UNDERSTANDING AND AVOIDING MICROAGGRESSIONS RELATED TO RACE AND IDENTITY

"You're so articulate."

The problem: Implies surprise that someone of a specific race or identity is intelligent or well-spoken.

Better option: Don't make comments like this at all.

"What are you?" or "Where are you from?"

The problem: Frames the person as an outsider or someone who doesn't belong.

Better option: If you are truly interested in someone's background, ask non-offensive questions like *"What did you like most about your childhood home?"* or *"What are some of your favorite family traditions?"* You could also start by sharing something about yourself like, *"Let's get to know one another. I'm* (share background, experience, etc.). *Please tell me about yourself."*

"They didn't mean to sound racist. That's just the way that you took it."

The problem: This diminishes the person's lived experience.

Better option: "I don't know the intent behind their statement, but I understand how that was hurtful to you."

"You take care of the math portion of the assignment. You're probably good at that."

The problem: Buys into stereotypes that certain genders or races are better at math and science.

Better option: "Let's each identify our strengths to determine how to tackle the project."

"I don't see color."

The problem: This negates — and attempts to dismiss — the reality that racial discrimination exists and significantly impacts many people's lives.

Better option: Acknowledge racial disparities and encourage respectful dialogue exploring related issues.

"Your name is too hard to pronounce, can I just call you [this]?"

The problem: Someone's name is a core part of their identity and may even have familial or cultural significance. Trivializing the importance of their name implies a lack of concern about erasing their identity.

Better option: Commit to learning the person's name and pronouncing it correctly. Research online tools that can help.

"You don't look like you're [race/identity]."

The problem: The way this is often framed as a compliment — as in, *"Wow, I would have never guessed you were [race/identity]."* — implies that you expect a person of that identity to stand out or look a certain noticeably different way that's not necessarily flattering.

Better option: Don't make comments like this at all.

"Is that your real hair?"

The problem: This implies that certain people are incapable of having certain hairstyles/lengths, and it alienates someone who may have a medical condition.

Better option: *"I really like your hairstyle,"* or *"That style looks great on you."*

"What does your [spouse of a different gender] do?"

The problem: This assumes that the person is in a heterosexual relationship and has a spouse.

Better option: Do not inquire about a person's partner unless they bring it up, then respect their pronouns.

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