Lesson   Monday

Introduction to Programming (/introduction-to-programming)
/ JavaScript and Web Browsers (/introduction-to-programming/javascript-and-web-browsers)
/ Homework: Identifying and Preventing Microaggressions

Text

This lesson is part of our regular Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion curriculum. This week, we will cover microaggressions: what they are, how they impact people, and how to recognize and prevent them. **An Epicodus staff member will be leading a discussion on this topic in the next class session.** Please read through this lesson in preparation for the discussion. We encourage you to bring your questions, commentary, reflections, and any experiences that you wish to share with the group.

Microaggressions and Inclusion

Learning about microaggressions will help us become more sensitive to others feelings and perspectives, and ultimately help us to be more inclusive. While diversity refers to the traits and characteristics that make us different from one another, **inclusion** refers to the actions we take to make others feel welcome. Inclusion is therefore what it takes to make Epicodus a safe and productive learning environment, and what we need in tech in order to diversify the tech industry.

Marginalization

When you are marginalized, you are treated as an outsider or you are in the minority in a given situation. Please consider the following experiences from individuals who have experienced marginalization.

Consider this excerpt from a blog post by Jules Walter, a Black software engineer (https://medium.com/tech-diversity-files/diversity-in-tech-the-unspoken-empathy-gap-5b806c83d717):

> Have you ever spent time in a place where you're in the minority, even briefly? At an event, for example, or in another country? Think about how you felt being the only man at an event attended primarily by women, or the only white person in an entire train station in a predominantly African-American neighborhood. If you have never experienced this, try it. The feeling of being an outsider, of not belonging, is what many minorities experience in the workplace on a regular basis.
>
> Until recently in my career, I was always the only black person on my team. Coworkers have generally been nice to me, but it's hard to ignore that I'm noticeably different when no one else at work looks like I do. I've learned to ignore this feeling of being an outsider, but it always comes back eventually, whether it's during meetings with executive leadership, while walking into a company's office for an onsite interview, or in other work-related situations.

In a recent survey (https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/04/success/only-ones-diversity), women told how similar "feeling[s] of being an outsider" affected them:

> Women who are onlies [the only woman in a group] report feeling "on guard," "under pressure" and "'closely watched."

Read one last story now, this time from Lindsay Grizzard, a woman on an otherwise all-male software development team (https://www.fastcompany.com/40512537/i-was-the-only-woman-in-my-company-for-two-long-years):

> This is how it is working as a woman on an all-male team: You can never put your finger on exactly whether it's the gender thing or whether it's just a personal thing or whatever. [For example,] my tech lead would only ever Slack me. It was really hard to get him to come sit down next to me and help me, which is a really common thing to do in coding. But he would do that with everyone else. At first I didn't really notice it, but after six months, it was like every time, even if I would ask him to come pair-program with me for a little while, it would be like pulling teeth.

When we're already tense from sticking out, the uncertainty of whether and why we're being treated differently can eat away at us and make it difficult to participate. And others' discomfort with our "otherness" can often lead them to treat us differently.

Understanding Microaggressions

The way that Lindsay Grizzard's boss didn't want to pair program with her is an example of a **microaggression**. Derald Wing Sue, Professor of Psychology and Education at Columbia University, defines microaggressions as:

> ...everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, often unintentional, which communicate negative messages to people in marginalized groups. These messages communicate they are lesser, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment.

In Lindsay's example, when her boss would pair with everybody else but her, the message she received was probably that her boss wasn't comfortable with her, or didn't think working with her was worth her time.

Here are several real-world examples of microaggressions, including some we've assisted students in addressing at Epicodus. The "hidden messages" might or might not be the intent of the person committing the microaggression, but either way, their effect on members of marginalized groups is the same.

- A male student explains a coding concept to a woman who hasn't asked for an explanation. (Hidden message: *"Women aren't as good at coding as men."*)
- A transgender student tells co-students their pronouns, but some students make minimal effort to use them, or ignore the request.

(Hidden message: *"Your identity doesn't matter unless it fits into my predefined notions."*)

- A younger student assists an older student with a piece of technology without being asked. (Hidden message: *"Older students are less skilled at using technology."*)
- A white student asks a student of color "Where are you *originally* from?" (Hidden message: *"You're a perpetual outsider in this classroom, city, country, etc."*)
- A non-disabled student asks a student with a disability about her mobility device. (Hidden message: *"You are different and less capable."*)
- For team week, three male students write a project idea on the board that references pornography. (Hidden messages: *"Referencing sexual content in the workplace is normal, and anyone that feels uncomfortable should just get used to the 'boy's club' of tech."*)
- An older student refers to their younger co-students as 'kids'. (Hidden message: *"Younger students are lacking in comparison to their older counterparts."*,)
- A student brings in snacks to share with their class. Another student politely declines the food, mentioning they're fasting in recognition of a religious holiday. The offering student exclaims *"That's sooooo crazy! I could never fast like that! Insane! How do you do it?!"* (Hidden message: *"Your religious practices and identity are abnormal."*)

The Impact of Microaggressions

The term microaggression combines the words "micro" and "aggression," but in some ways the term is misleading because the impact of microaggressions long-term is very significant. According to Dr. Sue:

> (Microaggressions) have been found to: (a) assail the mental health of recipients, (b) create a hostile and invalidating work or campus climate, (c) perpetuate stereotype threat, (d) create physical health problems, (e) saturate the broader society with cues that signal devaluation of social group identities, (f) lower work productivity and problem solving abilities, and (g) be partially responsible for creating inequities in education, employment and health care.

These issues arise because microaggressions themselves can be subtle even if their impact isn't. The following quote from Dr. Sue illustrates this. While he speaks specifically of their impact on people of color here, these issues also apply to women and people from other minority groups.

> Microaggressions hold their power because they are invisible, and therefore they don't allow whites to see that their actions and attitudes may be discriminatory. Therein lies the dilemma. The person of color is left to question what actually happened. The result is confusion, anger and an overall draining of energy.

Avoiding Microaggressions

If you rarely have that "sticking out" feeling, we really encourage you to start regularly thinking about how your actions impact people in minority groups. (If this feels like a lot to ask, think back to Jules Walter's suggestion to remember an experience where you were a minority and the emotional energy that state took; surely you can spare some of your own brain power to help others who are in this situation!) Here are a few guidelines to help you help others feel included:

- Don't call attention to a person's status as a member of a minority community, even if you don't mean it "negatively".
- Don't make jokes about marginalized groups or communities.
- Don't use terms that are disparaging toward minority groups, even if you're "just joking".
- Examine your own implicit biases. Be aware of assumptions you have that may affect how you treat others; especially those of different backgrounds, statuses, communities, or upbringings.
- Don't make statements or ask questions implying others may be less capable, or lacking in some manner.
- Don't allow stereotypes to inform how you view, interact with, or discuss others.
- Remember that current students are your future coworkers and network. Have fun, but act as you would in a professional workplace. After all, Epicodus is essentially your first "job" in the industry. Leave a good impression.

Dealing with Microaggressions

But what should we do if we are involved in a microaggression, whether as the target, a witness, or the person committing it? Here are some tips on handling microaggressions from each of these three roles:

What Should I Do if I have Committed a Microaggression?

If you stepped on someone's foot, you'd apologize, right? Even if it was completely unintentional, you still stepped on them. And that can hurt! Well, the same goes for microaggressions; while their damaging "hidden messages" aren't always intended, they still hurt. So they deserve acknowledgement, an apology, and reflection to prevent them from occurring again. Here are some things you can do when you commit a microaggression:

- Be proactive. If you realize you might have said something hurtful, call yourself out. Don't wait for someone to confront you!
- Acknowledge the impact. While it's okay to clarify your intent (*"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings"*), remember the impact your actions have on others is *not* dependent upon your intent, and is equally valid.
- Apologize. Even if you didn't intend harm, the impact can be hurtful. The target's feelings are 100% valid.
- Don't push for information beyond what the other person volunteers. It's not the obligation of this person (or other members of marginalized groups) to educate you, or explain the intricacies of the situation. While it's acceptable to ask for clarification about the situation, many members of marginalized groups report becoming exhausted due to constant pressure to explain why microaggressions are hurtful. You can always talk about the situation with trusted friends, read books by and about the experiences of people from other social groups, or seek voices from these groups online (such as from blog posts and articles) to learn more about the issue.
- Be a good listener. This is an opportunity to learn about someone else's perspective and become a better peer, ally, and future coworker. Listen carefully, regardless of the amount of information the other party freely gives.

- Consider your biases. No matter how hard we try, we all carry biases with us, and those biases are shaped by the world we live in. So if you do something that turns out to be a microaggression, take a moment to reflect on whether your actions might be the outcome of a bias, perhaps one you weren't fully aware you had, and think about how you can be better aware of that bias in the future.

- Follow up with Epicodus staff if you have remaining concerns or would like more guidance on preventing future microaggressions.

- Recognize that no matter how sorry you are or how unintentional it was, you are not the victim.

What Can I Do if I am the Target of a Microaggression?

There are many ways to respond when you are the target a microaggression. In this section, we are outlining a few ideas for folks who may not have context for microaggressions or experience with how to handle them.

When we're targets of microaggressions, we shouldn't immediately assume the perpetrator has hurtful intentions. We are more likely to handle situations in a productive, non-confrontational way if we don't assume others' intentions are hostile. If someone stepped on your foot, that doesn't mean they're on a mission to intentionally hurt peoples' feet, right? In most cases, it was probably an accident. That said, just like there's nothing wrong with telling somebody they stepped on your foot, there's also nothing wrong with telling somebody they hurt you with a microaggression.

Here are guidelines on handling microaggressions targeted at you and communities you belong to:

- You are *never* required to confront someone if you don't want to, or don't feel comfortable. Feel free to separate yourself from the situation. It's okay to take time alone to process. It's also okay to talk to somebody a while after the incident.
- Remember the difference between impact and intent. Your feelings are valid, regardless of the intent of the person committing the microaggression.
- You may choose to tell someone they've committed a microaggression. If you wish, explain why the microaggression was hurtful. While it may be difficult, try to treat them as you would like to be treated if you accidentally hurt someone else's feelings.
- You may also choose to discuss the situation with Epicodus staff. We will provide support, preserve your privacy, and work with you to devise a follow-up plan.
- Please let Epicodus staff know if you ever feel threatened, unsafe, or unwelcome at any time. We are here to advocate for you.
- If you feel you can no longer pair with another student due to microaggressions, inform Epicodus staff so we may accommodate.

What Should I Do if I Witness a Microaggression?

- Don't assume no one is hurt by a comment. Even if there are no clear targets, we all need to work together to make Epicodus a safe space.
- If you feel comfortable doing so, say something to the perpetrator(s) of the microaggression. Again, remember that their intent may have been different from their impact.
- If you're not a part of the group impacted by the microaggression, don't speak for members of that group, or make assumptions about their experience. Instead, focus on what *you* experienced.
- Listen and be supportive. This is an opportunity to learn about the experiences of others and to become a better peer and coworker.
- Let Epicodus staff know if students are acting in an inappropriate or hostile manner. We're here to support and help!

Code of Conduct Violations

To create a safe and welcoming learning environment, it's important that all students treat each other, and staff, with respect, kindness, and empathy. This includes respecting and welcoming all races, genders, ability levels, sexual orientations, ages, religions, and other traits and statuses.

Students that repeatedly target others with microaggressions, and/or display no improvement in this behavior after staff intervention are in violation of our Code of Conduct (in our Student Handbook (https://www.epicodus.com/student-handbook/)) and will be asked to leave.

Continuing to Talk About Microaggressions

Talking about our identities can be uncomfortable, especially if you haven't had these kinds of conversations before. It can be tempting to make jokes as a way of lessening that discomfort, but we'd urge you to avoid this kind of humor. Being a minority in any environment can be stressful, and having somebody joke about that experience can feel belittling.

On the other hand, we urge you to continue talking with your friends, classmates, and teachers about microaggressions and other aspects of making Epicodus an inclusive community.

Being An Ally

We encourage students to become allies. An ally is a person who actively works to improve conditions for people from groups with less power. Working towards preventing and calling out microaggressions is a good start. However, there are many other ways we can be allies as well.

We recommend checking out the following resources if you are interested in becoming an ally:

- Guide to Allyship (http://www.guidetoallyship.com/)
- Ally Skills Workshop handout (http://files.frameshiftconsulting.com/Ally%20Skills%20Workshop%20handout%20 %20US.pdf): Provides useful ally terminology.
- Better Allies (https://code.likeagirl.io/@betterallies): Weekly articles that provide steps toward being a better ally.
- Being an Ally to Women in Technology (https://medium.com/@hadrad1000/how-do-i-ally-being-an-ally-to-women-in-technology-73b70fb86a98): A resource on being an ally to women in tech.

Further Resources

- *Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life* (https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201010/racial-microaggressions-in-everyday-life)
- *Microaggressions: More than Just Race* (https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201011/microaggressions-more-just-race)
- How to Be a Better Developer (http://www.pdxwit.org/blog/2018/5/29/how-to-be-a-better-developer-the-human-side-of-things): Discusses being a better developer, ally, employee and coworker.
- Speak Up at School: How to Respond to Everyday Prejudice, Bias and Stereotypes (https://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/TT-Speak-Up-Guide.pdf): Tools for confronting bias.
- awesome-diversity (https://github.com/folkswhocode/awesome-diversity): A comprehensive resource on the advantages of diversity in technology.
- Women Engineers on the Rampant Sexism of Silicon Valley (https://video.wired.com/watch/women-engineers-on-the-rampant-

sexism-of-silicon-valley): Video interview from Wired on sexism in the tech industry.
- Out in Tech (https://www.geekwire.com/2015/out-in-tech-what-its-like-to-be-lgbt-in-an-industry-struggling-with-diversity/): An article from Geekwire on the challenges of being LGBTQ in the tech industry.
- Interview with Julie Ann Horvath (https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/interview-with-julie-ann-horvath): An interview with Julie Ann Horvath, a whistleblower against sexist behavior at Github.
- Susceptible to Imposter Syndrome (http://peopleofcolorintech.com/engineers/susceptible-to-imposter-syndrome/): A developer and woman of color talks about her experience with imposter syndrome.

Ready to Write Your Reflection?

There is a reflective assignment for this lesson. If you are ready to write your reflection, head on over to Epicenter to find the prompt. If you are logged in to Epicenter, you can access the prompt by navigating to this link:

🔗 **Reflection Prompt: Identifying and Preventing Microaggressions (https://epicenter.epicodus.com/journals?title=Identifying+and+Preventing+Microaggressions)**

Otherwise, you can find detailed instructions on accessing the reflection prompts in the DEI Reflective Assignments (https://www.learnhowtoprogram.com/introduction-to-programming/getting-started-at-epicodus/dei-reflective-assignments#finding-the-reflection-prompts) lesson.

Do you have feedback?

We want to hear about your experience of the DEI curriculum. We outline all of the ways you can give feedback in the student handbook (https://www.learnhowtoprogram.com/introduction-to-programming/getting-started-at-epicodus/student-handbook#giving-feedback).

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Last updated more than 3 months ago.

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