

# CLA Newsletter

April 2022

Issue 10

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## Editor's Comments:

by Erin Schwartz

Hello colleagues,

As we move into the midway point of the semester, I hope everyone is well and all your classes are clicking into place! In this issue, we have a fascinating essay about microaggressions and a reminder about our Common Reads project! As we move into our last couple of months of the semester, please submit updates on the end of the semester, things that you have accomplished, or interesting and helpful tips for faculty.

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# Microaggressions, its Manifestations and how to Avoid them in Daily Life Interactions.

Submitted by Yvonne Marie Tiandem-Adamou, Ed. D,  
Lecturer, WKU-CLA -China, [ytiandem@kean.edu](mailto:ytiandem@kean.edu)

Every human being wants to belong somewhere. We all come from somewhere, belong to a family, a culture, a society, and share specific core values. Therefore, our social circles are essential for our happiness and wellbeing and must promote respect for diversity, culture, and people's achievements. Unfortunately, humans tend to be subtly biased, either consciously or unconsciously, which may create specific imbalances in our relationships with others and even be detrimental to our mental health.

Recently, a friend shared a painful experience she encountered that left her depressed for a few days. While walking around the campus, she met a colleague from another department, a citizen from a country whose national language she has studied and currently teaches. After exchanging a few words, the person asked whether she was originally from his country, to which she responded she was from another country. The person responded, "too bad you are not from my country! And why do you teach this language?" This statement caused her a mental breakdown as she wondered why she deserved this response? Was being a citizen from another country other than his bad? Was she not qualified to teach this language?

As a naturalized US citizen (and most immigrants in the USA can testify to this), I can relate to this subtle bias as I have experienced it myself. After giving a public presentation or engaging in academic talks with others, someone always finds it necessary to ask, "...by the way you are very fluent in English, where are you from?". I have encountered comments like "where you were born here?" even after answering "I am American," which conveys that I am a foreigner and should not speak good English. In the past, I felt belittled having to justify why I spoke "good English" or justifying where I was born, which generally had nothing to do with discussion or presentation. I often felt like yelling how about we focus on my skills and leave the pettiness aside.

On another occasion, my two friends (Hispanics and Asian Americans) and I have delayed entry to a restaurant because it was too full. The attendant informed us of the restaurant's new policy to sit people on a first-come, first-serve basis, so we had to wait for the following available seats. Two white couples arrived and were immediately ushered in without any questions as we waited. We expressed our disgruntlement, and the attendant resentfully became defensive, pointing out that they were patrons. One of my party members was also a patron but never received such privilege. We expressed that we needed him to follow his rules; we should have been seated before the two couples who arrived later since we first arrived at the restaurant. We claimed this was racist, and the manager joined in and thought we were being too sensitive as his attendant was following the pandemic protocols, and the color of our skin did not matter to

him. However, the manager later recognized his attendant's mishap and apologized. Sadly, these subtle bias encounters (microaggressions) are very prevalent during interactions between minority groups and sometimes well-intended white populations.

This article will examine microaggressions and their manifestations and actions we can take to avoid engaging in microaggressive behaviors and contribute to establishing more inclusive communities.

Microaggressions are forms of subtle bias occurring during ambiguous interactions between minority populations and sometimes well-intentioned generally white persons of "good, moral and decent character" who may consciously believe and profess equality yet sometimes unconsciously act in a racist manner (Sue et al., 2019). White people often charge these incessant minor assaults of impulsive offenses to reinforce stereotypes or promote exclusion of their Black counterparts in America (William, 2019). Although microaggressions may sometimes be brief encounters, they carry denigrating messages sent to others by well-intentioned people, often unaware of the unconscious biases and prejudices (Sue, 2010). Being senseless acts, perpetrators find it difficult to admit their bias since they believe they are fair, and recognizing their unfair actions would crush their reputation of being of good moral character. Consequently, the victim bears the burden of the microaggressions' pain. In my friend's story mentioned earlier, the hidden message could suggest that she was not qualified to teach that language since she was not a native speaker or a non-native speaker; she may have landed the job through a sort of quota system. Moreover, for my first micro-aggression experience, the hidden message was that I was not expected to speak good English as an alien. More importantly, in the restaurant situation, the hidden message could be that you are not essential as a Black person and can only be seated after Whites. Shut up and wait. Whether these acts are conscious or unconscious, their perpetrators need to recognize them and be aware of their negative impacts on victims. Doing so is critical for establishing just and respectful diversified communities.

Also, although microaggressions may appear to compliment and be harmless to perpetrators, studies show they can demean the victims as they are full of hidden messages. Sue (2010) discusses some common manifestations of microaggression, including incidents when a white woman tightly clutches her purse or a white man checks for his wallet while crossing paths with a Black male since Black men are considered criminals. Equally important are instances where all Asian Americans are presumed to be smart (despite many struggles to achieve success in school), limiting resources to support this group of students. In other instances, complimenting Asian-Americans for speaking good English can be derogatory as they are often not perceived as "real Americans." Moreover, there are situations where the police may subtly stop a Hispanic or Black driver and ask to see his driver's license deducting that Hispanics are illegal aliens or Blacks out to commit crimes (Sue, 2010).

How can we avoid microaggressions? First, since these are primarily unconscious acts, we must try to remind ourselves of cultural differences between people, especially when we encounter persons of different cultural backgrounds from ours. Secondly, avoiding microaggressions requires conscious and intentional restraints from discriminatory actions using racial labels or comments that tend to prevent interracial relationships. Thirdly, limiting subtle verbal or non-verbal comments conveying rudeness and insensitivity undermines a person's academic abilities, racial heritage, or identity. Finally, in the same way avoiding subtle communications that nullify other ideas, feelings, or experiential reality can help improve intercultural/gender/racial relationships (Burns, 2010; Sue et al., 2019; William, 2019).

Sadly, microaggressions leave the victims hurting while the perpetrators are unaware they have been offensive gets along peacefully with their lives. Besides, perpetrators may be defensive and worse when confronted by labeling the victim "too sensitive" or "aggressive," as was the case in my restaurant encounter mentioned earlier. More so, Microaggression cases may get even more complicated if the perpetrator is from a different gender/racial background from the victim which may lead to one being arrested for harassment. Therefore, victims should first consider their safety while relying on a third-party bystander to speak out (Williams, 2019). Nonetheless, we must be mindful that the lack of perpetrators acknowledging their hurtful acts leaves the victim confused, angry, and depressed. In addition, there is evidence to show that microaggressions cause mental health in people (Pascoe and Smart, 2009). Furthermore, it negatively impacts work or campus climate, promotes stereotypes, devaluates individual social group identities, and impacts work productivity and problem-solving abilities (Smith, Hung, and Franklin, 2011). Finally, studies also show that microaggressions promote inequities in education and employment (Burns, 2020).

To sum up, we each have a responsibility to work together in building a healthy work environment and social communities where diversity is appreciated, and people are respected.

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## Common Reads Program Pilot

Submitted by Kyra Whitehead

This semester, we pilot WKU's first Common Reads Program using the book **American Born Chinese** by Gene Luen Yang (available in e-book format)!

The program's purpose is to facilitate meaningful dialogue around a common text and establish interdisciplinary engagement across disciplines.

Primarily, we are asking faculty from all departments to host book-related events on campus. Faculty might also use the book in a class activity or unit, or for an extra credit assignment.

Details and a sign-up spreadsheet have been sent via email. Please add your name and event idea to the spreadsheet if you are interested in participating.

To learn more about the program, feel free to reach out to Kyra Whitehead, Kristen Hartman, Jim Tarwood, Michael Watkins, Jennifer Marquardt, Danny Dyer, or Alfredo Oquendo.

Kyra Whitehead will also present the program in classes on request.

We hope that you are as excited about the program as we are! Please join us in starting a campus-wide conversation about *American Born Chinese*.

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## Submit to next month's newsletter:

by **Erin Schwartz**

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this month's issue!

Please submit stories, updates, introductions, accomplishments, publication announcements, and whatever else you think would be interesting and helpful for your colleagues to know!

To submit to the May issue please upload your documents to this google folder with your Kean email account. Please have submissions uploaded by **April 26, 2022**:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/16cTL8pZQJpLH63RYg9jkWbhYL4-c8mgs?usp=sharing>

Past issues can be found here:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1gOooEwS8c5GeaYxVhMmlWqoF5QOI4cSe?usp=sharing>

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中国浙江省温州市瓯海区大学路88号 邮政编码：325060

+86 577 5587 0000

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