

Workplace Microaggression Responses

AWM at UO

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The purpose of this document is to collate and prepare responses to common acts of discrimination and hostility experienced by women and other gender minorities in math departments. These will be presented in the form of example dialogues.

The dialogues have three roles: Alice (the respondent), Bob (the aggressor) and Cyprus (the bystander).

Areas: classroom, homework, supervisor meeting, advisor meeting, faculty meeting, teaching, social, seminar speaker, seminar audience, job interview, self.

Response Engagement Scale: Responses are marked in blue on a scale of 0 to 5 where 0 is completely unengaged “grey-rocking” and 5 is the most assertive. Some responses are from Alice (A) and some are from a bystander Cyprus (C).

Blatant discrimination (all areas)

B: Women are just *less* good at math.

A/C: [What has lead you to believe that? \(2\)](#)

Scientific discrimination (all areas)

B: The average IQ between men and women is the same, but the standard deviation for men is higher, which explains the gender gap.

Personalized discrimination (classroom, homework)

B: Don't bother asking Alice, they won't know how to do it.

Quiet discrimination (classroom, homework)

B: [asking people how to do a problem, specifically not bothering to ask Alice]

A: [\[Speaks up and answers the question anyway.\] \(4\)](#)

Post-diversity putdown (classroom, social)

B: You're only here because of diversity quotas.

B: I'm only here because of diversity quotas.

B: It's too bad they couldn't find a man to do this.

A: I'm sorry, but I need to get going. (1)

A: [disengages] (1)

A: What do you mean by that? (2)

Zero-sum thinking (social)

B: You're here instead of (at the expense of) someone more qualified.

A: No u. (5)

A/C: What has lead you to believe that? (2)

A: How do you know that's not the case for you? (3)

A: It sounds like you're projecting your own insecurities on me and I don't have the mental bandwidth to deal with that right now. (4)

Internalized dismissivness (self, social)

A: I was an admissions-office mistake.

Uphill battle (self, homework)

A: This topic is really difficult for me; I'm no good at it, and should focus only on other types of problems, other parts of math. Why bother learning things I can't do as easily as other people can?

Mansplaining (classroom, homework, teaching, seminar speaker)

A: [explaining something]

B: [interrupting] Well *actually*, the right way to think about this is ...

Malevolent advisor (advisor meeting, social)

B: Math is really difficult, you should take this (lower-level) course.

Benevolent advisor (advisor meeting, social)

B: Being a woman in math is really difficult, you should consider doing something else.

Diversity skeptic (faculty meeting, social)

B: I don't want to lower our standards of quality by admitting more women.

A: Why does admitting more women require lowering standards? (Please explain what you mean.) (3)

B: If our quota is higher than the actual percentage of women in math, then we'd have to let less qualified applicants in to make up for that gap.

A: Don't you always have more qualified applicants that you could accept? (4)

A: How do qualifications correlate with how successful students are at completing a PhD? (2)

A: Which qualifications do you use to determine admission? (2)

Devaluing gender-supportive programs (advisor meeting)

B: Don't waste your time applying for [REUs] aimed specifically at [women and gender minorities]. You're

smart enough to get into one that's open to everyone.

Clueless ally (faculty meeting, social)

C: I want to help women in math, but I don't know what I'm meant to do.

Question detractor (classroom, homework, seminar audience)

A: [asks a question]

B: Wow, do you really not know that?

Editor's Note [KP]: Relevant xkcd

C: I'm so glad to be the person who gets to share this with you today! [Explains.] (1)

A: Yes. Since you seem so knowledgeable about it, would you be willing to explain it to me? (1)

Math purist (all areas)

B: Stop trying to bring all of this politics and identity into math!

Catcalling (social)

B: I didn't know *pretty* women could do math.

A: Thank you for confirming my theory that only *ugly* men can do math. (5)

A: I didn't know that *ugly* men could do math! (5)

A: What do you mean? (2)

A: Maybe if you were prettier you could do math too! (5)

One-sided obliviousness (social, peer dating)

B: Wow, you should dress up more often! /

Why hide how nice of a figure you have? /

You usually wear baggier clothes than I do!

Offensive joke (all areas)

B: [makes an offensive joke]

C: I don't think that's appropriate.

B: Calm down, it's only a joke!

Misattribution (seminar speaker, social, job interview)

B: [Talking about a theorem proved by Alice] This is a result by Cyprus ...

Misidentification (faculty meeting, social)

A: [a professor attending a meetup]

B: Are you a student here?

A: No, I'm a professor. (1)

A: No, I'm Dr. —, nice to meet you! (2)
A: No, I'm a professor. Are you a student here? (4)

Strong misidentification (faculty meeting, social)

A: [a professor attending a meetup]

B: Are you one of the service staff?

[See previous entry.](#)

Partner misidentification (social)

A: [attending a conference with her male-presenting partner]

B: [to her partner] So you must be the mathematician.

Children question (job interview)

B: Are you planning to have children? /

How old are your children? /

What are you looking for, in a house? (listening for hints of “a good school district” or similar)

A: Why do you ask? (2)

A: I appreciate the question, but I'm not interested in discussing my personal life at this time. (2)

A: I appreciate the question, but our time would be better spent discussing my qualifications for this position. (2)

Reinforcing a double standard (cafeteria conversation about professor B)

C: The rest of the department had no idea Bob even had a wife, much less kids, until last week when he brought them by!

Ignored after providing information (classroom)

B: [in a group] [ignores B's (correct) answer to a question or suggestion]

Dismissal of math (in public, non-math situation)

B: Wow, you do math? You must be so smart / I hate math!

List of general responses

These responses work well in several different situations.

- A: What do you mean by that?
- A: [Returns with a questions asking for clarification.]
- A: [After being asked an inappropriate question.] When you asked me that, what were you hoping I'd say? (credit: Reddit, Carolyn Hax)