Approaching Writing with an Antiracist Perspective

Racism is not an issue that appeared recently. It has always been around in multiple forms, including in academic writing. Many stylebooks, such as APA, MLA, Chicago, and the AP, only address writing about race by advising writers to avoid bias and stereotyping. Yet, they don't necessarily explain what falls under racist language and what does not. The purpose of this handout is to address some commonly misunderstood terms and provide guidelines on how to approach writing with an antiracist perspective. It outlines elements that can be considered racist, biased, or micro-aggressive in writing and will cover some strategies on how to avoid that kind of language. Not only does approaching writing with an antiracist perspective help us be more inclusive and considerate; it also helps us be more accurate and precise, improving the overall quality of our writing.

Definitions

The following terms will be useful in thinking about how we can take an antiracist approach to writing.

- **Race**: There is no consensus on the exact definition of race. Organizations such as the Associated Press (AP) define race as a way to classify a group of people based on physical, behavioral, or ancestral commonalities or attributes. Antiracist scholar Ibram X. Kendi, among many others, define race as a construct of power. The term is incorrectly used interchangeably with ethnicity.

- **Ethnicity**: As with race, there is no consensus on the exact definition of ethnicity. Most dictionaries and scholars agree that ethnicity refers to cultural identity, rather than being based on physical characteristics. The term is incorrectly used interchangeably with race.

- **Racism**: Discrimination against a group of people based on their race, which manifests in systems, structures, procedures, and/or guidelines that benefit one race over others.

- **Antiracism**: The act of supporting antiracist ideas and policies; in other words, being against racist ideas and policies.

- **Identity/Identification**: Identity is chosen by an individual and indicates their preference and their view of themselves. Acknowledging that a person has the right to self-identify is key to building an inclusive practice in any field.

- **BIPOC**: Acronym which stands for **B**lack, **I**ndigenous, and **P**eople **o**f **C**olor.

- **POC**: Acronym which stands for **P**eople **o**f **C**olor. BIPOC is now more widely preferred, as it is more inclusive of minority identities.

- **Privilege**: Privilege refers to advantages (economic, social, and political) that give one group of people systemic and structural power over others. Privilege can take many forms; this handout specifically refers to white privilege, since in the American context, white people hold most of the power and reap most of the benefits. White-passing privilege (privilege afforded to BIPOC who look white) is also relevant to note here, since people who fall into this category also benefit from the status quo.

- **Power**: Power in this context refers specifically to the authority granted to certain individuals and groups as a result of privilege.

- **Stereotype:** Stereotypes are preconceived and generalized beliefs about an entire group of people that lump them all together and do not consider individual differences between the people who identify with that group.

- **Bias**: In the context of this handout, bias refers to intentional or unintentional use of language to indicate favor to a person or group. There are two main types of bias: explicit and implicit. Explicit bias refers to biases that we know and recognize; implicit bias refers to biases that are more subtle, and may often run contrary to outwardly expressed opinions and beliefs.

- **Microaggressions**: Microaggressions refer to interactions "verbal and nonverbal…in which a perpetrator causes harm to a target, whether intended or unintended" (Sue and Spanierman 8). Microaggressions by their nature contain implicit biases, but they are not the only example of a situation in which an implicit bias can exist.

Antiracist Strategies for Writing and Presenting

There are several things that students can do to identify and avoid stereotypes, implicit biases, and microaggressions while writing and presenting. Below are a few examples.

- Be aware of your own assumptions and biases. Sometimes people tend to imagine others as less complex than themselves, so you should always double check your writing to makes sure you are not projecting those perceptions.

- Employ diverse examples and support in your papers. When referring to different ethnic or cultural groups, make sure that their names are capitalized (e.g., Black, South Asian, Cambodian American, etc.). Avoid referring to specific groups simply as "ethnic" since that is imprecise. Don't single out a group in a way that perpetuates stereotypes.

- Ensure that presentations with visual aids include diverse representation (pictures of people of different cultural, national, and racial backgrounds). However, this advice comes with a caveat: make sure that you are not making your own assumptions about the images you choose! If you identify the people in the images as belonging to a certain group, be sure that you can verify that claim.

- Double check the spelling of names you aren't familiar with. If you need to speak names out loud, make the effort to pronounce them correctly. Google and YouTube are great places to find videos that can help you verify pronunciation.

- Make sure that you listen, and listen actively! You are probably surrounded by peers from different backgrounds and experiences; we all stand to learn from one another.

- Be open to acknowledging mistakes or uncertainties on how to describe or refer to groups and people that you aren't sure about.

Concluding Note

The most important thing is to remember to have empathy for one another. We must be cognizant of and make space for everyone's lived experience and understand that each person's experience is valid and worthy. Through knowing these definitions and employing these strategies, we can make sure that our writing incorporates these antiracist values as well.

Activity

Using the information provided in this handout, read each sentence and determine if it contains any instances of stereotypes, bias (explicit or implicit), and/or microaggressions.

1. I want to ask my friend Johnny to look over my math homework; he'll be able to help me since he's Asian.
2. I don't see color when I look at you.
3. As a woman, I know what you have to go through as a racial minority.
4. You are a credit to the Latino community.
5. As a POC, I know what you have to go through as a fellow racial minority.
6. Black people are more likely to be poor.

Answer Key for Activity

1. Stereotype. While nothing in this sentence is intentionally or unintentionally harmful, it showcases the stereotype that "All people of Asian descent are good at math," which generalizes an entire group of people and doesn't consider their individual experiences.
2. Microaggression. Even though it might be well-intentioned, such a statement denies a person's background and identification. It's not the writer/speaker's view of whether "color" matters; it's how the person being written/spoken about identifies themselves that's important.

3. Microaggression. This sentence would not suffice if used as, say, supporting evidence in a paper. It conflates two different experiences—gender experiences and racial experiences—and ignores that there may be different conditions and difficulties attached to them. This can be harmful because it could serve to erase someone's personal lived experience.
4. Implicit bias. This kind of statement, while intended to be a compliment, actually implies that there is something about the Latino community as a whole that makes them unworthy of credit. Besides being a factually incorrect generalization, it's also an assumption that is hurtful and harmful to people who identify as part of this community.
5. Microaggression. This is a tough one! Although POC may identify with one another to some extent, the experience of say, someone who identifies as South Asian, will be completely different from that of someone who identifies as Black. To say that all POC have the same experience firstly excludes Black and Indigenous experiences and secondly conflates the experiences of different groups.
6. Stereotype. This sentence claims that being a part of the Black community is the direct cause of being poor. However, even though two things might be related in some way, it doesn't mean that one thing caused the other or is the only relevant factor in the situation. Using such a statement as evidence in a research paper would be considered factually incorrect for two reasons: it assumes that correlation implies causation, and it generalizes an entire group of people without evidence.

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