Responding to Racial Microaggressions

How do we prepare ourselves and our children to respond to racial harm?

How adults talk –or don't talk– with children about Judaism and race has a profound effect on children's current and future understanding of their own culture and identity. This is a workshop for adults who interact with Jewish children, and who seek to help build a more inclusive and supportive community for Jews of all racial backgrounds. It will introduce new research by Dr. Buffie Longmire-Avital on Jewish racial socialization, including an opportunity to practice responding to racial microaggressions in the Jewish community. The workshop also includes resources for parents, mentors and educators engaging in these conversations.

GOALS

- Participants will reflect on the ways they are responsible for initiating racial justice-related conversations, and how they might approach these conversations going forward.
- Participants will develop a clearer understanding of what microaggressions are and how they are a problem in American Jewish communities.
- Participants will be better prepared to respond to common microaggression scenarios.

MATERIALS

- Slides in Appendix A
- Microaggression Handout (included below)
- Microaggression scenario facilitator notes (included below)

LESSON

Welcome and introductions: 10-15 minutes

- Introduce an overview of the workshop
- Go around to share names and pronouns
- If time: include 1-2 sentences about what brings them to the workshop

Warm-up activities: 10 minutes

Choose one or both prompts. These prompts can be done through writing, group go-around, or partner conversation.

- What is one formative moment when an adult influenced your Jewish or racial identity? What was the impact of this moment?
- What does it feel like to remember this moment? What effect does it have on us to remember?

Regroup: 5 minutes

What we say has power, and what we don't talk about has power, too. We are taking as a given that racism is prevalent in our society in overt and subtle ways, and the Jewish community is not immune. If we want to change this, and build a more inclusive and supportive community, we need to consciously address it. Buffie Longmire-Avital's research indicates that perceived readiness matters: adults who feel more prepared to engage with children are more likely to have meaningful and productive conversations with the children in their lives.

Data from Longmire-Avital's presentation indicates

- Slides in Appendix A: Lots of people talk to their kids generally about racism, but only half talk about how to address it in Jewish community; this suggests there's a need to be more proactive here. Also, parents raising JOC kids report witnessing more racial microaggressions, which suggests that a lot of other folks are not noticing that it's happening.

- According to Longmire-Avital, parents who felt more prepared to talk about racism reporting:
  - Were more likely to do it.
  - Typically reported more relationships with Jewish people of color
  - Were also more likely to talk to their children about how to respond to microaggressions.

What is a microaggression?: 15 minutes

- Read aloud the definition and/or hand out the definition:
  - According to Dr. Derald Wing Sue: "Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership."
  - Facilitator note to the group: "microaggressions" are an important concept in this research and beyond. At the same time, many people are moving away from using this language, and prefer the terms "racial harm" or "racist abuse" to emphasize that there is nothing small or minimal about the kind of harm being discussed.
  - Comprehension check: Invite participants to put the definition in their own words, identify other examples. Also note that the next activity involves study of more real examples of racial microaggression in the Jewish community, so hopefully by the end of the session the concept will be clearer.
    - Some common examples of microaggressions
      - When a White person tells a person of color "you're so articulate" - implying that that is unusual for a person of color
      - Asking a Black person "can I touch your hair?" - suggesting it's okay to cross personal boundaries to satisfy one's own curiosity
- Discuss: Why is it important to recognize brief, commonplace indignities?
  - Emphasize that in order to create a safe and welcoming community for all Jews, nobody should be subjected to casual, everyday offenses like these. Microaggressions create a harmful, hostile environment. They make people feel like they don't belong.

Practice responding, and teaching kids to respond, to racial microaggressions in Jewish spaces: 25 minutes

In small groups, read through a case of racial microaggression that was highlighted in Dr. Longmire-Avital's research. For each case:

- Identify the microaggression:
  - What is the "indignity" present in this situation?
  - What racial negativity is being conveyed?
- Identify some possible responses to this situation
- Pairs can role play talking to a/your child, explaining what is problematic and how to respond. Two participants take on the roles of adult and child. Parent introduces the scenario, and tries to explain the problem and some responses. "Child" responds with questions. Then switch roles.

[Note for facilitators: It is important to emphasize that participants should not enact the microaggressions themselves, as this perpetuates harm. The role-play should focus on how to talk about the harm, it should not re-enact it.]

Closing:5 minutes

Reflection questions (can be done with individual journaling, partner discussion, or full group reflection, depending on size and context of group)

- What will I take away from these microaggression scenarios practice?
- What is one idea or question that came up in this workshop that I want to keep thinking about and working on?
- What is one next step I'd like to take in terms of the racial justice education of my child(ren)/students?

Microaggression Definition

Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.
–Dr. Derald Wing Sue

MICROAGGRESSION CASE STUDIES
Quotations from Dr. Longmire-Avital's research and related scenarios

This section contains a variety of microaggressions that surfaced in the responses to Dr. Longmire-Avital's survey. We have included the quotes directly from the survey responses. Following the quote, there is a scenario to help flesh out the context. Participants can use these scenarios to unpack what the racial microaggression is, what the problem is, and then how to respond as a caring adult in this circumstance. The scenarios are followed by facilitation notes to help the teacher or workshop leader guide the conversations.

1. **Assumptions about (lack of) Jewish background:**
" Most of the Jews of color are from one parent that is a Jew by choice…"

Scenario: Your child goes to a Jewish school or religious school that appears to be entirely White. One day your child comes home having just met another kid with darker skin. Your child tells you about the new student and explains that the new student must have parents who converted to Judaism. How do you respond?

2. **Avoidance of another race:**
"In the neighborhood, for example, many white Jewish children do not want to play with black Jewish children."

Scenario: At synagogue, you noticed that your White children were only playing with other White children, when the synagogue class is more diverse. Over time, you notice that only a few of the White children play with the Black children. How do you approach this as a parent or teacher?

3. Ignorance of Jewish Diversity:
"...This past weekend a Jewish friend questioned the Jewish background of some Mexican Jews we know!"

Scenario: At Jewish summer camp, there was an activity where everyone shared where their family came from. After one camper said that her family was Mexican, another camper said, "You're Mexican? Then why are you here at a Jewish camp?" What assumption was the latter student making? How would you respond as a camp counselor or parent if you heard this comment?

4. Whitewashing Jewish History:
"Even as our temple works to be more inclusive, our family has to point out they are assuming everyone in the room is of white European descent. We've had to advocate for our children to be represented."

Scenario: In the religious school's Jewish history curriculum, 7th graders learn about European Jews coming through Ellis Island and living on New York City's Lower East Side in the early 20th century. When parents raise questions about this being the only Jewish-American origin story in the curriculum, the educator responds that this is the most common story, and there isn't time to go into all the different stories. How do you respond as a parent or fellow educator?

Microaggression Scenario Facilitator Notes

- Jews have lived all over the world and come from all different racial groups, both historically and in the present day.
- Jews from all over the world have been coming to the United States since Sephardic Jews arrived in New Amsterdam in the 17th century.
- It is generally considered inappropriate to ask someone how they came to Judaism. We are not supposed to bring up someone's conversion process unless they want to speak of it. Thus, to assume someone has converted suggests that you don't think they fully belong and they don't deserve the same level of respect shown to other converts.
- Some Jews are adopted as babies or small children into the Jewish community. How can we be sensitive to the lack of agency they had in the process of coming here?

Talking about Race and Racism?

- The vast majority of these parents [82.9%] have talked to their kids about racism in the U.S.
- Slightly more than half [53.59%] indicated that they have talked or taught their children about how to respond to racism/discrimination in Jewish spaces.
- ***Parents raising JOC kids witnessed more racial microaggressions and discrimination in Jewish spaces.***

Appendix A

Talking about racism in the US ⇔ Feeling more prepared to talk about discrimination and microaggression in Jewish spaces.

Having friendships or family who identify as JOC ⇔ Feeling more prepared to talk about discrimination and microaggressions in Jewish spaces.

Feeling more prepared to talk ⇔ more likely to have taught how to respond to discrimination and microaggressions in Jewish spaces.

Appendix A