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DEIB, Microaggressions, and Decentering: A Path to Cultural Shift in Organizations

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DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND BELONGING MICROAGRESSIONS AND DECENTERING:

A Path To Cultural Shift In Organizations

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Real change toward equity requires more than just diversity programs. It often requires a paradigm shift in the way businesses are run and deep cultural change that can be extremely challenging to achieve. Recent 'anti-woke' movements only confirm that progress on DEIB is not without challenges and getting everyone on board may be easier said than done. The objective for DEIB has to shift from just improving representation of equity deserving groups to creating environments where all employees thrive rather than just survive.[1]

I.   THE WHY

The why of this work is something we have spent some time pondering, and will continue to ponder. The obvious, business-centric answer, is one we have heard of repeatedly: diverse workforces are more profitable and innovative.[2]

But it is not enough to have a diverse workforce. The work has to also focusing on inclusion and belonging. "Both aspects of [diversity and inclusion] are important—diversity without inclusion can result in a toxic culture, and inclusion without diversity can make a company stagnant and uncreative. Companies are starting to focus more on diversity, but many disregard the inclusion piece of the puzzle. Without a concerted effort towards both inclusion and diversity, your workforce will feel out of place and unsupported."[3] Diversity and inclusion must go together as twin, reinforcing, goals. News stories abound of "diverse" organizations with toxic cultures where usually white, usually male, management either turns a blind eye to, or worse, actively encourages the toxicity —see Charlie Rose, Bill O'Reilly, Matt Lauer, Les Moonves, Activision/Blizzard lawsuit, etc.

There is another, more important facet to the why: to have people feel seen, appreciated, and supported, for its own sake. Because it's the right thing to do. Because this is what we all want and need in our communities, and a culture of assimilation, of refusing to accommodate the needs

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[1] *The Future of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging,* HR.com Affirmity white paper, found here: https://www.affirmity.com/resources/future-diversity-equity-inclusion-belonging-2023/

[2] *Diversity Confirmed to Boost Innovation and Financial Results*, Forbes, Stuart R. Levine and Thought Leaders Contributor Group, January 15, 2020, found here: https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesinsights/2020/01/15/diversity-confirmed-to-boost-innovation-and-financial-results/?sh=4b99703dc4a6

[3] *Diversity and Inclusion in the Workplace: Benefits and Challenges*, Kellie Wong, Achievers Blog, September 14, 2020, https://www.achievers.com/blog/diversity-and-inclusion/#:~:text=According%20to%20Deloitte%2C%20diverse%20companies,percent%20in%20high%2Ddiversity%20environments.&text=A%20major%20issue%20is%20that,a%20diverse%20and%20inclusive%20culture

and voices of people whose identities are not the same as ours, is not only not conducive to this goal, but it blatantly undermines it.

When we ask why, we do not ask this of people with marginalized identities. The *why* is obvious to Black women, disabled people, trans people – it is not just obvious, but it is their lived daily reality, the inescapable pressure of having to be twice as good for half the recognition, the crushing burden of having their actions be imputed to your entire group, or their mistakes be viewed as proof of their incompetence rather than just what they are, mistakes. For people of marginalized identities, the why is self-evident: being underestimated and underrepresented, especially at the leadership levels, is exhausting, infuriating, humiliating, and it costs them (and all of us) vitality and the ability to build wealth for themselves and their families.

Ijeoma Oluo eloquently explains the impact of microaggressions:

You know the hypercritical parent in the movies? The mom or dad who finds a way to cut you to the quick right when you are feeling happy or proud or comfortable? "Nice to see you're finally trying," or "That's a lovely dress. I can't even see how much weight you gained." The remark that seems harmless on the surface? The small sting that comes out of nowhere and is repeated over and over, for your entire life? That is what racial microaggressions are like, except instead of a passive-aggressive parent, it's the entire world, in all aspects of your life, and very rarely is it said with any misguided love.

Microaggressions are small daily insults and indignities perpetrated against marginalized or oppressed people because of their affiliation with that marginalized or oppressed group, and here we are going to talk about racial microaggressions—insults and indignities perpetrated against people of color. But microaggressions are more than just annoyances. The cumulative effect of these constant reminders that you are "less than" does real psychological damage. Regular exposure to microaggressions causes a person of color to feel isolated and invalidated. The inability to predict where and when a microaggression may occur leads to hypervigilance, which can then lead to anxiety disorders and depression. Studies have shown that people subjected to higher levels of microaggressions are more likely to exhibit the mental and physical symptoms of depression.[4]

But, why do this if you're a person with all the privileges, or enough privilege that you do not need to see this or do any of the work? Why be uncomfortable, why risk being perceived as racist or misogynistic, when you mean well and all you want is to just be known as a nice person, a good person? What can we say in America to a cisgender, straight, physically and mentally able, neurotypical, in shape, well-off white man who works hard for everything he has earned, and cannot see the barriers he does not have because they literally do not exist for him, and therefore he thinks they don't exist for anyone else? How do we get people who have no investment in this work because they do not believe it has anything to do with them, to become interested in this work and to see that this work has everything to do with them, too? To some extent, this work is a recognition that most people have more than one identity, some identities of privilege, and some

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[4] Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want To Talk About Race*, Seal Press 2019.

of marginalization. A zero sum game, strictly hierarchical system hurts most people within the system on some level, and a lot of people more than others.

Doing this work is a recognition that the grace that we seek for our own marginalized identities, the recognition that we seek for our own individual identities in all their complexity, is deserved by all individuals. It is a recognition that our perspective of how life is, is just that: a point of view; and it is no more valid than anyone else's.

For some, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging ("DEIB") work is an exercise in memorization to stay out of trouble: what do you need to remember not to say now? What about now? Oh good heavens, what about now? Maybe it's just safer not to say anything to anyone, don't pay anyone compliments, keep your head down because you're going to be blamed for it all anyway.

The problem with the blame game is that now we are using up our energy and time trying to calm down people who feel attacked, and the focus shifts away from the harm that is being perpetrated against people with marginalized identities and back on the comfort of the privileged. But, as Ruchika Tulshyan points out, the problem is not white people, it's white supremacy; the problem is not men, it's misogyny and the patriarchy. What we are dealing with is systems of oppression, but the only way to shift the paradigm is for all of us to personally take responsibility for dismantling these systems. Note that we say take responsibility, not take the blame.

Our goal is to help explain what decentering means and how to practice it, and by using this technique, to shift the focus from intent to impact. Decentering provides an access point to DEIB work that takes the gives you the space to be comfortable with your discomfort. This exercise is intended to begin the process of shifting who we're being in the world. And when we shift who we are, new actions will naturally arise, and new results follow.

DEIB conversations can be difficult, especially in the work place. We hope to give you some tools so that you can hear it when you have said or done something that silences a friend or colleague's lived experience, and instead of being defensive and shift the focus to your good intentions, or getting lost in shame or guilt, to be able to learn and grow.

Our hypothesis is that you cannot effect any real shift in an organization's culture if people are coming at it from the same point of view and in the same way of seeing and doing things that got them the results they are not satisfied with. We are not going to fix anything or cause a seismic shift in 45 minutes. What we hope to achieve is to plant a few seeds, and that some of you, hopefully many of you, will tend those seeds and let them grow. Every little bit counts.

II.   THE WHAT

The trends for diversity management vary from industry to industry.[5] While there are commonalities across the industries, there are idiosyncrasies that create differences. The common

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[5] Hamid, Aaisha. *Diversity and inclusion in the workplace: Where to start and what's next? YouTube,* uploaded by The Social Impact Show, 9 Dec. 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBw8xI1x7eI

threads: (1) people want to see more diverse representation at the organizational level; (2) more diversity professionals are being employed; and (3) increased diversity awareness at the micro- and macro-level.[6]

To appreciate the breadth of interpretations and develop a more comprehensive understanding of diversity, below are various definitions of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging, Privilege, Unconscious Bias, and Prove-It Again Bias from various researchers, organizations, and leaders in the area.

A.   Diversity

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), a leading professional association, recognizes that diversity has many definitions.[7] Generally, diversity refers to the similarities and differences among individuals accounting for all aspects of their personality and individual identity.[8]

David A. Thomas is the H. Naylor Fitzhugh Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School and Robin J. Ely is the Diane Doerge Wilson Profession of Business Administration at Harvard Business School. They both have extensively researched issues related to cultural diversity in organizations, leadership and organizational change. From their research, they have defined diversity as "not simply a reflection of the cosmetic differences among people, such as race and gender; rather, it is the various backgrounds and experiences that creates people's identities and outlooks."[9]

Marilyn Loden, a nationally recognized organizational change consultant, emphasizes the importance of an all-encompassing definition of diversity because she believed when any group is excluded, managing diversity may create division rather than inclusion. Notably, Marilyn first uttered the phrase "the glass ceiling" in the 1970s and gave the name to the concrete, cultural barriers to women's professional success, like the biased attitudes of male managers, unequal pay and a lack of role models and emotional support for women. In 1996, she developed a model where the primary dimensions of diversity are interlocking segments of a sphere that represent the core of each individual identity while the secondary dimensions are more mutable, less visible to others around us, and more variable.[10]

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[6] *Id.*

[7] SHRM's definition of diversity is available at https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pagIntroes/introdiversity.aspx#:~:text=Generally%2C%20diversity%20refers%20to%20the,their%20personality%20and%20individual%20identity

[8] *Id.*

[9] Saposnick, Kali, *Managing Diversity as a Key Organizational Resource: An Interview with David Thomas, Leverage Points*, no. 37, Pegasus Communications (2003), www.pegasuscom.com/levpoints/thomasint.html

[10] Loden, Marilyn, *Implementing Diversity* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 13.

In 2010, Loden Associates updated their dimensions of diversity model to represent a global view of the primary and secondary dimensions that informs our social identities.[11]
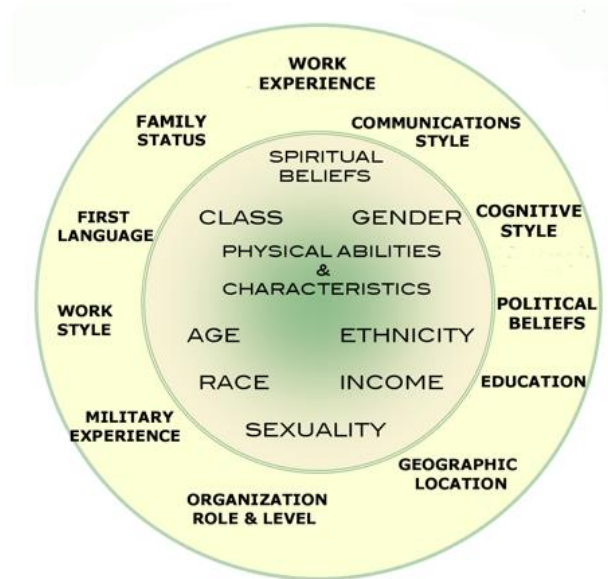
Anita Rowe, Ph.D and Lee Gardenswartz, Ph.D are pioneers in the field of Diversity and Inclusion since 1990 and human resource experts on managing workforce diversity. They embraced Loden's model of diversity but included an outermost layer that consists of
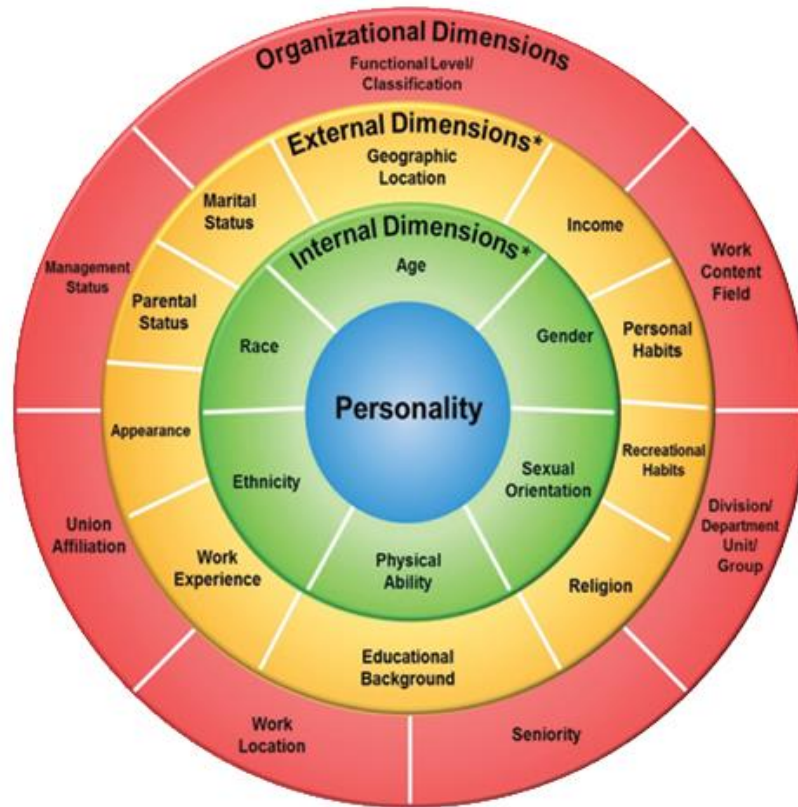
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[11] *Primary & Secondary Dimensions of Diversity*, Loden Associates, Inc., http://www.loden.com/Web_Stuff/Dimensions.html

organizational characteristics such as union affiliation, management status, and work content or professional field.[12]

*Gardenswartz & Rowe, Diverse Teams at Work (2nd Edition, SHRM, 2003)

*Internal Dimensions and External Dimensions are adapted from Marilyn Loden and Judy Rosener, Workforce America! (Business One Irwin, 1991)

B. Equity

Gallup defines *equity* in the workplace as the fair treatment in access, opportunity and advancement for all individuals.[13] Equity and equality are not the same thing. Treating everyone equally ignores the very real differences in access to training, education, and opportunities in non-dominant or underrepresented groups. There are two issues at play here. The first is that treating everyone equally may actually put some groups at a disadvantage. The second is that unconscious biases may be preventing us from evaluating and promoting people using the same metric.

[12] *Four Layers of Diversity Model*, Gardenswartz & Rowe,
https://www.gardenswartzrowe.com/why-g-r

[13] *Workplace Equity: The "E" in DEI and Why It Matters,* Pendell, Ryan, Gallup.
https://www.gallup.com/workplace/401573/workplace-equity-dei-why-matters.aspx

The illustration below is helpful to understand how treating everyone equally only benefits those who are a fit for the particular treatment.[14]
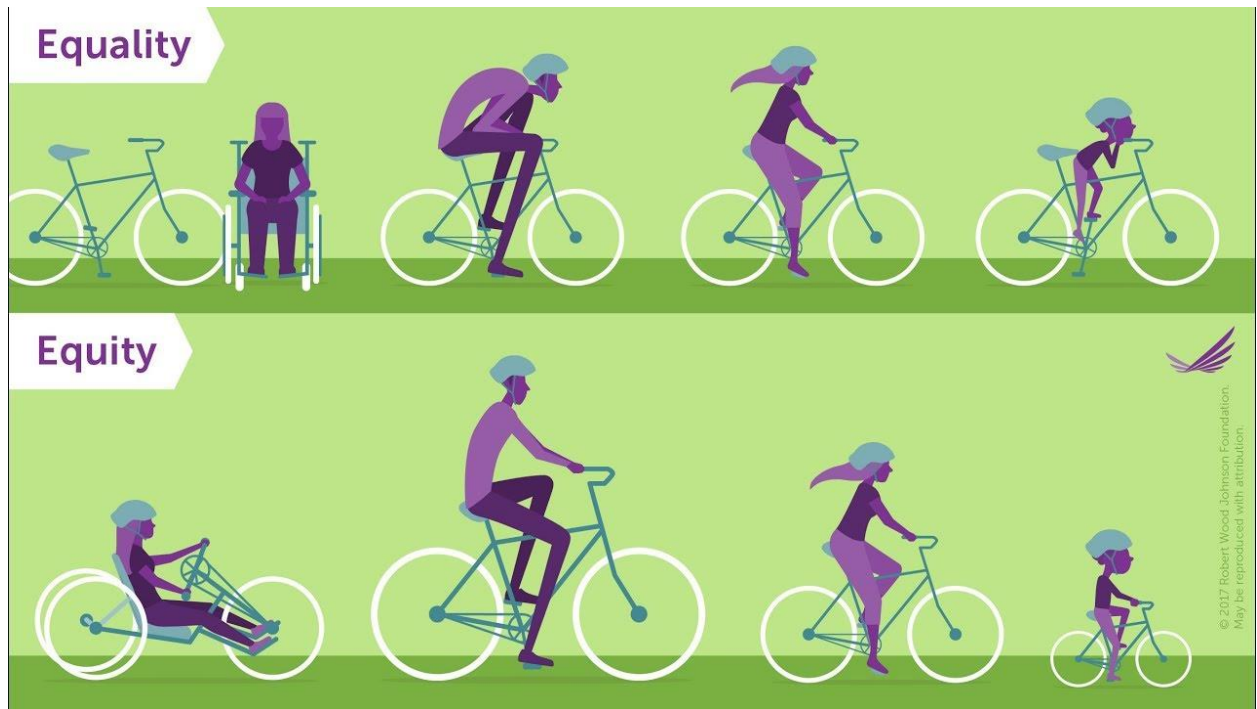
C. Inclusion and Belonging

A Harvard-trained lawyer and founder of The Vernā Myers Company, Vernā Myers said, "Diversity is being invited to the party; inclusion is being asked to dance."[15]

SHRM distinguishes diversity and inclusion as follows: "Inclusion describes the extent to which each person in an organization feels welcomed, respected, supported, and valued as a team member. Inclusion is a two-way accountability; each person must grant and accept inclusion from others."[16]

Inclusion and belonging are interrelated concepts, and provide further distinction within what is commonly referred to as inclusion. Inclusion "involves efforts and behaviors that can be fostered by the organization or actually by the people in it. Belonging is something that employees

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[14] Source: Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

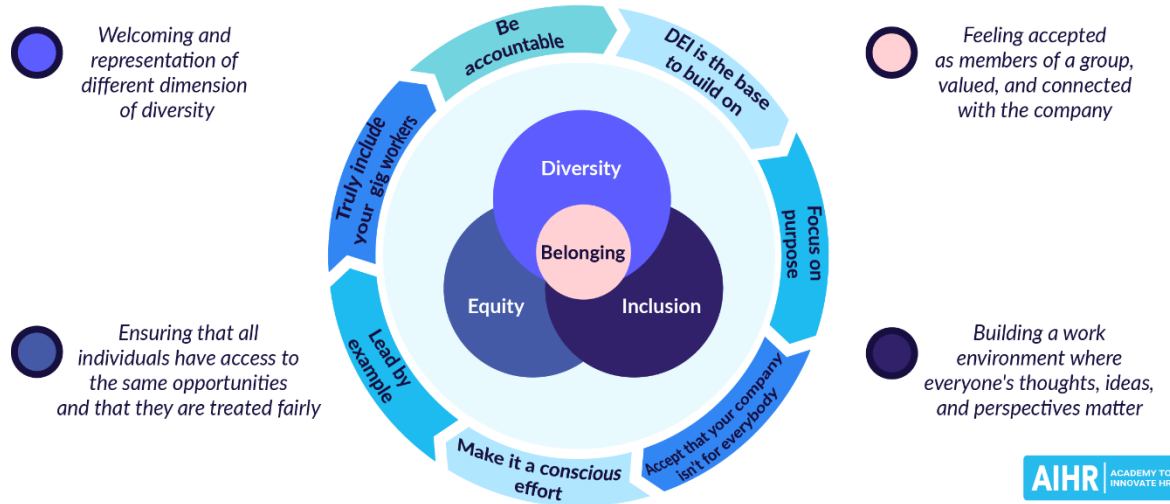[15] Myers, Vernā. *Diversity is Being Invited to the Party: Inclusion is Being Asked to Dance. YouTube*, uploaded by AppNexus, 10 Dec. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gS2VPUkB3M

[16] SHRM's definition of inclusion is available at https://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/tools-and-samples/toolkits/pagIntroes/introdiversity.aspx#:~:text=Generally%2C%20diversity%20refers%20to%20the,their%20personality%20and%20individual%20identity

themselves feel and results from your inclusion efforts."[17] So when we refer to inclusion in this paper, depending on the context, we mean either or both of these concepts.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB) at Organizations

Welcoming and representation of different dimension of diversity

Ensuring that all individuals have access to the same opportunities and that they are treated fairly

Feeling accepted as members of a group, valued, and connected with the company

Building a work environment where everyone's thoughts, ideas, and perspectives matter

In an inclusive environment, everyone's uniqueness is seen and appreciated, and people feel safe being their authentic selves at work, i.e., they feel they belong. Inclusion happens when people feel they are an insider, when they experience a feeling of belonging within their organization. Once we hire people from diverse backgrounds, do they feel they belong? Are they doing meaningful work? Do they have the psychological safety and the psychological availability to contribute authentically? Are there identity threats that we are overlooking, either internally or externally, that can be addressed to provide a safer environment for all employees, which would likely lead to greater engagement and commitment to the enterprise's success?

Think of inclusion more broadly than the categories of identities and individuals protected by equal employment laws, i.e., groups for which there is unambiguous evidence of historical discrimination.[18] For example, there may be individuals in your organization who are taking care

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[17] *Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB): A 2023 Overview,* AIHR; found here: https://www.aihr.com/blog/diversity-equity-inclusion-belonging-deib/#:~:text=sense%20of%20belonging.-,What's%20the%20difference%20between%20inclusion%20and%20belonging%3F,results%20from%20your%20inclusion%20efforts

[18] Lisa Nishii, Associate Professor, School of Industrial Labor and Relations, Cornell, 2018: Improving Engagement; Counteracting Unconscious Bias; Diversity and Inclusion at Work; Fostering An Inclusive Climate.

of elderly parents – this is not a protected category of people, but they are often overlooked and left behind because they cannot meet strict office attendance requirements.[19]

It is also important to distinguish inclusion from other concepts that may be misinterpreted as inclusion, such as differentiation and assimilation.

Inclusion Framework

	Low Belongingness	High Belongingness
Low Value in Uniqueness	**Exclusion** Individual is not treated as an organizational insider with unique value in the work group but there are other employees or groups who are insiders.	**Assimilation** Individual is treated as an insider in the work group when they conform to organizational/dominant culture norms and downplay uniqueness.
High Value in Uniqueness	**Differentiation** Individual is not treated as an organizational insider in the work group but their unique characteristics are seen as valuable and required for group/ organization success.	**Inclusion** Individual is treated as an insider and also allowed/encouraged to retain uniqueness within the work group.

(Source: *Inclusion and Diversity in Workgroups: A Review and Model for Future Research*, Lynne M. Shore, Amy E. Randel, Beth G. Chung, Michelle A. Dean, Karen Holcombe Ehrhart, Gangaram Singh, San Diego State University Journal of Management, Vol. 37 No. 4, July 2011, 1262-1289.)

D.   Privilege

"Privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they've done or failed to do. Access to privilege doesn't determine one's outcomes, but it is definitely an asset that makes it more likely that whatever talent, ability, and aspirations a person with privilege has will result in something more positive for them."[20]

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[19] *"Sandwich Generation" Caregivers and Workplace Impact*, Matthew J. Gallardo, BASW, CCP, Linked In Pulse (https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/sandwich-generation-caregivers-workplace-impact-gallardo-basw-ccp/); *The 'sandwich generation' quandary was hard on baby boomers. It's going to be harder on their kids*. Caitlin Gibson, March 11, 2020, Washington Post.)

[20] McIntosh, Peggy, *White Privilege" Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, Peace and Freedom Magazine, July/August, 1989, pp. 10-12, a publication of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Philadelphia, PA.

Privilege, like unconscious bias, is specific to the society in which we live. While in the United States, we often associate privilege with white privilege when "privilege" is mentioned, but below are some additional areas of privilege:

- White Privilege
- Male Privilege & Masculinities
- Straight & Cis Privilege
- Class Privilege & Economic Inequality
- (Dis)ability and Ableism
- Language Privilege and Code Switching

- Age & Ageism
- Nationalism, Citizenship, Immigration & Geography
- Physical Appearance (Body Size, Hair, Colorism)
- Family Structure Privilege
- Christian & Religious Privilege

E. Unconscious bias

Unconscious bias is a term often used to describe associations that we hold, outside our conscious awareness and control. It refers to unconscious forms of discrimination and stereotyping based on race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, age, etc., and are specific to the society in which we live. For example, how we view the work by someone who graduated from a top tier law school v. someone who graduated from a unaccredited law school.

F. Prove-it-again bias

Research shows while men are presumed to be competent, all women, especially women of color, are expected to constantly reestablish their presence and authority at work.[21]

G. Decentering

The practice of decentering our own experience, intention, and feelings as not relevant to the conversation, and putting the focus on the impact of what we say and do on other people. This

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[21] *Be a player, hate the game: Beating sex discrimination*, Jessica Hamzelou, New Scientist, May 13, 2014 (found here: https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn25555-be-a-player-hate-the-game-beating-sex-discrimination/); see also, Gender Bias Learning Project, US Hastings College of the Law (found here: https://genderbiasbingo.com/prove-it-again/#.ZCdO6-zMJb8).

includes taking the focus off our shame and feelings of guilt we might experience for saying or doing something that is offensive or exclusionary.

H.   Microaggressions

Counseling psychologist Dr. Derald Wing Sue describes microaggressions as "the everyday slights, indignities, put downs and insults that people of color, women, LGBT populations or those who are marginalized experience in their day-to-day interactions with people."[22] Ruchika Tulshyan uses the term "exclusionary behaviors" instead.[23] Ibram X. Kendi calls it abuse. "When I get commended for my perfect English, this may seem like a compliment to a white person, but for me it is a reminder that I must constantly be on guard to prove my English-speaking abilities or that I can fit into an English-speaking workplace."[24]

In many cases, the hidden messages in microaggressions, though often unintentional, may invalidate the group identity or experiential reality of target persons. The microaggression may communicate: You do not belong – you are inferior. Microaggressions can be behavioral (actions or symbols that display insensitivity to identity stereotypes), environmental (lack of representation and diversity) or verbal (saying something that is disrespectful or offensive to a marginalized group). Again, whether intentional or unintentional.[25]

In dissecting microaggressions further, there are recognized categories of microaggressions that are helpful in helping us identify a microaggression. A *microassault* refers to a blatant, verbal, non-verbal, or environmental attack intended to convey discriminatory and biased sentiments.[26] A *microinsult* is an unintentional behavior or verbal comment that conveys rudeness or insensitivity or demeans a person's racial heritage/identity, gender identity, religion, ability, or sexual orientation identity.[27] *Microinvalidations* are verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate, or dismiss the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of the target group.[28]

The City of Cambridge, Massachusetts has a useful chart illustrating common microaggressions, associated themes, related context with implicit bias, and what impact or message the microaggression sends to the recipient:

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[22] Sue, D. "Microaggressions: More Than Just Race." (found here: https://www.uua.org/files/pdf/m/microaggressions_by_derald_wing_sue_ph.d._.pdf)

[23] Tulshyan, R. 2022. *Inclusion on Purpose: An Intersectional Approach to Creating a Culture of Belonging at Work*

[24] *Id*. at p. 63.

[25] Sue, D., 2007, *Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life,* Implications for Clinical Practice

[26] Sue, D. W., Torino, G. C., & Rivera, D. P., Capodilupo, C. M., & Nadal, K. L. 2019. *Microaggression theory: Influence and implications*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons

[27] *Id*.

[28] *Id*.

Microaggression	Theme	Implicit Bias/Context	Impact/ Message
"Where are you from?" "Where were you born?" "You speak good English."	*Alien in own land*	When Asian Americans and Latino Americans are assumed to be foreign- born	You are not American. You are a foreigner
"You are a credit to your race." "You are so articulate." Asking an Asian person to help with a math or science problem.	*Ascription of Intelligence* - Assigning intelligence to a person of color on the basis of their race.	People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites. All Asians are intelligent and good in Math / Sciences.	It is unusual for someone of your race to be intelligent.
"When I look at you, I don't see color." "America is a melting pot." "There is only one race, the human race." "All lives matter"	*Color Blindness* - Statements that indicate that a white person does not want to acknowledge race.	Since race doesn't have an effect on me (white person) I can't see why we can't all get along.	Denying a person of color's racial / ethnic experiences. You must assimilate / acculturate to the dominant culture. Denying the individual as a racial / cultural being.
A white man or woman clutching their purse or checking their wallet as a Black or Latinx person approaches or passes. A store owner following a customer of color around the store. Crossing the street when a person of color approaches.	*Criminality* – Assumption of criminal status on the basis of race	A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant on the basis of their race.	You are a criminal. You are going to steal. You are poor. You do not belong. You are dangerous.
"Don't you want a family?" "Have you ever had real sex?" "So who is the man in the relationship?"	*Heteronormativity*	That people who aren't in heterosexual relationships are unable to have a family. Assumptions that they all relationships must fall along heteronormative lines.	Your relationship isn't real. You can't be fulfilled. You must pick a side.
"You're going to stay home with the kids right? "What she's trying to say is…" "You should smile more"	*Sexism*	That women must fall into gendered roles from the 1950's. That male affect, presence, behavior is the standard and	You shouldn't be working. You're a failure as a woman. You're not good

		everything else is contrary to.	enough. You're not being listening to and valued.
"You have a mental illness, but you seem so normal" "Why don't you just get out of bed and get some fresh air"	*Invalidation of Severity of Mental Illness*	That mental illness looks/behaves a certain way. General misunderstanding of the effects that mental illness can have.	You must not be hurting that much. It must not be that bad. Why can't you get over this?
"Oh! I wouldn't think *you* live here" "Oh you haven't been to Europe, you really should go"	*Classism*	Assuming someone doesn't live in a certain neighborhood because of how they look, talk, act. Assuming that everyone has means to travel	You don't belong. You're not going to lead a fulfilling life.
Washington Redskins Robert E. Lee High School College rooms and hallways with pictures of predominantly white heterosexual upper class males	*Environmental*	Assumes that harm cannot take place by names or visuals. Assumes that the normal or ideal students are white men of some means.	You don't belong. You're not welcome here.
"You're just being too sensitive" Eye rolling "You're always so difficult" "You're making too big of a deal of things"		Dismissive reactions that occur when bringing up that a microaggression has taken place.	

(Source: https://www.cambridgema.gov/-/media/Files/officeofthemayor/2019/deepmicroaggressionsworksheetfilledin012619.pdf)

Other examples include: "Why must everything be about race," "All lives matter," "Talking about race is divisive," and "Why can't we be civil even if we disagree?" All these phrases are designed to silence dissent and objection to systemic racism and other forms of systemic inequity, and to tone-police the objectors. What these phrases really mean is, I don't experience racism, I'm not racist, therefore your experience is invalid, and my comfort is more important than your oppression. These phrases invalidate the experience marginalized and underestimated[29] people, and at the same time reaffirm the status quo. Assimilation is the entry fee, and is also the barrier to true inclusion and belonging; assimilation is impossible when you look and sound different, and when your cultural context and your experience of life is fundamentally at odds with the dominant culture.

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[29] "Underestimated" people is Ruchika Tulshyan's term for people we commonly refer to as marginalized.

I. Micro-affirmations

Micro-affirmations are "[a] series of related practices . . . includ[ing]: small acts which are often ephemeral and hard-to-see, events that are public and private, often unconscious but very effective, which occur whenever people wish to help others to succeed." Put another way: "Micro-affirmations are tiny acts of opening doors to opportunity, gestures of inclusion and caring, and graceful acts of listening. [They] lie in the practice of generosity, in consistently giving credit to others—in providing comfort and support when others are in distress, when there has been a failure at the bench, or an idea that did not work out, or a public attack."[30]

III. THE HOW

A. Microaffirmations

To the same extent microaggressions can destroy a workplace, micro-affirmations can enhance it. Micro-affirmations are effectively the inverse of microaggressions.

Ask others for their opinions. Give congratulations on others' achievements. Give your undivided presence. Make eye contact. Provide credit where credit is due. Publicly acknowledge the good. Smile and nod. Say hello. All these *tiny* acts inspire loyalty and confidence in others and are considered micro-affirmations. In the workplace especially, ideas are often overlooked or appropriated by others when shared by underrepresented voices in the room — echo good ideas. An example of a micro-affirmation in such scenarios can include an approach as simple as saying, "Building upon what [insert name] said…" If someone who is underrepresented or otherwise in a power of lesser privilege is interrupted, you yourself can interrupt the interruptor and request that they allow the speaker to finish their thoughts.

If micro-affirmations are sounding a lot like basic courtesy, that's because they are, but their impact is significant in the workplace, especially in the aggregate. Micro-affirmations go beyond creating an inclusive environment. Micro-affirmations build an environment where people want to stay.

B. Decentering

Decentering is one access to inclusion and belonging. Understanding what decentering is may be easier with examples of what it isn't, or rather, examples of how we center our experiences in the way we listen and respond to people who are trying to describe their real experience of life. There are two components to this that we have identified so far (stay tuned, this may break down further as we practice it!): (1) When an individual shares the impact of something that was said or done that affected them, believe them. (2) Focus on the impact rather than your intent and your feelings about what happened.

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[30] The Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning at Brown University.

1. **When someone shares an experience with you, hear it and believe them.**

Empathy is a vehicle to an inclusive work environment. Jon Shanahan conducted a survey on this in 2018. His company's study found that 60% of the employees surveyed would take a pay cut to work for an empathetic company. 95% of these employees said that they would stay longer with an organization that could empathize with their needs, and 81% reported that they'd be willing to work extended hours for an empathetic employer. A one-size-fits-all approach to empathy is not likely to work, each organization has to adapt to its needs and the needs of the individuals who work there.
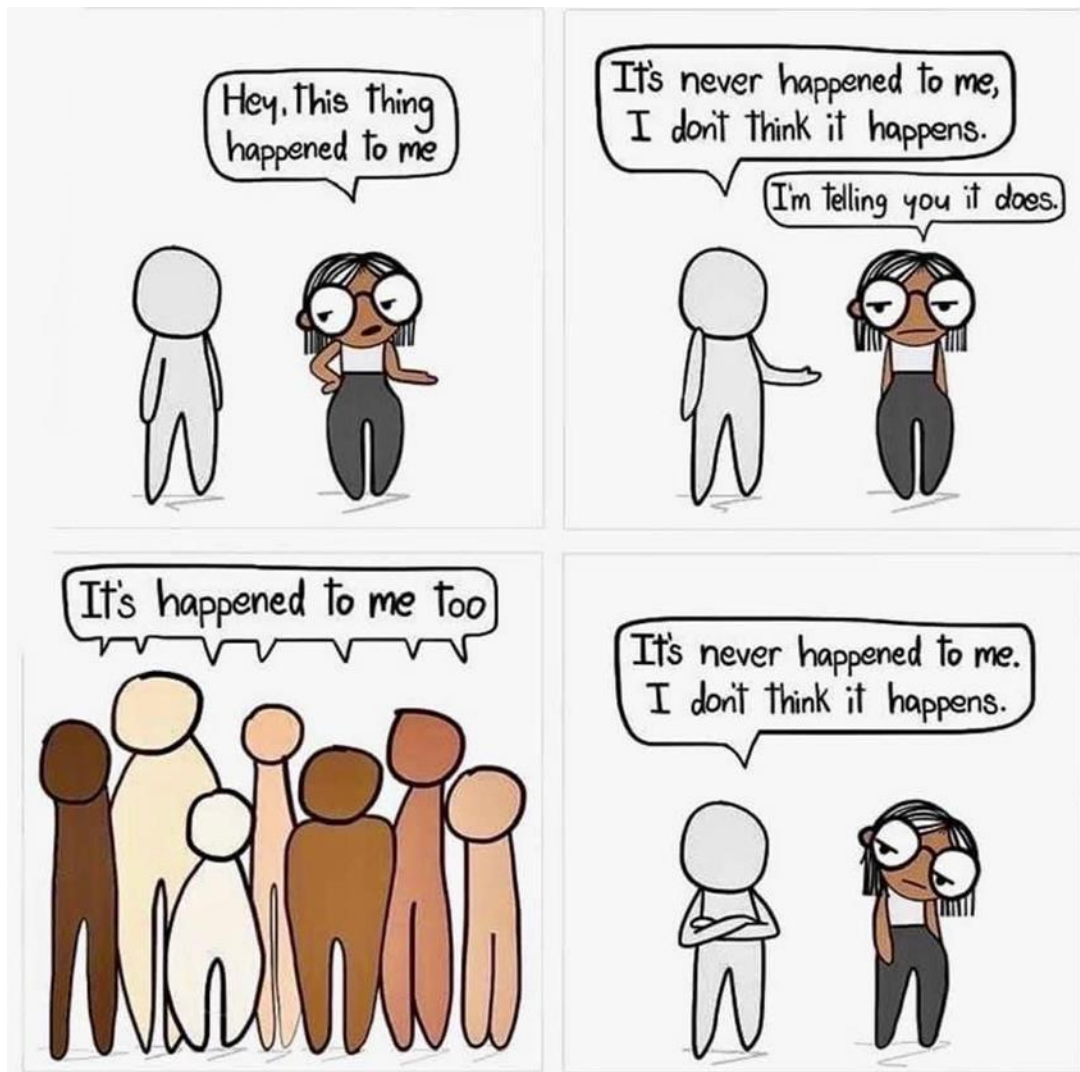
2. **Focus on the impact, not your intent or feelings.**

If the conduct described is your own conduct, or something you have done before or are doing now, take the focus off the feelings of shame, anger, defensiveness that it might trigger. Have your feelings, but keep them to yourself or work them out with someone who is your peer. Your intent is irrelevant, and even if it was, it is impossible to prove one way or the other if

someone is being intentionally exclusionary or if they mean well. Focusing on your intent and your feelings and your apology (including requiring forgiveness) is a way to center your experience and avoid discussing the actual issue, which is the impact of your actions. Whether you mean it or not, if you engage in microaggressions, you are having an impact on someone. Focusing on your intent invalidates the other person's experience and forces them to not only deal with the trauma of the microaggression, but also to have to cater to your feelings, and forces them in the position of having to determine your intent before they can legitimately be upset. And because they cannot know your mind, and in all likelihood your intent was innocent, that puts them in the position of their upset being invalidated, their upset is their problem.

"If you screwed up and you hurt people, your good intentions won't lessen that hurt. Don't insist that people act less hurt or offended or angry because your intentions were good."[31]

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[31] Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want To Talk About Race*, Seal Press 2019.

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3. **Use the BRIDGE framework[32] to make it easier to have decentering conversations. Move from fear to growth.[33]**

BRIDGE: An approach to cultivating an inclusion mindset

1. **B**e uncomfortable
2. **R**eflect (on what you don't know)
3. **I**nvite feedback
4. **D**efensiveness doesn't help
5. **G**row from your mistakes
6. **E**xpect that change takes time

Inclusion on Purpose
by Ruchika Tulshyan

dare to lead™
with BRENÉ BROWN

The graphic below, by Andrew M. Ibrahim, was inspired by the work of Ibram X. Kendi. The graphic focuses on becoming an anti-racist, and can be used in support of the BRIDGE framework to grow from exclusion to inclusion.

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[32] Ruchika Tulshyan, *Inclusion on Purpose: An Intersectional Approach to Creating a Culture of Inclusion At Work.*

[33] See also, *What It Means To Center Ourselves In Conversation—And How To Practice Decentering Instead,* Emily Torres, The Good Trade, June 23, 2020 (found here: https://www.thegoodtrade.com/features/decentering-yourself/); How to Decenter Yourself in Conversations With Members of Marginalized Communities, The MSW online program from the Baylor University Diana R. Garland School of Social Work, June 16, 2022 (found here: https://onlinegrad.baylor.edu/resources/how-to-decenter-yourself/); *Why DEI And Anti-Racism Work Needs To Decenter Whiteness*, Janice Gassam Asare, Forbes, February 15, 2021 (found here: https://www.forbes.com/sites/janicegassam/2021/02/15/why-dei-and-anti-racism-work-needs-to-decenter-whiteness/?sh=35eab6695886); *The Social Theory of Decentering*, Ashley Crossman, ThoughtCo., October 14, 2019 (found here: https://www.thoughtco.com/social-decentering-3026243).

The diagram shows three concentric zones radiating from a central circle labeled "Becoming Antiracist."

Fear Zone:
- I deny racism is a problem.
- I avoid hard questions.
- I strive to be comfortable.
- I talk to others who look and think like me.

Learning Zone:
- I recognize racism is a present and current problem.
- I seek out questions that make me uncomfortable.
- I understand my own privilege in ignoring racism.
- I educate myself about race and structural racism.
- I am vulnerable about my own biases and knowledge gaps.
- I listen to others who look and think differently from me.

Growth Zone:
- I identify how I may unknowingly benefit from racism.
- I promote and advocate for policies and leaders that are antiracist.
- I sit with my discomfort.
- I speak out when I see racism in action.
- I educate my peers how racism harms our profession.
- I don't let mistakes deter me from being better.
- I yield positions of power to those otherwise marginalized.
- I surround myself with others who look and think differently from me.

IV.   CONCLUSION

The conclusion is that there is no conclusion – this is a work in progress, a journey we are all on, and will be for a while. If you are feeling unsettled, unsure, uncomfortable: great! You're engaging. The goal posts move, they have moved since the history of humanity, and will continue to move – that's how we move forward and improve the world.

[END OF PAPER]