



THE CSWE COUNCIL ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION
AND GENDER IDENTITY AND EXPRESSION

The **N A M E** Steps

How to Name and Address Anti-LGBTQIA2S+ Microaggressions in Social Work Classrooms

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COUNCIL ON SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is the national association representing social work education in the United States. Through its many initiatives, activities, and centers, CSWE supports quality social work education and provides opportunities for leadership and professional development, so that social workers play a central role in achieving the profession's goals of social and economic justice. CSWE's Commission on Accreditation is recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation as the sole accrediting agency for social work education in the United States and its territories.



THE COUNCIL ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY AND EXPRESSION

CSWE's councils and commissions are volunteer bodies that work to advance CSWE's mission of promoting quality social work education. The Council on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (CSOGIE) promotes the development of social work curriculum materials and faculty growth opportunities relevant to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and the experiences of individuals who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, or two-spirit.

In general, Jaws and other Windows-based screen-reading programs will read this Guide. However, please note that the file may need to be opened in Adobe, Google Chrome, or other PDF readers known to work well with screen-readers.

Introduction

Microaggressions are everyday slights that communicate aggression or undermine a person's value based on their marginalized social identities and/or social locations.¹⁶ For example, microaggressions may be motivated by a person's race, ethnicity, class, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, disability status, religion/spirituality, country of origin, or citizenship status. Perpetration can be intentional and unintentional, and microaggressions can take the form of verbal, behavioral, and/or environmental offenses.¹¹

Homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic microaggressions are a serious problem in all educational settings, and social work classes are not immune.^{2,3,6,7} Homophobic and transphobic microaggressions have been associated with increased anxiety and depressive symptoms,¹⁸ as well as feelings of shame and internalized homophobia,¹³ for LGBTQIA2S+ students. LGBTQIA2S+ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, two-spirit, and other sexual and gender minority identities. LGBTQIA2S+ students with additional marginalized identities and experiences—for example, based on race, class, disability status, and/or national origin—may be particularly vulnerable to microaggressions in classrooms and field placements.^{4,7-10,12}

Classroom discussions in social work education can be charged and complex—with a substantial focus on topics such as power, oppression, stigma, and social identity. Despite this reality, educators typically receive little guidance on recognizing and responding to microaggressions in their classrooms—whether committed by students towards one another, or by the educator.¹⁷ The CSWE Council on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (CSOGIE) has developed this guide to support our colleagues in better recognizing and intervening in microaggressions towards LGBTQIA2S+ populations.

Social work educators serve a central role in helping students and colleagues reflect upon and learn from microaggressions that inevitably arise in the classroom. Improving the capacity of educators for recognizing and responding thoughtfully to microaggressions is vitally important as we train the next generation of social work leaders.

How Do LGBTQIA2S+ Students Experience Microaggressions in Social Work Classrooms?

The following are just a few reflections shared by students in the *Social Work Speaks Out! Study*.⁷

“I feel defensive in class due to past experiences during class discussions, especially when I have a professor who isn’t good at directing. I’m comfortable being out and having frank discussions in class, and I tell people when the subject comes up, but overall from the program I do not feel a great deal of community support, and I don’t predict many of my classmates to be supportive allies of future clients.”

—MSW STUDENT, UNITED STATES

“I feel supported for the most part. I do wish that professors that aren’t submerged into [LGBTQIA2S+] issues would learn a little more before they bring the topic up in class because when they describe these issues they sometimes can make you feel uncomfortable by their theories and ideas.”

—BSW STUDENT, UNITED STATES

“Many students in my program make homophobic, transphobic, or simply uninformed statements during class wherein professors will not speak out to correct them. I find myself having to present my identity to an entire classroom simply in order to correct an offensive or hostile statement.”

—MSW STUDENT, UNITED STATES

“I have noticed my professors, classmates, and field placement coworkers become visibly uncomfortable with trying to use the ‘right’ words to talk about [LGBTQIA2S+] folks. While this seems like a little thing, their hesitation or confusion reveals more than I think they know.”

—MSW STUDENT, UNITED STATES

These student comments reflect that they are looking to social work educators to notice and name microaggressions, as well as to respond effectively and thoughtfully to them. This is not an easy task, but we have developed the NAME Steps³ (discussed in the next section) to offer some general guidance.

Responding with Accountability as Educators: The NAME Steps

Microaggressions are almost inevitable in our classrooms, but often go unnoticed by untrained educators who are not members of targeted groups. As social work educators, we also face an important challenge in naming and responding to microaggressions without shaming and scapegoating the individuals who committed them. Rather, the focus should be on guiding classrooms to take collective responsibility for the well-being of all members of the group.

Educators might find it difficult to respond to microaggressions in their classrooms because they are concerned about “staying on topic”; worry about a lack of time; think it is not their place to intervene between students; or feel defensive, embarrassed, or ashamed—perhaps especially if the educator is the

one who committed the microaggression. However, naming and addressing microaggressions, especially when it is hard to do, is a central component of the *implicit curriculum* in social work education (i.e., what we teach through our policies and actions, rather than what is included in the syllabus and formal classroom content).⁵ A discussion about a microaggression in the classroom is an opportunity to model responsible and accountable community engagement, especially if it is uncomfortable. Rather than losing time or diverting from the stated focus of the class, the discussion often deepens class engagement and content learning. It may also help students in targeted groups to feel more comfortable being authentic in these spaces.

We have developed the **NAME Steps**³ to provide flexible guidance for educators across the social work curriculum. These steps are not meant to be rigidly followed, and it may be necessary to adapt the steps with your students to suit the needs of your particular classroom or other learning context (e.g., field placements). You as the educator may choose to proactively introduce the problem of microaggressions and the NAME Steps³ at the start of the term, or you may choose to simply hold it in mind for yourself as general guidance to stay oriented in a challenging moment.



Responding with Accountability as Educators: The NAME Steps *(continued)*



NOTICE

The first step is to recognize that a microaggression has happened in class. Ideally, you will notice it while it is happening, or shortly after. You might notice yourself scanning the room to see if anyone else is reacting, but it can be very difficult to tell how others are feeling. Nevertheless, they may be watching for your response. Even if no one else seems outwardly troubled, your concern about what happened might help students feel noticed and cared about in your classroom. Sometimes, you may not be able to recognize a microaggression that occurred in your class until hours, or even days, later. As soon as you can, take the opportunity to name what you are noticing in class—whether in the moment or at a later date.

ACKNOWLEDGE

A crucial task of responding to microaggressions in a classroom is for the educator to acknowledge their responsibility to help the group to name and address microaggressions when they come up, regardless of who commits them. Reminding the students of your role in facilitating the development of an actively inclusive learning environment can help set a tone of collaborative care, and reduce defensiveness and scapegoating of any individual in the class.

These steps can be hard to hold in mind when classroom dynamics are charged. Educators might notice tension between students, but nevertheless attempt to “just move on” or give up on trying to improve things. CSOGIE argues that naming and addressing microaggressions is fundamental to social work education. For further discussion of the NAME Steps,³ please see:

Byers, D. S., McInroy, L. B., Craig, S. L., Slates, S., & Kattari, S. K. (2019). Naming and addressing homophobic and transphobic microaggressions in social work classrooms. *Journal of Social Work Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2019.1656688>



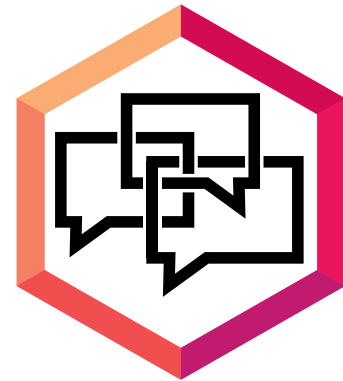
MAKE SPACE

Next, it is important to provide students an opportunity to reflect on their feelings about what happened, and attempt to understand it. If relevant, it may be helpful for you to draw a connection between the type of microaggression, and the themes of the course or the content you are covering that day.

Assign an amount of time for this discussion; perhaps 15 minutes. Let students know from the beginning how long you would like to discuss it, and ask for a student volunteer to serve as timekeeper to help you close the discussion and transition back to your agenda. If necessary, you can always add another segment in the next class session to continue the conversation.

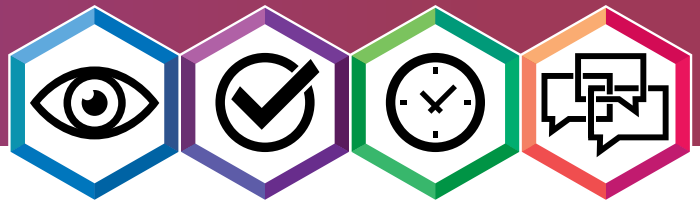
It is generally important during this time for educators to add some structure to the discussion to facilitate reflective dialogue, rather than blaming and defensiveness. For example, it might be helpful to explain that people in groups talking about microaggressions tend to feel defensive or scapegoat one or two people for a larger problem, and that both of these tendencies can get in the way of deeper learning as a group. You could begin by asking them to write for a few minutes about their own feelings and reflections. Discussion about what happened might briefly refer to the individuals involved so that everyone in the room understands the microaggression you are talking about, but it can then be broadened. For example, if one student asks another to share an opinion as a representative of a whole group, the discussion could focus on the incident itself, as well as the tendency to tokenize students from underrepresented groups in class, and to overgeneralize about marginalized groups.

As noted above, this class discussion should not depend on participation of the students directly involved with the microaggression, and the discussion should not endeavor to resolve conflicts or feelings between individual students.



ENGAGE THE GROUP

Finally, engage the class in discussion about how to move forward as a group in a reparative way. It might be useful for the group to plan to check-in during the next class to see if there were further reflections or thinking since the discussion. It might also make sense to choose a new reading assignment to deepen and redirect the discussion in the next class session. Educators may want or need to consult with a colleague, and could choose to share a plan for consultation with the students. The response should be a contextually meaningful strategy to continue the group's learning in response to the microaggression.



The following scenarios have been shared with us by colleagues and students. We walk through one case study with you, and then provide additional scenarios to facilitate practice. Thank you to those who contributed their classroom experiences.

CASE STUDY: WALKING THROUGH THE NAME STEPS

A heterosexual cisgender student says in a class discussion that she is planning to refer her client to another social work student at her placement agency. The client identifies as a transgender woman and she is living with HIV. The student explains that she doesn't believe in her client's "lifestyle." When another student objects, she and others say that she has "freedom of speech" and "freedom of religion."

N NOTICE

The first step is to notice this incident as a microaggression. In this case, the second student's objection may have clued you in, or you may have noticed it for yourself even before the student spoke up. However, even if you don't recognize the interaction right away, it is a critical first step to recognize what you have seen in your classroom as a transphobic microaggression. As soon as you can, name what is happening in the class.

You might say: "I want to pause here because something is coming up in the class discussion that I think is very important for us to think about carefully together. Differing attitudes about people who are transgender or living with HIV are something we should take up."

A ACKNOWLEDGE

Next, it is important to acknowledge your own responsibility for helping the group to name and address microaggressions when they come up. In this case, you need to name a microaggression committed by a student, but be cautious not to scapegoat the student who made the comment. It is a learning opportunity for everyone in the classroom.

For example, you could say something like: "What was just shared is one example of how transgender women living with HIV experience significant barriers in society. It is my job as the educator to notice when these kinds of examples come up and process them with the class. I think that it's important for us to take a few minutes to talk about your thoughts... Ideas like this are very common, and when they come up it can be an opportunity for the group to learn in a deeper way. Let's think about how such a belief might impact this client's ability to, for example, access healthcare services."

M MAKE SPACE

The third step is to take the time to actually address this microaggression and its impact in your class. If practical, tie it into the content of the particular course. For example, in a practice course you could broaden the discussion to the ethical obligation of social work practitioners to be aware of how their own beliefs may impact their interactions with clients. This important discussion could consider how practitioners can engage responsibly and reflexively across differences, including how they develop capacities for self-awareness and self-

regulation regarding personal biases.⁵ In a health or mental health course, it may make more sense to frame the discussion through the disparities in access to healthcare experienced by transgender women living with HIV, as well as the significant discrimination they experience from providers in trying to access care.^{14,15}

Your role during the discussion, and throughout the steps, is not to change any student's views or make them all agree. Rather, your task is to name, take responsibility, and hold students accountable for the microaggression. The goal is to promote reflection about an expression of bias in your classroom.

E ENGAGE THE GROUP

Finally, decide as a group how to move forward. You could plan for a follow-up discussion during the next class session, or you might make a change in subsequent course content (e.g., an additional reading and/or guest lecture from someone with expertise on transgender women's experiences with healthcare barriers). Remember, the response should be relevant to your school and class, and deepen the group's learning in response to the microaggression.

ADDITIONAL SCENARIOS

Now, try it yourself—or better yet, with your colleagues. Read these real scenarios from social work classrooms and then consider how the NAME Steps³ could be used to enhance your responses to such situations.

1 An older, cisgender, gay male student repeatedly misgenders another student in class who uses the personal pronouns they and them. Each time, you and the other students gently correct him. Toward the middle of the term, the student becomes frustrated, saying, "I learned to speak English with correct grammar." After some silence, the student seems calmer and says, "It's just that it's new for me and I feel stupid because I don't know all the gender terminology and I'm afraid I can't learn it."

2 In an exercise to practice interviewing skills on the first class of the term, you assign students to interview each other. You then move around the room to each student asking follow-up questions about the person they interviewed. In each case, you assume the gender identity of the students as you ask questions. For example, you ask questions like: "Why did she choose to study social work?" At the end of the exercise, a student raises her hand and points out that you had assumed everyone's gender and misgendered two students.

3 A student who is cisgender and blind shares that she will soon be having eye surgery and will have to miss an upcoming class. Later, during a small group exercise, another student asks if her boyfriend or husband will be available to help her during the recovery process. When she responds that she is single, the other student comments that it must be hard to be blind without a boyfriend or husband. The student approaches you after class and shares how uncomfortable it made her feel that the other student assumed that she must be straight and made assumptions about her needs based on her disability.

4 A White, bisexual, cisgender student presents a case from her field placement in an agency serving LGBTQI2S+ youth, of a client who is a Latinx, gender diverse, 15-year-old. The student says in class that she doubts the client can ever come out to their family because Latinx families are "almost always so homophobic and transphobic."

Additional Resources

In addition to the academic articles referred to throughout this guide, the following are a few introductory resources that may be helpful for learning and teaching about microaggressions.

► **Campus Pride**

An organization with many resources for LGBTQIA2S+ students, which may also be useful for educators. For example, see the resources available on religion and faith, as well as their speaker's bureau. Available from: <https://www.campuspride.org/>

► **But I Didn't Mean It That Way: Microaggressions**

Exercises and case studies for educators on classroom microaggressions. By P. Young, from the Kaneb Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Notre Dame. Available from: <https://perma.cc/T2S6-L5Y6>*

► **Microaggressions and Microaffirmations Series PART 1**

Includes suggestions for educators on recognizing and responding to microaggressions in their classrooms. From the UC Davis Center for Educational Effectiveness. Available from: <https://perma.cc/3M9D-BJ2G>

► **Tools for Department Chairs and Deans**

Tools on recognizing and interrupting microaggressions. From the University of California Faculty Leadership Seminar Series. Available from: <https://perma.cc/ZAW3-9RCG>

MORE ACTIVITIES AND RESOURCES FOR CLASSROOM USE

In Group/Out Group Lesson Plan (University of Washington):

<https://perma.cc/VA9R-NGMM>

Microaggression Activity (Awareness Harmony Acceptance Advocates):

<http://breakingprejudice.org/teaching/group-activities/microaggression-activity/>

Permalink: <https://perma.cc/QYX7-P6ER>

Speak Up: Responding to Everyday Bigotry (Southern Poverty Law Center):

<https://www.splcenter.org/20150125/speak-responding-everyday-bigotry>

Permalink: <https://perma.cc/5X9Y-TJHE>

Trans Microaggressions Photo Project (GLAAD):

<https://www.glaad.org/blog/glaad-launches-trans-microaggressions-photo-project-transwk>

Permalink: <https://perma.cc/6EKD-WWY7>

Microaggressions.Com:

www.microaggressions.com

* **Please Note:** Perma.cc links have been used to archive the PDF resources, and have been provided as back-ups for specific webpages. Perma.cc provides reliable, unbreakable links to permanent copies of the resources, even if they are taken offline by the original poster.

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