

INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL CONCERNS COMMUNITY CASES

NAVIGATING MICROAGGRESSIONS IN THE FIELD

SUMMARY: Developing actionable strategies for addressing microaggressions and managing cross-cultural misunderstandings in professional settings.

CASE TYPE: Practical

Practical cases offer procedures and strategies for handling situations that one might encounter in community engaged work. These cases have answers that would be considered appropriate and others that would be ill advised.

This case follows a student who experiences a microaggression from a staff member at their service site. While this scenario naturally invites deep personal reflection, the text below focuses exclusively on the practical considerations of managing the interaction and maintaining professional relationships. For a focus on the internal dimensions of this experience, please see the companion case: ["Identity, Perception, and Belonging."](#)

FOCUS AREAS	LEARNING OBJECTIVES
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Power Dynamics• Interpersonal Tensions• Psychological Safety	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Recognize and define microaggressions.2. Reflect on strategies for responding to microaggressions in cross-cultural or immersive settings.3. Develop verbal scripts and strategies for responding to microaggressions in real-time.4. Consider the role of bystanders and the responsibility of team members to create inclusive environments and mitigate uncomfortable situations5. Create a plan for maintaining professional relationships while establishing personal boundaries.

SCENARIO

Rohit is a rising junior studying economics and theology. Rohit is ethnically Indian but was born in and has lived his whole life in Colorado. Rohit has decided to spend the summer before his junior year as part of a university program that places students in service-oriented roles with community organizations around the world.

Rohit and two other students, Daniel and Maria (who are both white), are working with a nonprofit focused on food insecurity in Central America. When they arrive in the region, the staff at the nonprofit is welcoming, but Rohit begins to notice small but persistent comments that feel off. The staff seems to treat Daniel and Maria as "standard" Americans, while treating Rohit with a different level of scrutiny regarding his background.

At dinner one night, a senior staff member says, "Rohit, I feel like we don't know much about you yet, can you tell us more about where you're from?" When he replies, "I'm from the state of Colorado, we've talked about this a few times," the staff member laughs and responds, "You know that's not what I mean, tell us where you're really from."

Rohit freezes. He knows he needs to address this to stop it from happening again, but he also needs to maintain a working relationship with this staff member for the rest of the summer. Daniel and Maria are sitting right there, looking uncomfortable but staying silent. Rohit wonders what the most effective next move is to correct the misconception without blowing up the dinner.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are microaggressions? How might they show up in immersive or community engagement settings?
2. Why might someone hesitate to speak up when they experience or witness a microaggression? What are the risks or perceived consequences?
3. If you were Daniel or Maria, what is your responsibility here? What specific phrase could a bystander use to intervene effectively in this moment?
4. In this scenario, what options should Rohit consider in responding? What could he say to clarify his boundary while maintaining professional composure? Should Rohit address this incident publicly at the table or privately later? What are the pros and cons of each approach?
5. If the behavior continues after Rohit responds, what is the appropriate escalation path? Who should he contact?
6. Is there space for people to ask questions about background and other personal information? If so, how might this be done?
7. What proactive steps can be taken to foster a more inclusive and respectful environment in immersion programs?

FACILITATOR CONSIDERATIONS

- **ENCOURAGE OPENNESS.** Acknowledge that this can be a vulnerable topic and encourage active listening, respect, and confidentiality.
- **PRACTICE SCRIPTS.** Students often freeze because they don't have the words. Have them practice saying phrases like, "I understand you're curious, but I've answered that question," or "I was born in Colorado, so that is where I am really from."
- **BYSTANDER INTERVENTION.** Focus heavily on the peers. Silence from peers often hurts more than the comment itself. Brainstorm "interruption" strategies that divert attention or validate the target.
- **UTILIZE DISCUSSION STRATEGIES.** Consider preparing definitions or short readings on microaggressions beforehand. Use role-plays or reflective writing if students seem hesitant to speak.
- **SHARE RESOURCES.** Introduce terms like micro-affirmations, cultural humility, and allyship and explore related strategies.
- **SAFETY FIRST.** Remind students that their psychological safety comes first. They are not required to educate everyone they meet.

CLOSING QUESTIONS

- What is one phrase or strategy you learned today that you could keep in your "toolkit" for future fieldwork?
- How can a team prepare before a trip to handle these types of comments so that no one student has to face them alone?