

# Microresistance as a Way to Respond to Microaggressions on Zoom and in Real Life

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# FACULTY FOCUS

HIGHER ED TEACHING STRATEGIES FROM MAGNA PUBLICATIONS

- April 7, 2021
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Someone speaks over you. The chair consistently overlooks your raised hand. A colleague takes credit for an idea that someone else articulated just moments ago. Misgendering. Mispronunciation of names. Tokenizing, dismissive, and even toxic behaviors. [Derald Wing Sue](#) defines these as microaggressions, “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group.”

Unfortunately, microaggressions can and do happen in real life . . . and on Zoom.

While Zoom has enabled many higher ed institutions during the pandemic to continue teaching, administering, and even socializing, it is also the scene of countless microaggressions.

Some challenges related to Zoom and other online meeting spaces are well known, such as inequitable access to the internet, potential distractions in the home space, and screen fatigue. Less well known is how Zoom can exacerbate bad communication and, unfortunately, the opportunity for microaggressions.

How do we hear all of the voices that want to be heard? How can we run more inclusive virtual meetings? Even in the best conditions, accomplishing these aims requires a level of skill that many of us lack, so let's build our skills, collectively.

What follows is our definition of microresistance and advice on how to leverage the affordances of Zoom to improve virtual meetings and perform microresistant strategies when needed.

## **What is microresistance?**

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We define microresistance as small-scale individual or collaborative efforts that empower targeted people and allies to cope with, respond to, and/or challenge microaggressions with a goal of disrupting systems of oppression as they unfold in everyday life, thereby creating more inclusive institutions.

This definition has evolved from Sayumi Irely's [dissertation](#), and our [expansion](#) of her work.

## **What forms can microresistance take?**

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Rather than just reacting, there are several communication tools that can help us use our voice in ways that are empowering, clarifying, and rooted in the values of compassion and growth. For example, [OTFD](#), developed by [Learning Forum](#), helps to organize one's thoughts to respond to a microaggression in a manner that can be heard by the perpetrator rather than having them shut down in defensiveness or fragility. The acronym OTFD stands for the mnemonic *open the front door* to communication (rather than closing it) as well as the four steps in the tool: stating what you observe, think, feel, and desire.

Similarly, [ACTION](#) is an interactive microresistance tool based on inquiry and impact exploration that seeks to elicit empathy on the part of the perpetrator. Although ACTION essentially includes the four steps of OTFD, it also includes questions to ask the perpetrator (e.g., "What did you mean by that phrase?") and help them explore the impact of their statement or behavior (e.g., "What impact do you think that comment could have on ...?"). Both OTFD and ACTION come from a place of curiosity and compassion and request change and/or growth from the person who committed the microaggression. Deciding how to

respond, and which tool to use, can be challenging. Contextual considerations (e.g., aggressor characteristics, relational conditions) as well as choices that are available (e.g., OTFD, ACTION) in responding to microaggressions are provided in this [framework](#).

## How to microresist in Zoom?

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Let's go back to the introductory examples. The communication tools described can be used to respond to several of these. Interruptions or overlooked hand raises by someone in a position of power can be addressed with OTFD. For example, given the power differential in the hand raise example, a more indirect OTFD might be in order:

I am noticing that not everyone who has their hand raised is getting the chance to speak **(Observe)**. I think it is important for us to hear all voices as we consider the implications of this decision **(Think)**. I feel uncomfortable moving forward **(Feel)**. Might we be able to create a system that ensures all voices can be heard **(Desire)**?

The chat function can be used to respond to several of these examples as well. For example, when a colleague takes credit for an idea that someone else just articulated you could broadcast the following in the chat: "I love Maria's idea on the pass/fail implementation. Thank you, Maria, for coming up with that idea!" For misgendering, one might add to the chat, "I agree with Cass and appreciate the work they put into this project." Or one could do a more direct response in the form of an OTFD in the chat.

Back channel chatting (what Zoom calls direct message chatting) can be utilized for providing microaffirmations to others (e.g., "Your point on the issue was SO important!") as well as for perception checking. For example, "Sanaya, did you just feel dismissed by the comment Jen made? It seemed dismissive to me. If so, are you okay if I say something?"

## Tips for making Zoom meetings more inclusive

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While being ready to respond with microresistance strategies is helpful, those of us who set up and run Zoom meetings also can make choices that preemptively increase chances for productive and inclusive interactions. The Student Office for Accessibility Resources at Furman University provides some [excellent advice](#) for Zoom presentations; here are additional tips from our meeting experience:

- Turn on [closed captions](#) so that all can have access to what is being said.
- Consider asking participants to add the name that they use (e.g., Samantha goes by Sam) and their [pronouns](#) to their Zoom display names by using the "rename" function or in settings.
- [Encourage turning on video](#) without requiring it.
- Recruit, when possible, [someone to help monitor the chat](#), especially for larger meetings.
- Start with [ice breakers](#) or at least introductions when possible.

- Consider asking people to introduce themselves *without* their titles and time at institution, in order to reduce the effects of rankism that people in academia routinely face.
- Share screens with text large and clear enough to be read.
- Make allowances for interruptions and possibly introductions of family members, pets, or others who enter the screen.
- Consider utilizing the hand-raise function and calling on speakers in order (Zoom automatically puts earlier hands at the top of the list in the “participants” window).
- Use breakout rooms to foster conversations, since some find it difficult to speak in a large-group setting.
- Schedule meetings so that people can take a break (i.e., not hour-long meetings back to back).
- Prevent uninvited disruptors with proper security settings and other practices.

Microresistance is not about one-off responses, but instead, an intentional, constructive form of resistance against the multiple forms of oppression as they manifest in everyday life. In this way, we begin to actualize the inclusive environments to which we aspire.

Beverly Daniel Tatum argues that we all have our own spheres of influence—our family, friends, co-workers, community members—where we can encourage positive behavioral change. When we microresist against the everyday forms of oppression that appear in our own spaces (e.g., at work, school, in our communities, in our families), we can work toward creating more inclusive spaces for everyone in real life . . . and on Zoom.

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