

Subtle Acts of Exclusion

Microaggressions Toolkit: The Practice of Ouch

A Companion to the Book *Subtle Acts of Exclusion* by
Michael Baran and Tiffany Jana

1. Introduction

In partial response to *Widening the Circle of Concern*¹ and consistent with our mission to help the congregation dismantle white supremacy culture, the Chalice Transformation Team is introducing the “ouch” practice to encourage us to interrupt and hopefully in time eliminate microaggressions here at Chalice. These are almost always unintentional and originate from our implicit or unconscious bias. When we carry out this practice with love and compassion, it will be a gift to each of us.

2. What are Microaggressions, or SAEs?

“Where are you from, where are you really from”
“I think your accent is so cute” “You speak English so well”
“You don’t look African” “You don’t look Jewish” “You’re so articulate”
“I love your hair, can I touch it?”

These are a few examples of **Microaggressions** (go to pg. 4 for additional examples). When spoken to Black, Indigenous, or other people of color, these are harmful; especially when they are experienced over and over. **They are also known as Subtle Acts of Exclusion (SAEs)**. They’re **Subtle** because they can be confusing and hard to identify; they are **Acts** that are said or done and they serve to **Exclude** by inferring that you’re different or you don’t belong. Ibram X. Kendi, in his book *How to be an Anti-Racist*, contends that the harm of these acts should not be minimized. He considers them another form of **racial abuse** and even warns that the word “microaggressions” may minimize impact.

SAEs reflect our implicit biases. Although race-oriented SAEs are of particular interest they also show up in our interactions with those different in nationality, sexual orientation, gender, faith, political affiliation, socioeconomic class, and abilities. The impact of exclusion is a problem not only for an individual, but also for the larger culture

¹ “Widening the Circle of Concern”, Report by the UUA Commission on Institutional Change, June 2020.

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where the repetition of microaggressions reinforces and maintains systems of power, inequality, bias, and what is considered “normal;” in other words, white supremacy.

The Practice of “ouch” is one tool we can use to challenge SAEs and white supremacy.

3. Overview – The Practice of “Ouch”

Suppose you are wearing sandals and someone wearing shoes steps on your toes. It hurts. It would be natural for you to say “ouch!!” And once the person who stepped on you realizes what they had done, they would apologize.

If you are the target of an SAE, it hurts. And it can hurt a lot. So, it should seem natural for you to say “ouch,” thus interrupting the conversation or action and opening up the opportunity for discussion and learning. It should also be natural for an ally to do the same.

Of course it doesn’t always seem natural, does it? There are two reasons: First, many of us have never done it before and don’t feel we have the skills to do it well. Second, we are often not certain how the person we interrupted is going to react. This toolkit will help address these concerns. On pages 7 & 8 are summaries Robin DiAngelo, author of *White Fragility*, prepared from her research and experience of two ways white folks may respond to feedback on their racism.

However, it is understandable why a victim of an SAE may choose to remain silent. To speak up can be traumatizing and emotionally draining. And let’s be clear, especially with respect to racist SAEs, it’s really white UU’s responsibility to address the behavior. That is one reason why allies are so important.

Because SAEs are almost always committed unintentionally, “ouch” should always be practiced with love and compassion. It should never be used to make someone feel guilty, ashamed, or embarrassed. When you use “ouch,” always consider that you’re “calling someone in” to an important conversation. And if you are the one interrupted, welcome it with grace and curiosity and an openness to learning.

Because SAEs are harmful, our UU Principles compel us to act.

Let’s examine in more detail what happens during a microaggression so we can develop guidelines on how to use “ouch”

4. Roles during a Subtle Act of Exclusion (SAE)

During an SAE, those present will fall into or assume one of four roles:

- The **initiator** is the person who commits the SAE.

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- The **subject/victim** is the person(s) who is targeted by the SAE. There are times when the subject or victim is not present.
- An **ally** is someone who speaks up and interrupts the conversation in support of a victim.
- A **bystander** is someone who witnesses the event but says nothing

5. Guidelines to Use “Ouch” as the Subject/Victim of an SAE or as an Ally

You’ve just been a victim of an SAE, how should you or an ally respond? There are two ways recommended by the book:

Option A: Respond Immediately

Interrupt the conversation or action by saying “ouch” or another word you prefer such as “pause” and ask one of these or a similar question²:

Ask for more clarification: “Could you say more about what you mean by that?” “How have you come to think that?” When someone is asked to clarify, they may recognize what they said may be harmful and respond, “But I didn’t mean it that way.” Of course they didn’t. This opens up an opportunity for you to explain intent vs. impact.

Separate intent from impact: “I know you didn’t realize this, but when you _____ (comment/behavior), it was hurtful/offensive because_____.”

There are, of course, other ways to ask these same questions. Don’t hesitate to put them in your own words.

It deserves repeating that your conversation should focus on the SAE’s impact, not the intent of the initiator. Intent does not lessen the harm that was done.

If the initiator is open to the conversation, continue until there is understanding. If the initiator is defensive and agitated, suggest that you move on for now, but set an intention to discuss it at a later time. Be sure to follow up.

Remember to assume good intentions. Oftentimes SAEs slip out when people intend a compliment (“You’re so professional.”) or when they are curious (“Where are you really from?”); Instead, of “calling people out,” think of speaking up as “calling people in” to a conversation.

² “How to Respond to Microaggressions”, NYTimes Article by Hahna Coon, March 3, 2020

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What if I’m not sure it is an SAE? If you heard something that made you feel uncomfortable, pause the conversation and say: “what you just said (or did) has made me feel uncomfortable. I think it might be an SAE. Let’s explore this together to see if it is.”

Have patience but expect progress. We are asking ourselves to start what could be a difficult conversation, and could open us up for potential negative repercussions. It’s important to keep a level head and be in tune with your own readiness for the conversation. But the feedback you are offering is a gift, and it is appropriate to expect progress in return.

Being an ally: It is a delicate balance to amplify marginalized voices without speaking over them. When you interrupt as an ally, speak from your own perspective. “I’m feeling uncomfortable with what you just said (or did). I believe it was an act of exclusion.” Allies are very important when the subject or victim of an SAE is not present. Often, stereotypes or dehumanizing references to marginalized groups occur when no one from those groups are present.

Option B: Respond Later

Although responding to an SAE immediately has benefits, what was said is fresh in everyone’s mind and others who hear the conversation will benefit too, there will be times when you are simply too uncomfortable to respond immediately. That’s OK. Reach out to the initiator later and have the same conversation suggested above.

6. Guidelines for Responding as the Initiator of an SAE

IT HAPPENS! Expect it to happen. If you have been called “in” as the initiator, **listen for understanding**. Spend your mental energy listening to understand the speaker’s perspective instead of trying to formulate a response or defense. Respond with grace (“I hear what you are saying, and I would like to take a moment to process it.”). **Replace defensiveness with curiosity and empathy**. Don’t attempt to clarify your intent, rather concentrate on the impact of your comment on others. Consider asking follow-up questions or paraphrasing what the other person is saying. Look the other person in the eye and make sure your body language is open.

The direct benefits of having productive conversations include: increased feelings of inclusion for people with marginalized identities; more trust among everyone, more collaboration across organizations; improved ability to give feedback on other issues, and a culture of transparency, interpersonal civility, and accountability.

To avoid being an initiator, **think before you speak**.

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- Is what I am about to say/ask based on stereotypes or assumptions about a marginalized group?
- Is it unnecessarily intrusive? Am I overstepping?
- Is it based on kindness and generosity or the opposite?
- Do I have the authority or right to tell/ask this person to comply with my request?
- Is this a good use of my authority/privilege?
- Would I say the same thing to a person of a different gender/color/race, etc.?
- Is this going to make the person feel inadequate or as if they don't belong?
- Does this question their normalcy or make them feel like a threat or a curiosity?
- Will this make someone feel invisible, as if they are not an individual?
- Have I focused, gotten context clues, and seen a person as an individual before making assumptions?

(All material quoted and paraphrased from *Subtle Acts of Exclusion: How to Understand, Identify, and Stop Microaggressions* by Tiffany Jana and Michael Baran)

Resources:

- Table of Racist oriented SAEs — Next Page
- [Six Types of Microaggressions That Harm LGBTQI People](#) an article from the Psychology Benefits Society
- Go to the [The Microaggressions Project](#) for real life examples that folks experience every day in all the areas.
- Go to the [Project Implicit](#) and take tests to find out your implicit biases about race, gender, sexual orientation, and other areas!

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Table of Race-Oriented SAEs

Adapted from: Wing, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, Esquilin (2007). Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice. *American Psychologist*, 62, 4, 271-286

Theme	SAEs	Message
<i>Alien in their own land</i> When Americans of color are assumed to be foreign-born	“Where are you from?” “Where were you born?” “You speak good English.” A person asking an Asian American to teach them words in their native language.	You are not American You are a foreigner You don’t belong here
<i>Ascription of Intelligence</i> Assigning intelligence to a person of color on the basis of their race.	“You are a credit to your race.” “You are so articulate.” Asking an Asian person to help with a Math or Science problem.	People of color are generally not as intelligent as whites. It is unusual for someone of your race to be intelligent. All Asians are intelligent and good in math & sciences.
<i>Color Blindness</i> Statements that indicate that a white person does not want to acknowledge race	“When I look at you, I don’t see color.” “America is a melting pot.” “There is only one race, the human race.”	Denying a person of color’s racial / ethnic experiences. Expecting assimilation / acculturation to the dominant culture. Denying the individual as a racial / cultural being.
<i>Criminality – assumption of criminal status</i> A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant on the basis of their race.	A white man or woman clutching their purse or checking their wallet as a Black or Latino approaches or passes. A store owner following a customer of color around the store. A white person waits to ride the next elevator when a person of color is on it.	You are a criminal. You are going to steal / You are poor / You do not belong / You are dangerous.
<i>Denial of individual racism</i> A statement made when whites deny their racial biases	“I’m not a racist. I have several Black friends.” “As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority.”	I am immune to prejudice because I have friends of color. Your racial oppression is no different than my gender oppression. I can’t be a racist. I’m like you.
<i>Myth of meritocracy</i> Statements which assert that race does not play a role in life successes	“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.

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Table of Racism Oriented SAEs, continued

Adapted from: Wing, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, Esquilin (2007). Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice. *American Psychologist*, 62, 4, 271-286

Theme	SAEs	Message
<p><i>Second-class citizen</i></p> <p>Occurs when a white person is given preferential treatment as a consumer over a person of color</p>	<p>Person of color mistaken for a service worker</p> <p>Having a taxicab pass a person of color and pick up a white passenger</p> <p>Being ignored at a store counter as attention is given to the white customer behind you</p> <p>“You people ...”</p>	<p>People of color are servants to whites. They couldn’t possibly occupy high-status positions.</p> <p>You are likely to cause trouble and / or travel to a dangerous neighborhood.</p> <p>Whites are more valued customers than people of color</p> <p>You don’t belong. You are a lesser being.</p>
<p><i>Environmental microaggressions</i></p> <p>Macro-level microaggressions, which are more apparent on systemic and environmental levels</p>	<p>A college or university with buildings that are all names after white cisgender heterosexual upper-class males</p> <p>Television shows and movies that predominantly feature white people, without representation of people of color</p> <p>Overcrowding of public schools in communities of color</p> <p>Overabundance of liquor stores in communities of color</p>	<p>You don’t belong / You won’t succeed here. There is only so far you can go.</p> <p>You are an outsider / You don’t exist. People of color don’t / shouldn’t value education.</p> <p>People of color are deviant.</p>
<p><i>How to offend without really trying</i></p>	<p>“Indian giver.”</p> <p>“That’s so gay.”</p> <p>“She welshed on the bet.”</p> <p>“I jewed him down.”</p> <p>“That’s so white/Black of you.”</p> <p>“You people ...”</p> <p>“We got gypped.”</p> <p>Imitating accents or dialects</p> <p>“Ghetto”</p>	<p>History of term is irrelevant</p> <p>Everyone in a group is the same</p>

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Whites Receiving Feedback on Racism and Responding from the Mainstream Framework: Above & Below

Feelings:

Behaviors

Singled out Shamed Angry	Guilty	Attacked Accused Scared	Silenced Insulted Outraged	Judged	Crying Focusing on Intentions	Leaving Seeking absolution	Withdrawing Arguing	Denying Avoiding
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Claims:

I know POC
I marched in the '60s
I took this in college
The real oppression is class
You are judging me
You don't know me
You are generalizing
That is just your opinion
I disagree
How dare you assume I would be racist?
You don't do this the right way
You're playing the race card

This is not welcoming to me
If I say the wrong thing I'll get fired
You are making me feel guilty
You are elitist
I just said one little innocent thing
Some people just find offense where there is none
You hurt my feelings
You misunderstood me
Where is your empathy?
I don't feel safe
The problem is your tone
I was taught to treat everyone equally

Underlying beliefs (do not need to be conscious or intentional):

Racism is simply personal prejudice
Racism is only enacted occasionally, and rarely if ever by me
As a white person, I will be the judge of whether racism has occurred
My learning is finished / I know all I need to know
Racism can only be intentional; not having intended racism cancels it out
Having suffered relieves me of racism or racial privilege
White people who experience another form of oppression cannot experience racial privilege
If I am a good person I can't be racist
My unexamined perspective is equal to people of color's
I am entitled to remain comfortable
How I am perceived by others is the most important issue
As a white person I know the best way to challenge racism
This process needs to feel good / be comfortable. If not, it's being done wrong
It's not kind to point out racism
Race privilege is something one is aware of and can feel
Racism is conscious bias. I have none: I am not racist
Racists are bad individuals, so you are saying that I am a bad person
If you knew me or understood me you'd know I can't be racist
If I have friends of color I can't be racist
There is no problem / society is fine the way it is
Racism is a simple problem ("People just need to ...")
My world view is objective and the only one operating
If I can't see it, it isn't legitimate
If you have more knowledge on the subject than I do, you think you're better than me
Judging is wrong; it is possible not to judge
I am superior

How it functions

Maintains white solidarity
Silences the discussion
Protects one's worldview
Focuses on messenger, not message
Protects racism

Closes off self-reflection
Makes white people the victims
Takes race off the table
Rallies more resources to white people

Minimizes
Hijacks the discussion
Protects white privilege

Robin DiAngelo, 2015

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Whites Receiving Feedback on Racism and Responding from an Anti-Racist Framework: Above & Below

Feelings:

Behaviors

Gratitude	Excitement	Discomfort	Guilt	Reflecting	Apology	Listening	Processing
Embarrassment	Motivation		Humility	Seeking more understanding		Grappling	Believing
	Compassion	Curiosity					

Claims:

Thank you
YES! I am opening and shifting
It's my responsibility to resist defensiveness and complacency
Man, this is hard
Wow, hard but so stimulating and important
I better get on this
Oops!
It can't be avoided
It's personal but not *strictly* personal
There is no right way to do it; I will focus on the message not the messenger
I need to build my capacity to endure discomfort / bear witness to the pain of racism
I have some work to do

Underlying beliefs

BEING GOOD OR BAD IS NOT RELEVANT
Racism is a multi-layered system
All of us are socialized into it
Racism cannot be avoided
Whites have blind spots on racism / I have blind spots on racism / it's hard to see or recognize
Racism is complex / I don't have to understand it for it to be valid
Whites are unconsciously invested in racism / I am unconsciously invested in racism
Bias is implicit / unconscious; I don't expect to be aware of mine without a lot of on-going effort
Receiving feedback is a gift
Feedback from POC indicates trust
Feedback on white racism is difficult to give; how I receive feedback is not as relevant as the feedback itself
Authentic anti-racism is rarely comfortable. Discomfort is key to my growth and thus desirable
White comfort maintains the racial status quo, so discomfort is necessary and important
I must not confuse comfort with safety / As a white person I am safe in discussions of racism
The antidote to guilt is action
It takes courage to break with white solidarity
It takes courage to lead other whites in this work; how can I support those that do?
The only way out is through
I bring my group's history with me; History matters
Given my socialization, it is much more likely that I am the one who doesn't understand the issue
Racism hurts (even kills) people of color 24/7. Interrupting it is more important than my feelings, ego, or self-image

How it functions

Minimizes defensiveness
Demonstrates curiosity and humility
Stretches one's worldview
Puts what one professes into practice
Interrupts privilege-protecting comfort
Interrupts racism

Demonstrates vulnerability
Allows for growth
Ensures action
Builds authentic relationships / trust
Interrupts internalized superiority

Robin DiAngelo, 2015