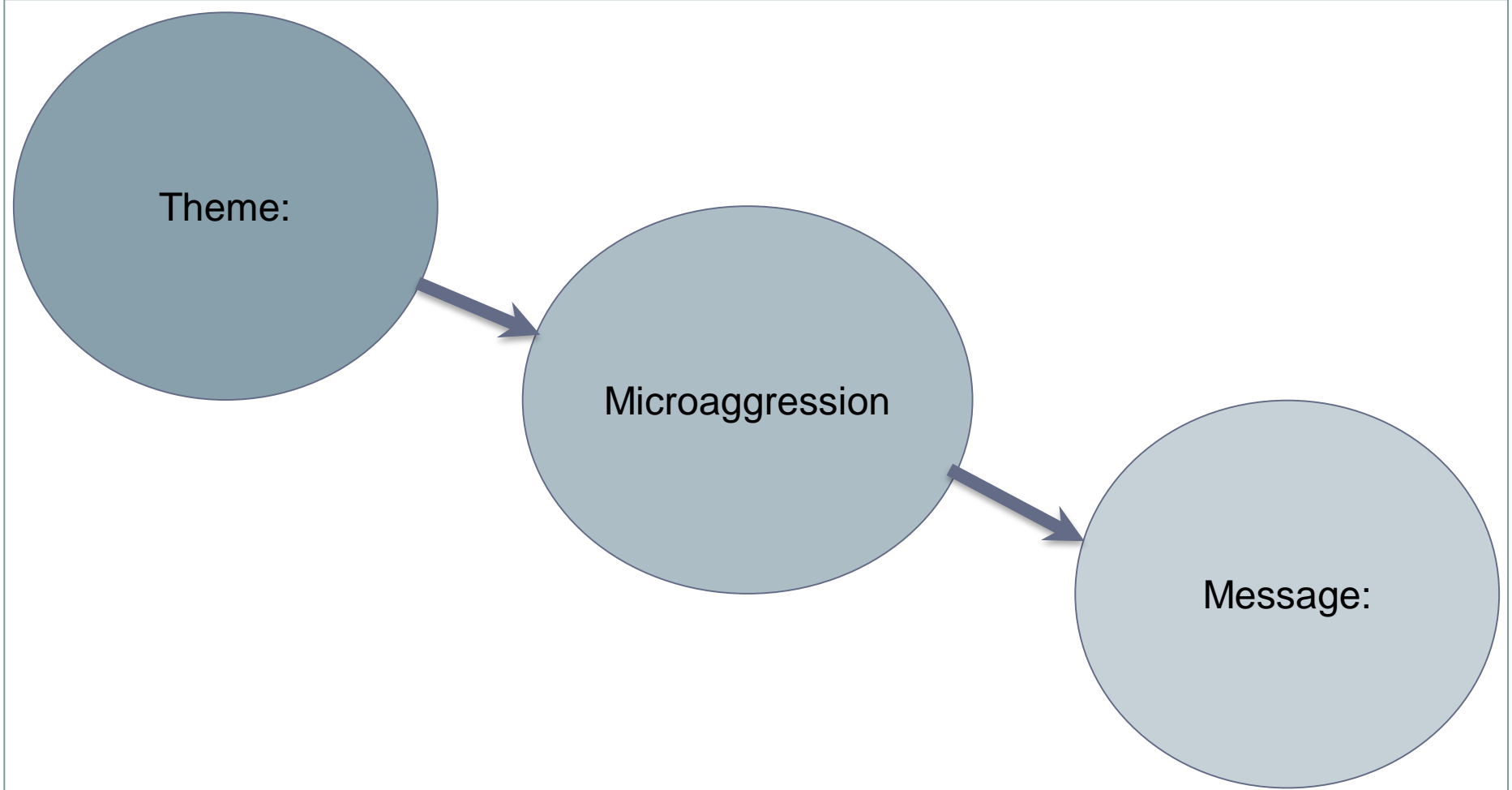


- [If Microaggressions Happened to White People](#)
- Reactions to this video?

Theme:

Microaggression

Message:



# Common Themes of Race-Based Microaggressions

- 
- Alien in one's own land
  - Ascription of intelligence
  - Color blindness
  - Denial of individual racism
  - Criminality/assumption of criminal status
  - Myth of meritocracy
  - Second-class status
  - Environmental invalidation
  - Pathologizing cultural values/communication styles

Theme:

Ascription of  
intelligence

Microaggression:

“You are so  
articulate.”

Message:

It is unusual for  
someone of  
your race to be  
intelligent.



# Examples of Race-Based Microaggressions

Theme	Microaggression	Message
Alien in own land	“Where are you from?” “Where were you born?”	You are not American. You are a foreigner
Ascription of Intelligence	“You are a credit to your race.” “You are so articulate.”	It is unusual for someone of your race to be intelligent.
Color Blindness	“When I look at you, I don’t see color.”	Denying a person of color’s racial / ethnic experiences.
Criminality – assumption of criminal status	A person clutching their purse or checking their wallet as a person of color approaches or passes. A store owner following a customer of color in a store.	You are a criminal. You are going to steal / You are poor / You do not belong / You are dangerous.

# Examples of Race-Based Microaggressions

Theme	Microaggression	Message
Denial of individual racism	“I’m not a racist. I have several Black friends.”	I am immune to races because I have friends of color.
Myth of meritocracy	“I believe the most qualified person should get the job.” “Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough.”	People of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race. People of color are lazy and / or incompetent and need to work harder.
Second-class citizen	Person of color mistaken for a service worker. “You people ...”	People of color are servants to Whites. You don’t belong. You are a lesser being.
Environmental microaggressions	Television shows and movies without diverse representation of people of color.	You are an outsider / You don’t exist.



# Common Themes of Gender-Based Microaggressions



- Sexual Objectification
- Second-class citizenship
- Ascription of intelligence
- Use of sexist language
- Assumption about traditional gender roles
- Denial of sexism
- Denial of individual sexism
- Sexist humor/jokes
- Assumption of inferiority
- Intrinsic skills & personality types

Theme:

Restrictive  
Gender Roles

Microaggression:

“How are you  
going to work full-  
time and raise  
children?”

Message:

Women’s  
primary  
responsibility is  
child-rearing.



# Examples of Gender-Based Microaggressions

Theme	Microaggression	Message
Ascription of Intelligence	"Oh, you are a bio major? Are you studying to be a nurse?"	Women are not smart enough to be doctors.
Intrinsic Skills & Personality Types	Women in power lead by emotion and are too sensitive!	Women are "genetically" emotional & sensitive.
Second-class citizen	We can't have a woman president!	Women's leadership abilities do not compare to that of men.
Environmental Microaggressions	The only options for gender on university forms are "male" and "female"	Transgender individuals do not belong or matter here.
Assumption about traditional gender roles	"How will you be able to work and take care of children?"	Women are primarily responsible for child rearing.

# Common Themes of Sexuality and LGBTQ Based Microaggressions

- Use of heterosexist, homophobic, or transphobic terminology and language
- Discomfort or disapproval of LGBTQ experience
- Assumption of universal LGBTQ experience
- Endorsement of heteronormative culture and behaviors
- Assumption of sexual pathology or abnormality
- Misgendering

Theme:

Endorsement of  
Heteronormative  
Culture and  
Behaviors



Microaggression:

“So, who is the  
man in the  
relationship?”



Message:

A relationship  
is only valid  
when there is a  
man/masculine  
figure.

# Examples of Sexuality and LGBTQ Based Microaggressions

Theme	Microaggression	Message
Assumption that sexual orientation is the cause of all presenting issues	“What do you think this issue has to do with your sexuality?”	Your sexual orientation is the problem.
Avoidance and minimizing of sexual orientation	When someone comes out and someone responds with, “Good, it’s about time.”	Coming out is not a big deal.
Attempts to over identify with LGBTQ clients	Making frequent references to distant family members who are LGBTQ.	I understand your issues because I know someone who is LGBTQ.
Making stereotypical assumptions about LGBTQ clients	Telling a lesbian woman, “You don’t look like a lesbian.”	Lesbian women have a certain appearance.

# Examples of Sexuality and LGBTQ Based Microaggressions

Theme	Microaggression	Message
Expressions of heteronormative bias	A LGBTQ client notices that a therapist's office only displays heterosexual books and pamphlets.	You are abnormal
Environmental microaggressions	The only options for gender on forms are "male" and "female"	Trans and non-binary individuals do not belong or matter here.
Warnings about the dangers of identifying as LGBTQ	"Are you sure you want to enter this lifestyle?" or "Have you really thought this through?"	Any problems you face are your own fault for choosing a LGBTQ identity.

# Types of Microaggressions



- **Microinsult** (Often Unconscious): Behavioral/verbal remarks or comments that convey rudeness, insensitivity, and demeans a person's identity.
- **Microassault** (Often Conscious): Explicit, purposeful identity-based derogations characterized primarily by a violent verbal or nonverbal attack.
- **Microinvalidation** (Often Unconscious): Verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate, or nullify a person's thoughts or feelings.



# Types of Microaggressions



- **Microinsult** (Often Unconscious):
  - Body language, inserting additional space between yourself and African American patients and not White patients
- **Microassault** (Often Conscious):
  - Refusing to use appropriate pronouns for transgender individuals
- **Microinvalidation** (Often Unconscious):
  - Dismissing perceived discrimination or racism as paranoia or unrealistic

# Intersection of Microaggressions



- Individuals who have multiple oppressed identities experience multiple microaggressions, and are receiving constant messages their identity is invalid, invisible, and disposable.

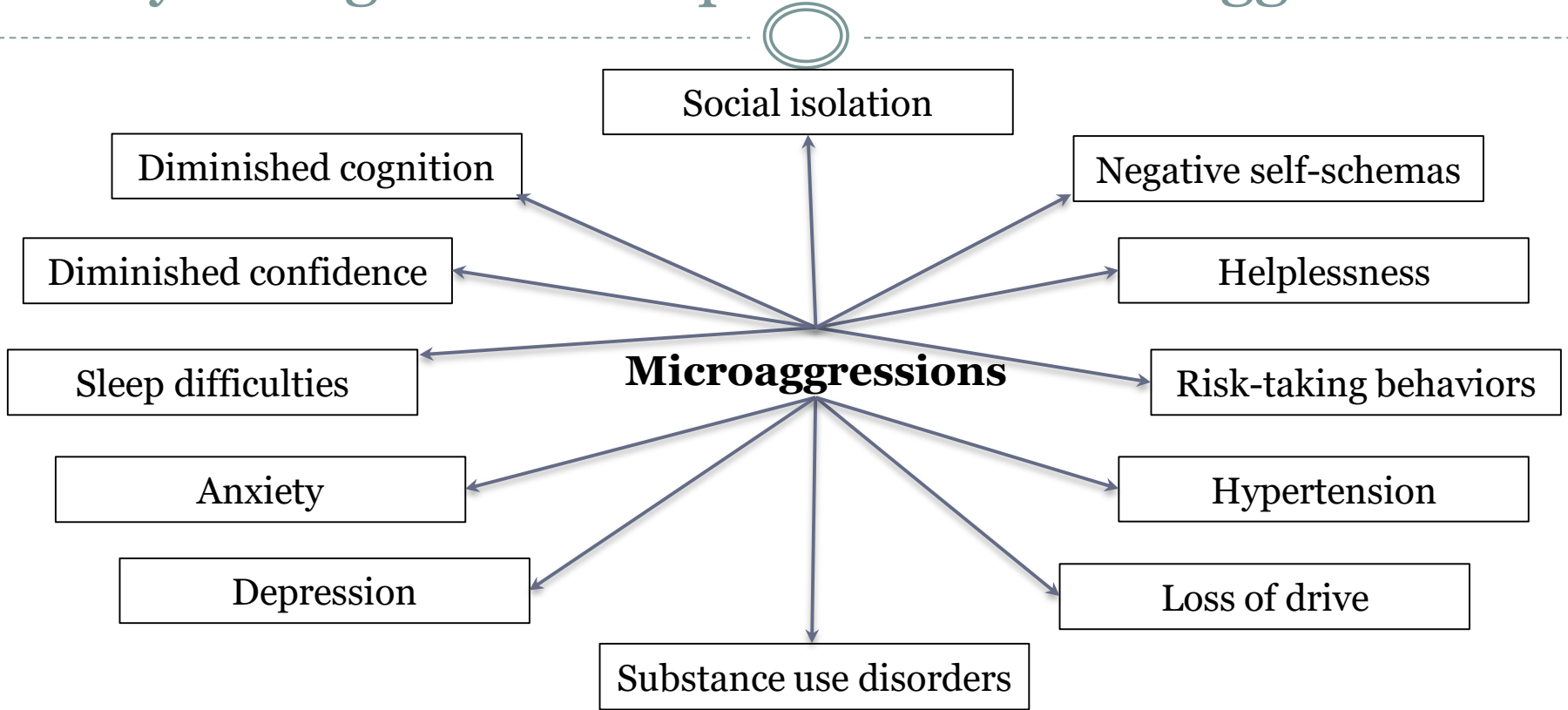
# How Microaggressions are Like Mosquito Bites



## How Microaggressions are like Mosquito Bites

- Reactions to this video?

# Psychological Consequences of Microaggressions



# Should I Respond to a Microaggression?



1. If I respond, could my safety be in danger?
2. If I respond, will the person become defensive and will this lead to an argument?
3. If I respond, how will this affect my relationship with this person (e.g., coworker, family member, etc.)
4. If I don't respond, will I regret not saying something?
5. If I don't respond, does that convey that I accept the behavior or statement?
6. If I was being microaggressive, would I want someone to call out my behavior?

# Ways to Confront Microaggressions



- Take a deep breath!
- Don't be quick to assume offense was the intent.
  - Focus on the event, not the person.
    - Reframe and educate.
    - Label what has occurred.
- Explain how you interpreted the slight, and how it may be interpreted by others.
  - Humor, when appropriate!

# Recommendations for Confronting Microaggressions



- Address microaggressions when they happen.
- Be mindful of your cultural and social positioning:
  - The way you would respond to a child vs. an adult
  - Your relationship and rapport with the microaggressor
- Navigating cultural differences when addressing/confronting microaggressions.
- Be an ally, but always listen to the person who has experienced the microaggression.

# Microaggressions – Activity



- We are going to provide you with 2 scenarios. Each group has similar microaggressions, but featured in a different interaction.
- We want to come up with the message that is being sent via the microaggression, and ways you would respond to each microaggression.
- Be specific! If you would confront it head on, what would you say? What would that look like?



# Microaggressions – Activity



**Scenario:** You overhear a teacher tell a student who has a non-westernized name, “Your name is so hard to pronounce, do you have a nickname I can call you?”

**Scenario:** You overhear a colleague telling a new staff member who has a non-westernized name, “Your name is so hard to pronounce, do you have a nickname I can call you?”

Theme	Microaggression	Message
Pathologizing cultural values/ communication styles	“Your name is so hard to pronounce, do you have a nickname I can call you?”	<i>What message do you feel is being communicated via the microaggression?</i>
<i>How would you respond?</i>		

# Microaggressions – Activity



**Scenario:** You overhear a student tell another student, “If there is a LGBTQ club, why don’t we have a club for straight people?”

**Scenario:** You overhear a student tell a teacher, “If there is a LGBTQ club, why don’t we have a club for straight people?”

Theme	Microaggression	Message
Discomfort or disapproval of LGBTQ experience	“If there is a LGBTQ club, why don’t we have a club for straight people?”	<i>What message do you feel is being communicated via the microaggression?</i>

*How would you respond?*

# Microaggressions – Activity



**Scenario:** You hear an administrator tell a student, “Well, you don’t have to worry about getting into college because you’re a minority.”

**Scenario:** You hear a student tell another student, “Well, you don’t have to worry about getting into college because you’re a minority.”

Theme	Microaggression	Message
Meritocracy	“Well, you don’t have to worry about getting into college because you’re a minority.”	<i>What message do you feel is being communicated via the microaggression?</i>
<i>How would you respond?</i>		

# Microaggressions – Activity



**Scenario:** You hear an elementary aged-child ask another child, “Are you a girl or a boy?”

**Scenario:** You hear an elementary aged-child ask an adult, “Are you a man or a woman?”

Theme	Microaggression	Message
Misgendering	“Are you a girl or a boy?”	<i>What message do you feel is being communicated via the microaggression?</i>

*How would you respond?*

# Confronting and Resisting Microaggressions



- When have you observed or experienced a microaggression in real life? How did you handle the situation? Do you wish you would have addressed it differently?
- How do you teach this to people you work with?

# Reducing Microaggressions During Assessment and Treatment



- Referral forms
  - ◆ Add in pronunciation of name
  - ◆ Alter the way you ask demographic questions
    - “Legal Name” and “Preferred Name”
    - “What sex were you assigned at birth? (What does your original birth certificate say?)” \_\_\_\_\_
    - “Current gender identity?” \_\_\_\_\_
    - “Pronouns” \_\_\_\_\_

# Reducing Microaggressions During Assessment and Treatment



- At time of intake, ask the hard questions!
  - How to pronounce name
  - Pronouns they use (even introduce yourself with the pronouns you use)
  - Gender identity
  - Sexuality
  - Ask if they have experienced oppression (racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.) and if it has had an impact on their mental health

# Reducing Microaggressions During Assessment and Treatment



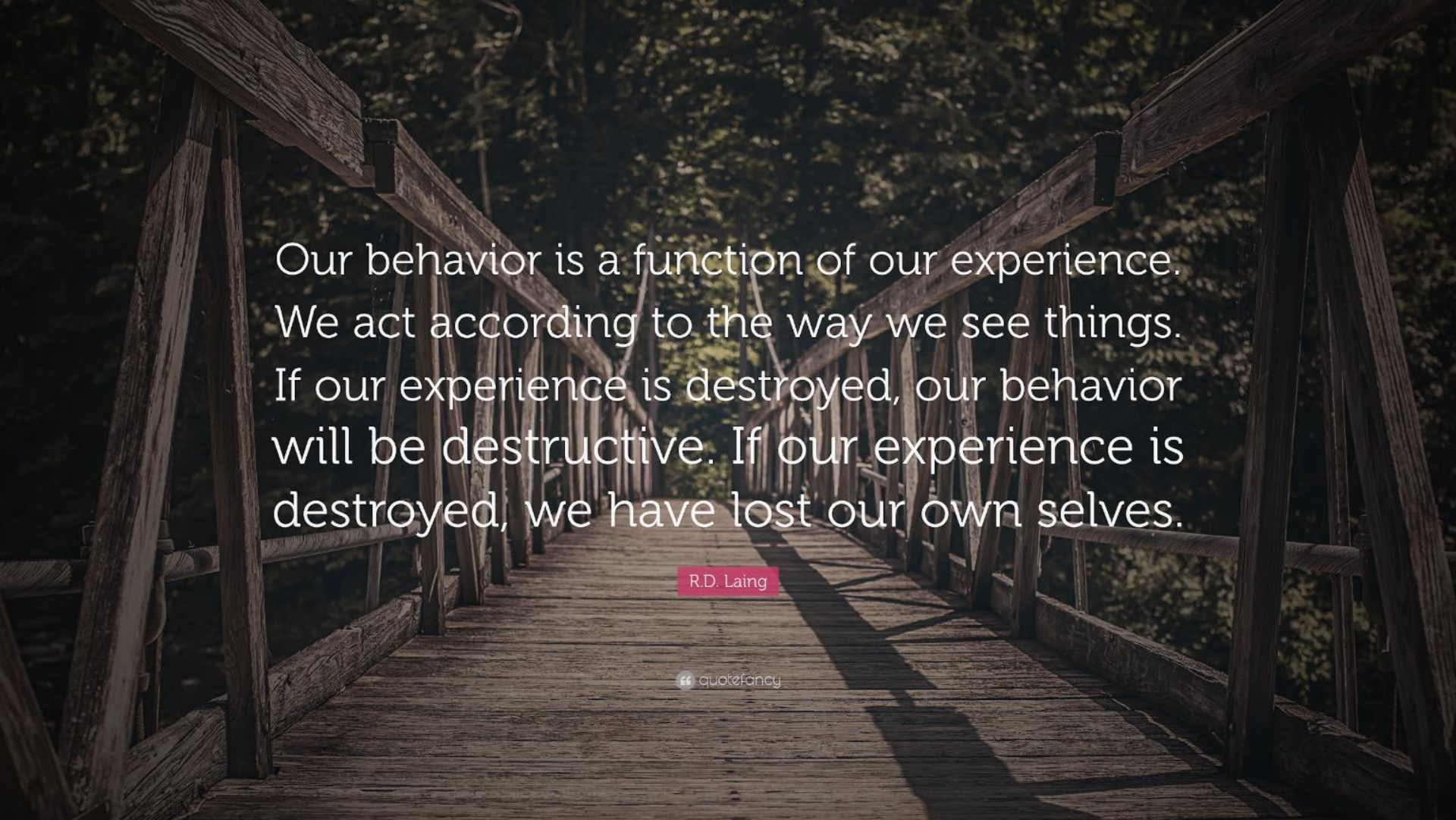
- During treatment and educational activities:
  - Pronounce their name correctly, use the name they wish to go by
  - Use correct pronouns
  - Be mindful and respectful of scheduling during religious and cultural holidays and celebrations
  - Remove heteronormative metaphors, examples, or assumptions
  - Assigning projects/homework that ignore differences in socioeconomic status and inadvertently penalize clients/students with fewer financial resources.



# Reducing Microaggressions During Assessment and Treatment



- Reduce environmental microaggressions
  - Are the pamphlets and promotional materials your agency uses only promoting one type of identity? Do you have diverse individuals represented?
  - Institute gender inclusive restrooms and policies
  - Remove of gender-specific identifiers on job applications
  - Expand where you promote the business and where you recruit staff
  - Add your pronouns to your email signature and business cards
- Other suggestions?

A wooden suspension bridge with a railing, stretching into the distance over a dense forest. The bridge is made of weathered wood and has a simple railing. The background is filled with green trees, and the lighting is soft, suggesting a late afternoon or early morning setting. The bridge's structure is a series of vertical posts and horizontal beams, with ropes or cables supporting the deck from above.

Our behavior is a function of our experience.  
We act according to the way we see things.  
If our experience is destroyed, our behavior  
will be destructive. If our experience is  
destroyed, we have lost our own selves.

R.D. Laing

“ quote fancy

# Awareness, Acceptance, Advocacy



- Continuing education
- Understanding your own implicit bias
- Begin with a fearless searching of the soul and self-reflection.
- Move beyond tolerance
- Acting out of responsibility and not out of guilt

“We need to be weapons of mass construction, weapons of mass love. It’s not enough just to change the system.

We need to change ourselves.” – Assata Shakur

# Moving toward Cultural Humility



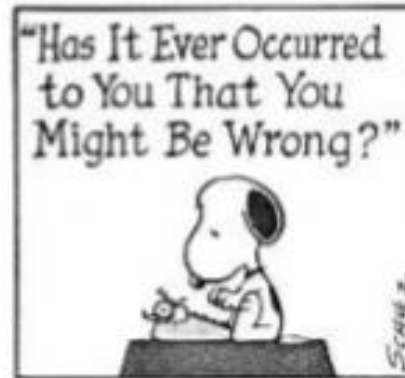
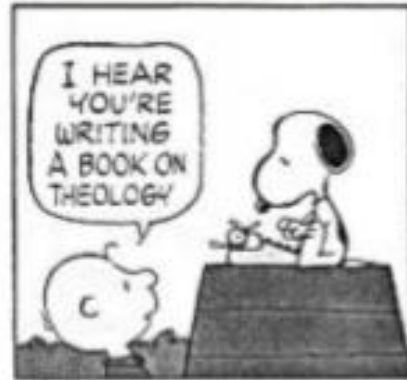
- Move toward difficult conversations and engage your client in conversations about their cultural identities that are most important to them.
  - This is necessary to develop a strong bond with clients and create an environment where they trust you with all parts of themselves.
  - Avoidance is not an option.
- If you are experiencing cultural anxiety or insecurity you are likely becoming self-focused.
  - Learn to cope effectively with these feelings so they do not impact your ability to attend to the client's needs and affective experiences.
- When you can regulate your anxiety and maintain an other-oriented stance during cultural discussions, the emotional bond is likely to deepen.
- It is easy to focus on symptom reduction and forget that discussions about cultural identities are important in developing a strong bond between client and therapist, and ultimate success in therapy.

# Cultural Humility



- Encourages therapists to approach their work with culturally diverse clients with an attitude of openness, and engage in a dynamic process of growth.
- Acknowledging and owning one's limitations to understanding a client's cultural background and experience.
- Striving to express openness and interest in the client's salient cultural identities.
- Emphasizes there is no end point of competence, but rather continued growth and development over time.
- Cultural humility has been linked to stronger working alliances with diverse clients, achieving higher rates of improvement, and being able to repair relationships with clients following microaggressions in therapy.

# Cultural Humility Model





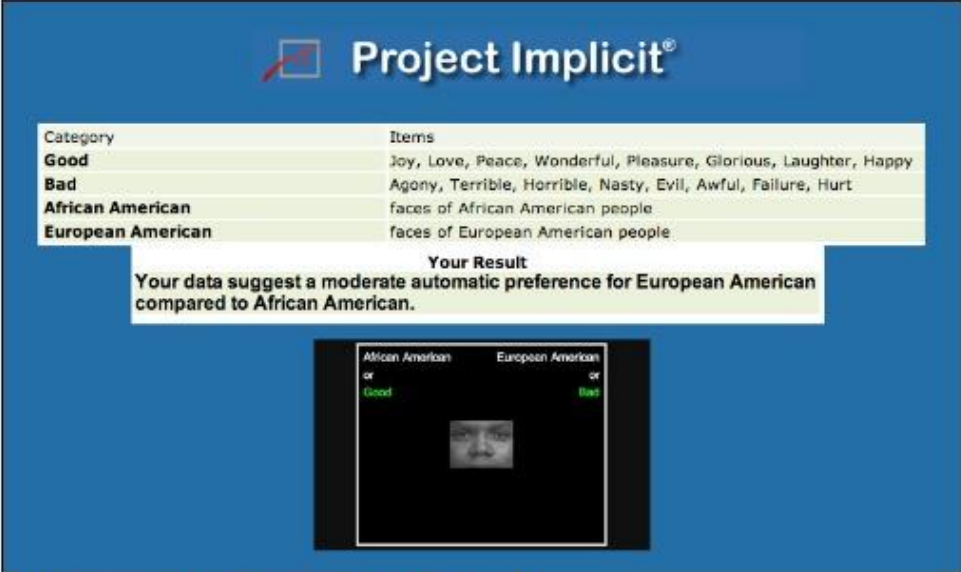
# Why do we need these talks?



- **Parents and educators as front-line responders**
  - Topics of race and racism are typically ignored, done nothing about, or cause paralyzing anxiety and indecision
  - Reactions and (in)ability to speak about tough topics passed down from generation to generation
- **Improves the psyche of children on both sides of equation**
  - Improves self-esteem, breaks false beliefs and assumptions, making people aware of oppressor roles, etc.
- **Differences are noticed and cared for with curiosity, open-mindedness, and compassion**
- **Determine the curriculum taught to future generations**
- **Prevention is better than remediation**
- **Takes personal responsibility for change**
- **Continue to learn**

# Implicit Association Test

Harvard  
University's  
"Project  
Implicit"



The screenshot shows the Project Implicit interface. At the top is the Project Implicit logo. Below it is a table with two columns: 'Category' and 'Items'. The table lists 'Good' (Joy, Love, Peace, Wonderful, Pleasure, Glorious, Laughter, Happy), 'Bad' (Agony, Terrible, Horrible, Nasty, Evil, Awful, Failure, Hurt), 'African American' (faces of African American people), and 'European American' (faces of European American people). Below the table is a 'Your Result' box stating: 'Your data suggest a moderate automatic preference for European American compared to African American.' At the bottom of the screenshot is a small image of a face with a scale from 'Good' to 'Bad'.

Category	Items
<b>Good</b>	Joy, Love, Peace, Wonderful, Pleasure, Glorious, Laughter, Happy
<b>Bad</b>	Agony, Terrible, Horrible, Nasty, Evil, Awful, Failure, Hurt
<b>African American</b>	faces of African American people
<b>European American</b>	faces of European American people

**Your Result**  
Your data suggest a moderate automatic preference for European American compared to African American.

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>



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