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Practice
Tool



Exploring Unconscious Bias & Racial Microaggression in the Workplace



Department
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www.practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk

Introduction

The aim of this resource is to introduce practice supervisors to the PRACTISINGRACE framework and the METRO MAP (a visual aide memoire that describes the day-to-day experiences of Black, Asian and ethnic minoritised practitioners throughout their social work journeys). These tools explore unconscious bias and racial microaggression in the workplace and invite practice supervisors to consider the impact on practice and how they can bring unconscious behaviour into consciousness on an individual, team, and organisational level.

Members of marginalised groups can occupy multiple intersectional positions (for instance, disabled people, women, and LGBTQIA+ people) and will face microaggressions because of their [perceived] social status.

Sue (2015) contends that we *all* harbour biases towards other groups due to our cultural conditioning. It's difficult to acknowledge that we unconsciously treat people differently due to our biases, and that these biases can have far-reaching and negative outcomes. According to Brockmann et al. (2001), workplace racism is a significant barrier to progression for Black, Asian and ethnic minoritised social workers achieving senior positions.

Within a social work context, there is a disproportionately higher failure rate among Black and Asian newly-qualified social work (NQSW) practitioners on Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) programmes (Skills for Care, 2021; Carter, 2012; Samuel, 2021). Evidence also suggests that, for Black students, social work placements take longer to successfully complete (Fairtlough, et al., 2014; Tadam, 2015). Black social workers are more likely to be subject to informal and formal performance plans than their white counterparts (Van der Gaag et al., 2016), and they are overrepresented in fitness to practice investigations (Samuel, 2020).

Is this coincidence, or do unconscious bias, racial microaggressions, and other forms of racism inform these outcomes?

Building on the social GRRRAACCEEESSS

This practice tool is based around a new mnemonic called PRACTISINGRACE, which is an adaptation of Burnham's (2012) social GRRRAACCEEESSS framework describing different aspects of personal and social identity. There are power differentials in every position we occupy, such as gender, class, 'race,' and many others. Each position also comes with a unique set of rights and duties, constraints and opportunities.

The social GRRRAACCEEESSS constitute our moral order and reveal deeply held beliefs that influence our behaviour, how we relate to others, and make decisions. You can read more about the social GRRRAACCEEESSS framework in this [practice tool](#).

As the social GRRRAACCEEESSS continue to embed themselves within social work practice, PRACTISINGRACE expands this mnemonic to include work-related issues, experiences, self-perception, and the perception of others.

Gender
Geography
Race
Religion
Age
Ability
Appearance
Culture
Class/caste
Education
Employment
Ethnicity
Spirituality
Sexuality
Sexual orientation

I'm quite looking forward to this training. What about you?



Amanda

Not really! I don't know why you ask because my answer is never PC enough for you! Training like this... I'm always made to feel guilty because I'm 'white'. I just get so frustrated and angry so it defeats the purpose. As a woman, a lesbian, and a single mum, I know that it's like to feel oppressed so I get it! I've applied for the operational managers job twice and both times it's been given to a man! So, discrimination doesn't just happen to black people...!



Daphnie

PRACTISINGRACE & the METRO MAP – Practice Tools

PRACTISINGRACE was originally created as part of a two-part mentoring supervision framework that includes the 3S's tool (Scaffolding, Strategies, and Stories of Success) and is designed to support Black, Asian and ethnic minoritised practitioners experiencing dilemmas, challenges, and barriers to progression in the workplace. The framework provides practitioners with a space to 'think things through', discard unhelpful narratives, devise strategies to move forward, and align with stories that speak to their success.

The primary goal of this practice tool is to invite practice supervisors to explore their biases, to 'know what they don't know,' and to bring the unconscious into conscious awareness. The METRO MAP tool highlights the negative implications of unconscious bias and racial microaggression and how these can shape perceptions, experiences and outcomes.

Supervisors, managers, and leaders shape workplace culture. It is therefore envisaged that PRACTISINGRACE and the METRO MAP are used by both supervisors and senior managers in management team meetings. These exercises are designed to be used by individuals, in pairs, and as a group activity to discuss how the learning can begin to shape the team and the wider organisational context.

The first exercise invites practice supervisors to share their own experiences of unconscious bias and microaggression in the workplace, using PRACTISINGRACE to explore these themes. The second exercise seeks to challenge practitioners to examine their behaviour and bring the unconscious into consciousness by travelling along the METRO MAP.



I had a disagreement with a colleague and argued my point coherently. The next day he told me that he was 'scared' of me. I stated that this view of 'scary Black women was racist pathology.' Shortly after, I left the organisation. Five years later, the same colleague joined my workplace and was refusing to work with me. My manager and the head of service told me to sort this out myself. I declined the colleague's invitation for a three-way meeting. As it turns out, if I hadn't left my previous job, he intended taking a grievance out against me for calling him a 'pathological racist!' Obviously, he had unresolved issues, but the fact he would come to a new workplace, refuse to work with me, tarnish my reputation, and the fact I was unsupported by the primarily white leadership taught me so much about privilege and unconscious bias.

Matilda

Key terms

Unconscious or implicit bias (the two terms are used interchangeably)

The [Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity](#) refers to implicit bias as ‘residing deeply in the subconscious. These biases are different from known biases that individuals may choose to conceal for the purposes of social and / or political correctness. Rather, implicit biases are not accessible through introspection’ (Kirwan Institute). Unconscious bias occurs without conscious awareness of what is happening and these learned beliefs, attitudes and stereotypes can negatively affect perception, behaviour and decision-making.

Sue, et al. (2007, p.272) adds that implicit bias is a type of subtle racism that is ‘difficult to identify, quantify, and rectify because of [its] subtle, nebulous, and unnamed nature.’

Microaggression and racial microaggression

Unconscious bias can lead to discrimination in the form of microaggressions. The term was coined by Pierce in 1970, who wrote in 1995:

The most grievous of offensive mechanisms spewed at victims of racism and sexism are microaggressions. These are subtle, innocuous, preconscious, or unconscious degradations, and putdowns. In and of itself a microaggression may seem harmless, but the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to diminished mortality, augmented morbidity [increased illness/disease], and flattened confidence. (Pierce, 1995, p. 281)

Microaggressions come in different forms. Nadal, et al. (2015, p. 147) assert that people with multiple oppressed identities will experience ‘intersectional microaggressions’ (i.e., subtle forms of discrimination that may be influenced by more than one identity).

Racial microaggressions are said to be unconscious, daily intentional or unintentional verbal, behavioural, and environmental comments that express a derogatory, hostile, or negative racial slight or insult towards an individual or group (Sue, et al., 2007).

Microassaults, microinequities, microinsults and microinvalidations

Microassaults are conscious and explicit affronts that hurt an individual or group through name-calling and other purposefully discriminatory behaviour. Microassaults tend to be verbal, nonverbal and / or violent attacks.

*'I'm not going to apologise every time I forget to call you Jane and not John!
It's not natural to me and I shouldn't be made to feel guilty about it!'*

*'You lot always complain that you're not made to feel welcome but you don't
try to assimilate!'*

Microinequities are unconscious and result in a person being overlooked, disrespected and devalued. This takes place in everyday conversations and is experienced as subtle slights, gestures and tones. This behaviour is pervasive, but its impact is dismissed and the episode is said to be harmless.

'What Amina was trying to say was...'

*'Okay so you were there first. Perhaps the shop assistant just didn't see you or
are you saying she did it deliberately? Why would she do that?'*

'I didn't mean to interrupt. I thought you'd finished! Go on then!'

Microinsults are verbally communicated in conversation and are often represented by subtle snubs, rudeness, stereotypes and insensitivity towards an individual or a group's heritage or identity.

*'He got uppity because I didn't pronounce his name properly! I felt quite
intimidated by him.'*

'I'm not being rude, but why does your food smell like that?'

'You articulated that so well!'

Microassaults, microinequities, microinsults and microinvalidations

Microinvalidations are said to be unconscious and deny or invalidate the thoughts, feelings and experiences of an individual or group.

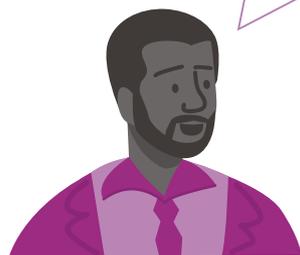
'How do you know that's what he meant? You're so oversensitive!'

'Here we go again! You always assume it's about racism.'

'All lives matter! Why is it always about Black people?'

Definitions adapted from Sue, et al. (2007).

I know I have an accent. They hired me knowing this. So why does it feel it's now being used against me? It makes me not want to speak. Now I'm being told I don't join in and that I'm too quiet. I can't win!



Olu

Unconscious bias and microaggression in the workplace

We are not, 'immune from inheriting the racist, gender, and heterosexist biases, stereotypes, prejudices, and falsehoods of the society in which we are raised.' (Sue, 2015, p. 22).

Racial biases are pervasive. This fact often prevents us from discussing race because we're likely to be confronted with having to deal with what we may internally believe, think or feel. It can be upsetting to suddenly realise that our unconscious bias violates our conscious perception of ourselves as being morally decent. While we are concerned that people

will mistake us for being biased, the real fear is that we are biased, as we have inherited biases that may not be in our consciousness. If this goes unaddressed, it may have a negative impact on how we treat others in the workplace.

In recent times, the stories of inequitable practice (namely unconscious bias, microaggressions, and other forms of racism, sexism, homophobia, disablism and so on) within the workplace have been given a platform through the Black Lives Matter social movement.

Why would I deliberately say something that I know would hurt someone? Oh, you're saying I might do it unconsciously? Well then that proves it's not deliberate. It gets rather tiring being made to feel guilty and being blamed for everything when you know that you're a good person!

Tina



Using the practice tools

These exercises explore how the power differentials embedded within the social GRRRAACCEEESSS impact all social work practitioners. Paying closer attention to our moments of action and how we invite others to sit beside us is a vital aspect of self-reflexive practice.

This practice tool is an invitation to acknowledge how bias and microaggressions can influence the supervisor / supervisee relationship, and how bias affects what we say and do.



Luke

PRACTISINGRACE Framework

PRACTISINGRACE is a collection of work-based contexts that reflect some of the lived experiences of Black, Asian, and ethnic minoritised social work practitioners.

PRACTISINGRACE highlights power differentials and the multiple contexts that exist within the supervisor / supervisee relationship, to bring these into consciousness.

PRACTISINGRACE is not an exhaustive list and will evolve as the framework develops.

Power / Privileged groups / Prejudice / Positioning / Performance / Personal-[un]professional-political / Perspectives / Partnership / Production / Private / Psychological safety / Powerless

Race-ism/s / Relational risk taking / Reasonable adjustments / Racist pathology / Reflexivity / Rights and duties / Responsibilities / Race-based bias / Risk

Assertive / Authority / Appraisal / Action plan / Angry / Attitude / Aggressive / Argumentative / Afraid / Accent / Abbreviated names / Anti-discrimination / Anti-racism / Aesthetics / Assimilate / Allies / Affirmation

Competence / Confident / Challenging / Criticism / Capabilities / Confrontational / Context / Curiosity / Connection / Conflict / Communication / (Un)Comfortable / Covert microaggression / Coded language / Cognitive dissonance / Colour blind / Confused / Contribution / Culture fit / Courage

Tricky / Team / Time / Trust / Truth

Inequitable practice / Inequality / Institutionalised / Incompetence / Invisibility / Identity / Isolated / Invalidation / Intimidating / Intent / Impact / Invisible attacks

Sexuality / Sexual orientation / Spirituality / Something else / Success / Standards / Self-esteem / Status / Scrutiny / Sickness / Safe uncertainty / Stereotype threats / Scary / Smelly food / Silence / 'Safe space'

Improvement / Impostorism / Internalised microaggressions / Ignored / Intersectionality

Negativity / Nepotism

Gender / Geography

Race / Religion

Age / [Dis]Ability / Appearance

Culture / Class / Caste

Ethnicity / Education / Employment / Equity / Explanation / Emotional / Experiences / Emotional tax

Exercise 1 – PRACTISINGRACE QUESTIONNAIRE

In pairs, using the PRACTISINGRACE framework, answer the following questions about unconscious bias and microaggression in the workplace:

1. What are some of the subtle ways you are treated differently due to your social GRRRAACCEESSS?

- a) What happens and how do you respond? Does anyone else notice and if so, what did they say / do?
- b) Do you think that the person making the comment is conscious of what they said or the impact this may have had?
- c) Who did you speak to about this episode?

2. How often do these episodes occur?

3. What are some of the stereotypes that exist regarding your group membership? What subtle ways do people communicate these stereotypes to you?

4. What impact does this have on your:

a) Confidence

b) Relationships with your supervisor / manager / colleagues

c) Your practice

d) Your emotional wellbeing

5. Were you able to speak to the person directly and explain the impact of their comment / actions? If not, what prevented you from doing so? If so, what was the outcome?

6. What strategies have you adopted to deal with these subtle infractions in the workplace?

7. Do you trust that your manager / the organisation will validate your experiences of discrimination and take decisive action to support you? If not, why is this?

8. What steps have / will you take to invite your supervisor / manager / colleagues to think about unconscious bias and microaggression in the workplace?

Group discussion:

- > What have taken from this exercise?
- > How will this learning be shared with your team?

METRO MAP: All in a day's work!

The METRO MAP describes the journey and day-to-day workplace experiences of Black, Asian and ethnic minoritised social work practitioners.

> [Click here to view the METRO MAP](#)

Exercise 2 – METRO MAP: All in a day’s work!

Please complete this exercise independently before joining a colleague to discuss your thoughts and responses.

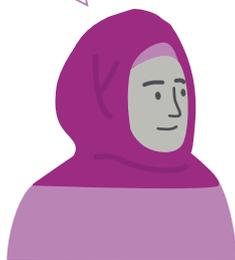
METRO MAP questions		Destination answers
1	After travelling along the Metro Map, what are your thoughts and feelings?	
2	Were any of the stations unfamiliar to you? If so, how will you find out about them?	
3	Which stations describe / confirm your experiences of your supervisee / colleague?	
4	In what ways might these existing beliefs positively or negatively influence your thoughts / feelings / actions toward the supervisee / colleague?	
5	Do you know what confirmation bias is and how it can be used to disadvantage others?	

6	<p>What differences have you noticed in your approach when managing performance issues of supervisees from Black, Asian and ethnic minoritised groups?</p>	
7	<p>How would you respond if your supervisee / colleague accused you of unconscious bias or racial microaggression?</p>	
8	<p>Who would you speak with to 'think things through' and help you deal with the feelings and emotions that this might raise for you?</p>	
9	<p>What are some of the ways that you could use curiosity to explore your biases and bring them into consciousness?</p>	
10	<p>Would you be able to return to a conversation with a supervisee / colleague and acknowledge an episode of unconscious bias or microaggression?</p>	

Group discussion:

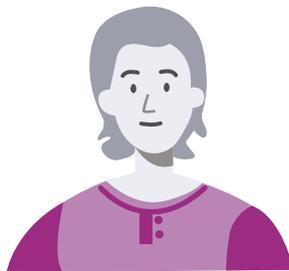
- > What was the learning you have taken from this exercise?
- > How will this be shared with your team?

I've been in the job for over 20 years and I've experienced all manner of bias and racist behaviour. The sad thing is I'm probably going to experience this for the remainder of my career!



Rupinder
Group Manager

My biggest fear is someone accuses me of racism!



Harriet
Operations Manager

Oh, you are looking at me! Okay, let's schedule a meeting so we can put together an action plan. I'm next available in four weeks' time.



Nick
Director

Taking PRACTISINGRACE & the METRO MAP forward

We understand the challenges that Black, Asian and ethnic minoritised supervisees face when discussing inequitable practice, particularly when the setting is not validating and they are forced to defend their experiences. This can be distressing for the supervisee and frustrating for the practice supervisor, especially if they have yet to confront unconscious bias and microaggression. The practice supervisor may find it difficult to acknowledge the harm being discussed if they are reacting defensively.

It is strongly recommended that, if PRACTISINGRACE and the METRO MAP are to be used in supervision with Black, Asian and ethnic minoritised practitioners, the practice supervisor creates a psychologically safe environment in which inequitable

practice can be discussed and experiences are validated. It's important to be clear about the intention of using this framework and what ongoing support and action will be offered.

The PRACTISINGRACE framework and the METRO MAP will act as an aide-memoire to promote curiosity and self-reflexivity as practice supervisors continue to explore unconsciously held beliefs and the impact of racial microaggressions.

As consciousness grows, it is critical that practice supervisors actively begin to build psychologically safe environments within the supervisor/supervisee relationships, the team, and the service as a whole - alongside developing their expertise in 'calling out' unconscious bias and racial microaggressions in the workplace.

This has given me so much to think about. Some of the exercises were really challenging. If things are going to change, it is going to take 100% effort.

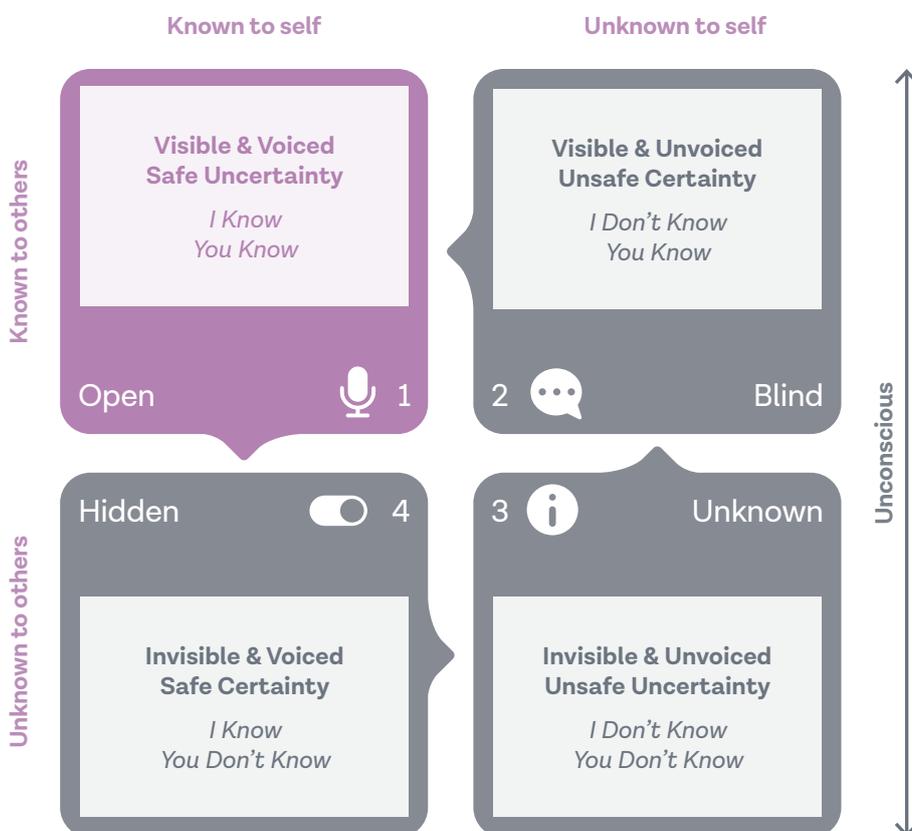


Amanda

Using the Johari window, safe uncertainty and the social GRRRAAACCEESSS to challenge unconscious bias and microaggression

The Johari window is a framework used to understand unconscious bias. It can help increase self-awareness and our understanding of others. This visual tool has been adapted and simplified to include the **safe uncertainty** model (used in supervision to aid critical reflection) and the social GRRRAAACCEESSS model (Burnham, 2012), focusing on visible and invisible, voices and unvoiced stories.

This tool is designed to help practice supervisors explore unconscious bias and microaggressions from a position of self-reflexivity and curiosity. It consciously asks what connections can be made to practice and what opportunities invite us to move from positions of uncertainty / not knowing to conscious awareness and safe uncertainty.



Adaptation of Johari's window (1961), Safe Uncertainty (2005) & Social GRRRAAACCEESSS (2012)

Systemic ideas: remaining curious and challenging unconscious bias and racial microaggressions

Domains of action & reflection-in-action	Pay attention to what you are doing, how you are doing it and why you are doing it. Be mindful of the language you are using while speaking with others and inviting them to sit beside you.
Self-reflexivity	Being able to reflect on your own personal and professional stories and how these influence you in relation to others. Be conscious of the lens through which you view and act in the world, and challenge the normative values you might place onto others.
Social GRRRAAACCEESSS	Pay attention to power differentials and understand the impact of your actions on others. Be conscious of what may be visible or invisible, voiced or unvoiced.
Curiosity verses certainty	<p>Pay attention to the positions that you occupy and be curious about your stance and what it is informed by.</p> <p>Be adaptable to changing positions.</p>

Conclusion

This practice tool is a call to action! There is a moral imperative to challenge unconscious bias and microaggressions in the workplace. Those in positions of authority and power who shape workplace culture must lead by example and create an equitable environment for all where it is safe to challenge inequitable practice.

Other ways to use this practice tool

- > Reconnect with the PSDP tools Critical conversations in social work supervision and Developing cultural competence, and watch the PSDP film [Decolonisation: honest conversations about white supremacy](#).
- > You can also use this tool in group supervision, by encouraging social workers to consider how unconscious bias affects not only workplace culture but direct practice with children and families.

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