



Navigating microaggressions in the workplace:

Recognizing and dismantling subtle acts of exclusion

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Objectives

- **Recognize microaggressions in the workplace.**
- **Understand the challenges of microaggressions and how they negatively impact the workplace.**
- **Learn and implement strategies to effectively address microaggressions.**

Disclaimer

Defining microaggressions

- **Commonplace behavioral indignities whether intentional or unintentional communicating hostile, derogatory or negative attitudes toward marginalized groups', which can be found historically throughout man's existence (Pierce 1974, as cited in Ehie et al., 2021).**
- **Overt or subtle communications perpetrated by individuals or organizations that convey disrespect to the target individuals or groups (Ross-Sheriff 2012).**
- **Daily commonplace, subtle behaviors and attitudes towards others that arise from conscious or unconscious bias (Ehie et al., 2021).**

Defining microaggressions

They are

- a. constant and continual in the lives of people of color**
- b. cumulative in nature and represent a lifelong burden of stress**
- c. continuous reminders of the target group's second-class status in society**
- d. symbolic of past governmental injustices directed toward people of color (Sue et al. 2019)**

Origins

- **Racial differences; used as justification of slavery**
- **1970s work of Dr. Chester Pierce**
- **Lack of empathy and/or understanding**
- **Cognitive placeholders**



What are microaggressions?

- **A hurtful effect that can be intentional or unintentional**
- **Verbal or nonverbal**
- **Single occurrence or part of a pattern**
- **Reduces the confidence, self-esteem, or effectiveness of the target persons**
- **Contains conscious communication and hidden or metacommunication**
- **The impact is what matters, not the intent of what was said**

Types of Microaggressions

Microassaults

Microinsults

Microinvalidations

Environmental microaggressions

Microassaults

- **Conscious biases or discriminatory verbal abuse or behaviors**
- **Explicit statements or actions intended to hurt the recipient**
- **Name calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions**

Microinsults

- **Unconscious messages that are insensitive to a person's racial identity or background**
- **More subtle not intended to be discriminatory**
- **Still conveys a humiliating or demeaning undertone**

Microinvalidations

- **Behaviors intended to diminish a person's experience, thoughts or feelings**

Environmental microaggressions

- **Delivered through**
 - **Social Media**
 - **Educational Curriculum (Texas)**
 - **TV Programs**
 - **Mascots**
 - **Monuments**

From Microaggressions to Subtle Acts of Exclusion

From microaggressions to subtle acts of exclusion

- **Lack of clarity**
- **Not helpful to bringing people together to work on solutions**
- **The term communicates it's not a big deal**
- **Provokes defensiveness**
- **Focuses on the intent as aggressive**
- **Makes people feel small and unimportant**

From microaggressions to subtle acts of exclusion

Subtle Acts of Exclusion (SAE)

- 1. They are subtle.**
- 2. They are acts.**
- 3. They serve to exclude.**

SAE Activity

Roles in a SAE event

- **Subject**
- **Initiator**
- **Observer**
 - **Ally**
 - **Bystander**

Subject

- **The person or group being excluded**

Initiator

- **Person who says or who nonverbally does the SAE**

Observer (Bystander & Ally)

Observer: Anyone who overhears or sees the SAE



Bystander: An observer who chooses not to speak up (can be anyone)

- Fear of retaliation
 - Losing friends
 - Not wanting to get involved
- 

Ally: An observer that speaks up (commitment to external action)

Categories of SAEs

- **Gender and sexuality**
- **Race and ethnicity**
- **Ability**
- **Religion**
- **Age and generation**

SAE Activity

SAE in Social Work Practice

Systemic effects of SAE in social work

- **Institutional (systemic)**
- **Supervisor/Supervisees**
- **Individual Contributors/Colleagues**

Institutional (systemic)

- **strong power differential exists between perpetrator [initiator] and target [subject]**
- **the microaggression is blatant and immediately harmful (microassault)**
- **it would be risky to respond personally**
- **institutional changes must be implemented**

(Sue et al., 2019)

Supervisor/Supervisees

Listening Skills

Take TIME to increase connection amongst peers and to create trust among colleagues

Employees who feel heard are more engaged and motivated

3 out 10 employees feel heard at work

Individual contributors/colleagues

- **Microtrauma**
 - **Lifetime of microaggressions**
 - **Increases stress**
 - **Lower emotional well being**
 - **Increase depression and negative feeling**
 - **Create a hostile and invalidating campus and work climate**
 - **Impede learning and problem solving**

Individual contributors/colleagues

STAGES OF INCLUSION



Racial Battle Fatigue

- **Experiences cause a "freeze effect"** (Goodman, 2011 as cited from Sue et al., 2019)
- **Anxiety**
- **Guilt**
- **Self-disappointment**
- **Rumination from not acting, negative self-evaluation**
- **Internalizing prevalent discriminatory attitudes and negative beliefs about oneself**
- **Social support**
- **Spirituality or religion**
- **Humor**
- **Role shifting**
- **Armoring**
- **Cognitive reinterpretation**
- **Withdrawing for self-protection,**
- **Self-affirmations**
- **Directly or indirectly confronting the SAE**

To understand SAEs

- **Connect with your own marginalized identities**
- **Listen for understanding**
- **Think before you speak**
- **Close the loop**

A 3D yellow puzzle piece is centered on a dark grey background. The piece has a classic interlocking shape with four tabs and four blanks. The word "Solutions" is printed in white, bold, sans-serif font in the center of the piece. The background features several thick, black, wavy lines that resemble liquid or smoke, creating a dynamic and abstract environment. The lighting is soft, casting a slight shadow from the piece onto the surface below it.

Solutions

We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.”

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

“The world is a dangerous place to live, not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don’t do anything about it.”

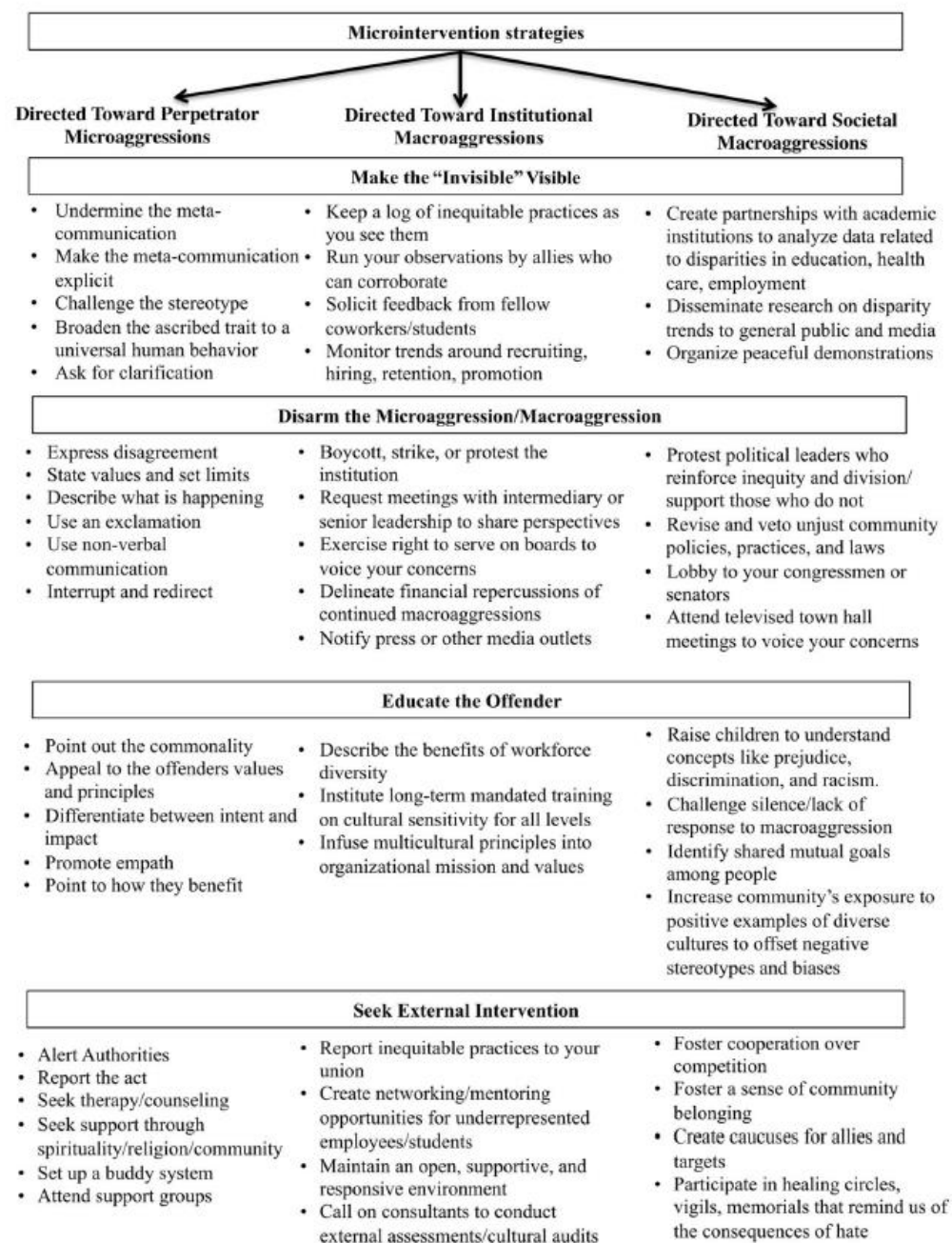
—Albert Einstein

Solutions

Make	the “invisible” visible
Disarm	the microaggression
Educate	the initiator about the metacommunications they send
Seek	external support when needed

- **Pick your battles**
- **Educate rather than confront**
- **Consider where and when to address the initiator**
- **Adjust your response as the situation warrants**





The SAE Accountability System

The SAE accountability system

- **Speaking up in a way that holds people accountable with productive, open, and civil conversations**

Guidelines as the subject or observer

Pause	Pause the action.
Assume	Assume good intent.
Explain	Explain why the action was paused.
Progress	Have patience but expect progress.

Guidelines as the Initiator

Acknowledge	Acknowledge the feedback with gratitude.
Replace	Replace defensiveness with curiosity and empathy.
Follow up	Follow through and follow up.

Making the change in organizational culture

- **Expect SAE to happen**
- **Communicate the norm**
- **Practice speaking up**

Organizational roles

- **Executive leadership**
- **Middle management (social work supervisors)**
- **Individual contributors (social workers)**

Executive Leadership

- **Need to be the first to learn the SAE accountability system**
- **Model best practices and set the tone**
- **If they initiate an SAE accountability system, they need to be fully on board**
- **If SAEs are not actively discouraged, then they are tacitly encouraged**

Tools for executive leadership

Surveys

Interviews

Focus groups or forums

Town hall meetings

Middle Management

- **SAE accountability system can be done as a top-down or pushing the idea up to executive leadership**
- **Implement with teams to improve communication and functioning**
- **Responding to the system can feel burdensome**
- **People leave their bosses, not the company**
- **Empower people to voice their grievances in the moment**

Individual contributors (social workers)

- **Most important role**
- **No business without contributors**
- **Resist the urge to abuse the privilege and weaponize SAE accountability**

TABLE 7.1 How to Respond to a Microaggression

Intent of the Microaggression	Microintervention Action				
	Pause	Name and Disarm	Educate	Report	Treat the Impact
Not to cause harm	✓	✓	✓	*	✓
To cause harm	✓	✓		✓	✓
In either case, if you don't feel safe . . .	Work with a colleague or supervisor to determine the best interventions together.				✓

** If someone continues to use microaggressions after repeated microinterventions, you may consider escalating it to a supervisor.*

Allyship

Allyship is...

Allyship is empathy in action

It's really seeing the person next to us

Advocating for the person missing who should be next to us

We use our power and influence to create positive change for our colleagues, friends, and neighbors

Deloitte's Six Signature Traits of an Inclusive Leader



Develop inclusive leadership skills



Commitment. Develop personal values that include DEI, and stay true to those values by committing to action. These values might relate to fairness, respect, kindness, justice, and a belief in the value of diversity for your team and business.



Courage. Show vulnerability and humility, acknowledge your personal strengths and weaknesses and work on them, and admit mistakes. Also, be brave as an agent of change, take responsibility for challenging the status quo, do the work to create needed change, and hold yourself and others accountable.

Deloitte's Six Signature Traits of an Inclusive Leader



Cognizance. Become self-aware of your biases, and mindful of situations where you're most likely to be biased (e.g., when you're fatigued or stressed)



Curiosity. Be open to different perspectives, and tolerate ambiguity



Cultural intelligence. Seek to empathize and gain knowledge about people with identities and cultures different from your own



Collaboration. Give people autonomy, trust them, and empower them to fully contribute



How to be an ally

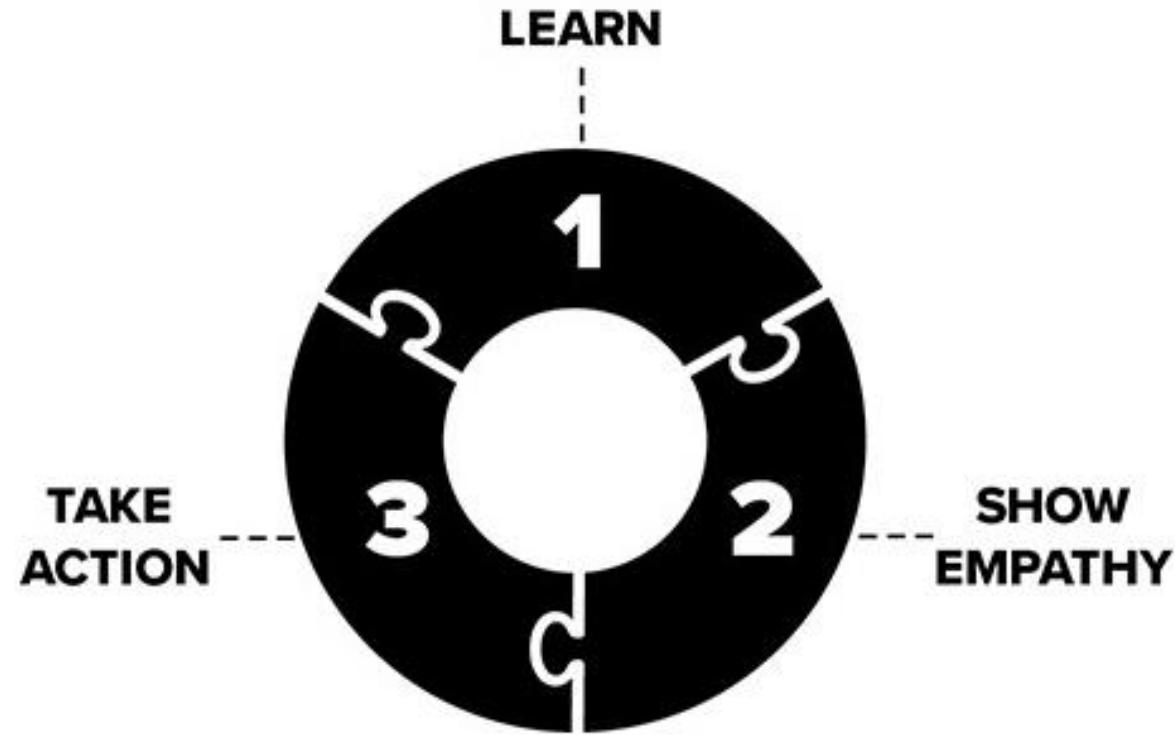


FIGURE 1.1 How to Be an Ally

1. **Learn, unlearn, and relearn.** Learn about and recognize historical harm and its intergenerational impact, unlearn biases from history and cultural marginalization, and relearn from new perspectives.
2. **Do no harm—understand and correct our biases.** Work to change your behaviors and actions so that you don't unintentionally harm people with biases.
3. **Recognize and overcome microaggressions.** Develop your awareness and empathy skills to identify and eliminate microaggressions.
4. **Advocate for people.** Step up and advocate for people in small, everyday ways that can make a big difference.
5. **Stand up for what's right.** Intervene to stop microaggressions and support people who have been harmed.
6. **Lead the change.** When you're ready, take action to lead the change in your work, on your teams, and in your workplace.
7. **Transform your organization, industry, and society.** Address biases and inequities in your company and in the broader world.

Reinforcing psychological safety

- **Psychological safety is a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking (Edmondson, 1999 as cited in Jana & Baran, 2020).**



SAE Activity

Resources and tools

- www.subtleactsofexclusion.com
- InQuest Digital
- Loom Technologies
- Revised 28-Item Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (R28REMS)
- Cultural Competence Self-Assessment Checklist
- Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)

Questions?

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Microaggression (SAE)

Commonplace behavioral indignities whether intentional or unintentional communicating hostile, derogatory or negative attitudes toward marginalized groups', which can be found historically throughout man's existence. Chester Pierce

ROLES IN SAE

Subject:

Person being excluded

Initiator:

Person who acts on SAE

Observer:

Anyone who oversees or hears SAE

- ♦ Ally
- ♦ Bystander

[SAE Accountability]

- ♦ Pause the action.
- ♦ Assume good intent.
- ♦ Explain why the action was paused.
- ♦ Have patience but expect progress.

TYPES OF MICROAGGRESSIONS

Micro assaults

- ♦ Conscious bias, explicit statement

Microinsults

- ♦ Unconscious messages

Microinvalidations

- ♦ Diminish experiences, thoughts, feelings

Environmental microaggressions

- ♦ Macro level systemic, social media, tv programs, monuments, mascots

Racial Battle Fatigue

- ♦ Experiences cause a "freeze effect"
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STAGES OF ALLYSHIP

- ♦ Denier
- ♦ Observer
- ♦ Learner
- ♦ Ally
- ♦ Advocate
- ♦ Accomplice
- ♦ Activist

WHY SAE

From Microaggressions to

Subtle Acts of Exclusion

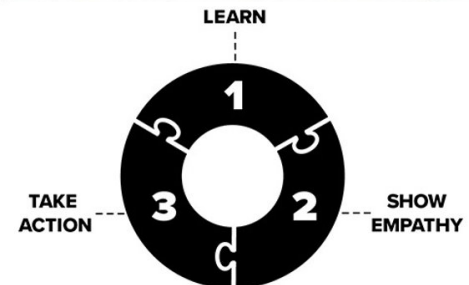
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Common Verbal Microaggressions

Avoid these microaggressions	Consider this
Interrupting: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interrupting someone while they are speaking.• Talking over someone's words.• Not allowing someone to finish their thought.	People with underrepresented identities are more likely to be interrupted. Men are three times more likely to interrupt a woman than another man. ⁷ Interruptions can be verbal and nonverbal—if we are thinking about what we're going to say next, we might be saying something with our body that tells someone we aren't listening and want to talk. Take a step back and listen with empathy; respectfully allow someone to finish their complete thought.
Taking up more than your share of airtime: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dominating the conversation.• Not creating space for someone to speak.• Speaking on panels or at events that don't have diverse speakers.	A study from Brigham Young and Princeton Universities found that given a mixed population at the table, men take up 75 percent of the conversation in a meeting. ⁸ Be aware of who has taken up airtime, create openings, and genuinely invite people to share their thoughts. Say no to panels without diverse speakers; suggest someone with an underrepresented identity in your place.

Common Nonverbal Microaggressions in the Workplace

Avoid these microaggressions	Consider this
Invisibilization and exclusion: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ignoring someone's presence in the room, in a conversation, or in a public space.• Not inviting someone to a meeting when they should be there because of their expertise and role.• Having non-senior-level people or non-"VIPs" sit against the wall versus sit at the table.• Seeing or treating two Black women as interchangeable.	Invisibilization is a form of othering: "I don't see you or recognize you." This could happen in meetings or events, where no one introduces themselves to a person with an underrepresented identity. Or walking past someone and pretending they don't exist. This happens to me often in my own neighborhood in San Francisco, the heart of the tech industry: men will literally run into me because they don't see me, or expect me to move out of their way. Be mindful of inclusion in meetings—invite people to be in the room where decisions are made, with a powerful position at that table. Ensure everyone is introduced to one another. Pause, humanize, and empathize.
Not paying attention: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Looking at your laptop or cell phone or otherwise multitasking while someone is speaking.• Talking aside to someone else when a person is sharing an idea or experience.• Closing off your body or communicating disinterest when someone is speaking.	Give people your full attention. Put down your phone, close your laptop, and pay attention. Practice empathetic listening. Use open body language and facial expressions that connect with the speaker, show you are truly listening and care what they have to say. If someone is new to a group or company, the only person like them in the room, or just nervous, this can make a huge difference. And you may also find that you remember more about what they say.

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DISARMING MICROAGGRESSIONS

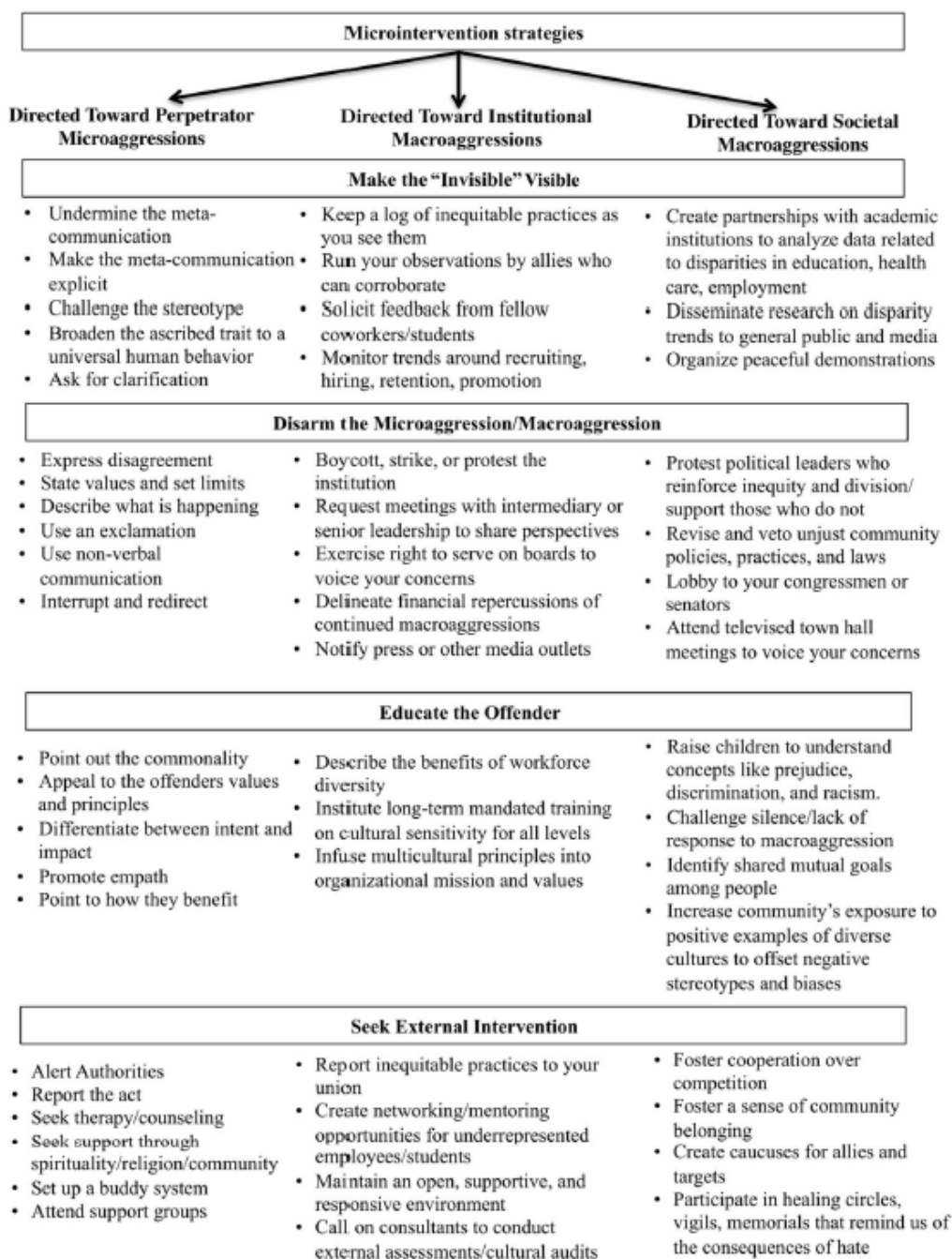


Figure 1. Microintervention strategies.

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