Welcoming Environments

CS109: Ethical Foundations of Computer Science
February 19, 2019
Discussion: Welcoming Environments
What is a “Welcoming Environment”? 

• An environment that is, well, welcoming. (Ha.)

• It is an environment that is welcoming to all groups (majority, minority, and in the middle).

How do we get this magical thing?
Welcoming Environments: Creating One

We are all responsible!

• Create a feeling of community
• Understand and promote the Growth Mindset
  • Do not confuse preparation with ability!
• Insist on decency
• Stop bias
Insist on Decency

• Do not allow condescension/flaming/hazing to stand

• Speak up and stop it!
  • In class
  • On Piazza
  • In the lab
  • In the hallways
  • At work
  • ...

A Big Part of Decency: Eliminating Microaggressions

Those are those little comments that:
• May seem to be compliments but are not
• Make someone feel like they are not part of a group
• Intentionally put someone down
• Make fun of someone for an innate trait
• Pigeonhole a person’s characteristics based on the stereotype of the group

Yes, intent and context may matter.

For instance, the question, “Where are you from?” could be:
• Friendly conversation
• An attempt at background information to understand someone better
• Meant to make someone feel different from others

But realize that what the listener hears is what matters.
Other examples...

• “Weeelll.... Microsoft hires a lot of women.”
• “Girls are good at design”
• “Men are just not good communicators.”
• “I mean, I know there must be smart people in the South, but when I hear that accent... I just can’t believe it”
• “Are you in the right building?”
• “How can you go to work and leave your kids at home?”
Why do these microaggressions matter?

• Behavior is cumulative: one comment may not matter, but many of the students in our underrepresented groups face many of these comments.

• Not welcoming
• Ostracizing
• Affects the recipient’s confidence
Step 1: Recognition

This is hard. Here are some thoughts:

• Try to hear it through the recipients ears and in other contexts [text message vs. voice]
• Listen for key words: “actually” “you people” “like them”
• As yourself:
  • Does it marginalize the person’s experience/feelings/actions?
  • If the statement were made to an underrepresented group as a whole, would it be appalling?
• Practice: Read a bunch of them along with explanations about what they means, and you’ll be able to recognize new ones on the fly
Step 2: Assessment

- Is it important to address?
- Should I interrupt now?
- Should I take the person aside later or address this issue at a later time?
- What is stopping me from intervening?

Later: What could you, anyone in the scenario, or the organization do to prevent future instances?
Step 3: Response

• Confusion. Avoid accusations and instead invite clarification “What do you mean by that?”
  • “Could you explain, please?”
  • “Which women? Which men?”
  • “How do you know that?”

• Arouse dissonance: people don’t like to be inconsistent.
  • I’m surprised you would say something like that, considering how supportive you are of women in computing
Step 3: Response

• Pivot: this is a way of not confronting directly, but letting people know they made a mistake in a socially graceful way.
  • If someone thinks that a colleague is a clerical worker, walk up and say, “Hi, have you met our new assistant professor?”

• Declare irrelevance.
  • “Why does that matter here?”

• Use humor (when appropriate for the situation or your relationship with a colleague)
Stopping Bias

• Learn about bias
  • How it sounds
  • How it looks
  • Be particularly concerned with *implicit bias*

• Interrupt it!
What is Implicit Bias?

It is NOT explicit bias

These are the biases built into society.
  • These are shortcuts to help you make sense of the world
  • Sometimes those shortcuts have negative effects

We receive the implicit message about what is good and what is bad from the day we are born.

*We must take conscious steps to overcome our implicit biases.*
I Don’t Have Bias!

We all have bias
- It’s part of being able to function in our complex world: our brain categorizes items to process them faster
- Most of it is implicit

Harvard has created implicit bias tests:

https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/
Why Does It Matter?

Implicit bias can cause:

- Those microaggressions
- Stereotype threat
  - Occurs when a person is concerned that his or her actions will reflect negatively on a group
- Failure to recognize greatness
- People to not meet their full potential
What do we do?

• First, we learn to recognize and understand implicit bias.
  • We can’t stop something we don’t understand
Types of Bias

Bias takes many forms, some common ones:

- Performance Bias
- Performance Attribution Bias
- Competency vs. likeability
- Maternal Bias
- Conformity Bias
- Affirmative Action Bias
- Self-Serving Bias
What do we do?

• First, we learn to recognize and understand implicit bias.
  • We can’t stop something we don’t understand

• Then, we speak up and stop it.
Oh no!

• *You* have said or done something that was misinterpreted/not well considered/not good.

• First: Don’t be this guy:
I DON'T ALWAYS SAY SOMETHING STUPID

BUT WHEN I DO, I KEEP TALKING TO MAKE IT WORSE
Oh no!

• *You* have said something that was misinterpreted/not well considered/not good.

• First: Don’t be this guy:

• Second: Stop talking, and just apologize. We all make mistakes.
• “Whoops! I didn’t mean that. Of course we want your opinion/want you here/your skills are amazing.”
Case Studies

Decidedly unwelcoming environments and their effects:

- GitHub
- Uber
- Or find one of your own!
References

• Interrupting Bias in Academic Settings from NCWIT: https://www.ncwit.org/resources/interrupting-bias-academic-settings


• How Instructors Can Improve Inclusiveness in Classrooms or Programs: https://www.ncwit.org/sites/default/files/workshop_how_instructors_can_improve_inclusiveness_in_classrooms_and_programs.pdf