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MICROAGGRESSIONS

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Microaggressions are defined as 'everyday, verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile or derogatory, or negative messages' to individuals based on their belonging to a marginalised group.[1] Such displays of prejudice are often fleeting and subtle, yet their cumulative effect over time has been shown to have negative psychological effects on individuals' sense of self-worth and sense of belonging in academia. The concept, initially theorised based on empirical research carried out in psychology, has since been taken up in public debate and used outside of academia.

The first wave of scholarship on microaggressions emerged during the post-civil rights era in the US concerning the need to understand the emergence of 'subtle' forms of racism. This 'new racism' – or 'colour-blind racism' as it is often called – is characterised by the covert nature of its discourse and enactments.[2] Microaggressions, as one of its principle manifestations, demonstrate that systemic racism and other forms of discrimination are still prevalent, but their mechanisms are more difficult to discern than in the past. They may take the form of comments that reflect the perpetrator's worldview of certain groups as inferior or 'overly sensitive' such as, 'You speak English really well' to an American-born Latino or a rolling of the eyes when a racialised person speaks about lived experiences with race or gender in the classroom.

Western institutions of higher education, as perpetuators of systemic injustice,[3] have provided fertile empirical terrain for the examination of microaggressions, and there are currently three types that have been identified through empirical investigation: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation.[4] A *microassault* is a deliberate verbal, nonverbal or environmental aggression that communicates a perpetrator's prejudicial attitudes. This type of microaggression, because it is intentional, is closest to traditional forms of racism as it has a clear message to the

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recipient. Examples include using ethnic slurs or engaging in explicitly biased hiring practices that select men as managers and women as support staff. *Microinsults* are defined as unintentional acts or statements that degrade an individual based on their gender, religion, cultural heritage, ability, or body morphology. In the case of a microinsult, a meta-level commentary or hidden message is conveyed. For example, when a Latino woman professor is mistaken for a member of the cleaning staff (hidden message: Latino women do not belong in academia) or when a disabled college student is praised for being 'so inspirational' (hidden message: I see your personhood as limited to opening the minds of able-bodied people). Finally, *microinvalidations* are acts or comments that deny the lived experiences or reality of a marginalised group. A common example is 'colour-blindness', which exposes the belief that racism no longer exists.

In the example below, the poet and writer Claudia Rankine, whose *Citizen: An American Lyric* came as a sharp and meditative portrait of racism in the 21st century, presents a poignant microaggression that comes from higher education:

> You are in the dark, in the car, watching the black-tarred street being swallowed by speed, he tells you his dean is making him hire a person of color when there are so many great writers out there.
>
> You think maybe this is an experiment and you are being tested or retroactively insulted or you have done something that communicates this is an okay conversation to be having.
>
> Why do you feel comfortable saying this to me? You wish the light would turn red or a police siren would go off so you could slam on the brakes, slam into the car ahead of you, fly forward so quickly both your faces would suddenly be exposed to the wind.[5]

The microaggression described by Rankine illuminates two particularly important dimensions of 'new racism': the perpetrator is presumably unaware, and the statement has the potential to trigger feelings of deep uncertainty and distress (What just happened? What are you saying? Should I report this and if so, what will the repercussions be? Why does this keep happening to me?). If the recipient attempts to expose the statement as a microaggression, they may be met by an attempt to lessen the experience: 'you know what I mean'.

The phenomenon of microaggressions has been more recently extended to describe offensive behaviour motivated by identity markers other than race such as gender, social class,[6] differently-abled bodies, sexuality, and body morphology. The increased scholarly understanding of microaggressions and their gatekeeping role in the academy at all levels has secured the concept an important place in the current inclusion and diversity initiatives in higher education. Although many attempts have been made to increase awareness of microaggressions and the negative impact they have on staff and students, much work remains to be done in terms of how to best address the problem.

Microaggressions in the higher education sector

Institutions of higher education around the world are experiencing a significant diversification of their student body and academic staff but have largely failed in creating an inclusive environment.

However, simply changing the representation of various groups does not in and of itself ensure that the experiences of racial/ethnic minority and women students are as positive as those of their white and male counterparts. In order to know whether and how there are differences, it is necessary to ascertain students' perceptions about the degree to which their campus experiences suggest that equity has been achieved. Since institutional change tends to be slow, one cannot assume that increases in the numbers of students of colour have been accompanied by adequate changes in what has been called the 'chilly climate' for students of colour and women in undergraduate populations at PWIs.[7]

Efforts to protect marginalised individuals within higher education have also increased. From mentoring programmes to the establishment of women's networks, the building of 'communities of care', and initiatives to scaffold the trajectories of early-career faculty, such diversity work may buffer the effects of the most blatant instances of systemic injustice, but they remain insufficient.[8] Such diversity and inclusion initiatives, which are often allocated significant resources, fail to reform an institutional framework that allows for microaggressions and other instances of symbolic violence to go unrecognised.

Microaggressions also reveal the paradoxical condition imposed on marginalised individuals in the academy: that of being simultaneously 'visible' and 'invisible'.[9] On one hand, they are potentially scrutinised for behaviour and personal displays that deviate from the 'norm', or are required to speak on behalf of their race or culture. On the other hand, their opinions, perspectives, and lived experiences remain unrecognised in academic knowledge hierarchies.

The literature also reveals that microaggressions are highly context dependent. What is perceived as a microaggression in one context may not be perceived as such in another. This high degree of context dependence makes microaggressions very difficult to investigate empirically. It also suggests that specific academic communities (department or research-group level) need to give serious consideration to the contexts in which they are likely to be produced. It is perhaps through local, context-driven understandings that microaggressions may be lessened, but more research is needed to confirm this hypothesis. Literature and testimonials generated in the context of empirical studies suggest that another striking and common attribute of microaggressions is that they are often attributed to the ignorance and indifference that characterise the perpetrator's perspective. Moving forward, both an exploration of context and the perpetrator perspective will be key to advancing knowledge of these phenomena.

In the wake of the first ten years of scholarly literature, several compelling critiques have been raised regarding microaggression research and its application in training programmes. In mainstream discourse, proponents of microaggression

research have been accused of unduly politicising campus life and promoting a culture of victimisation.[10] Lilienfeld, one of the most vocal critics, further challenges the idea that 'microaggressions are operationalized with sufficient clarity and consensus to afford rigorous scientific investigation'.[11] As such, the term remains too loosely defined and constitutes a misnomer for exclusion phenomena that may be more aptly named 'inadvertent racial slights'.[12] Finally, he cautions the premature adoption of microaggression training programmes in higher education until a more robust scientific framework is developed.

There nonetheless remains the question of how to deal with the 'chilly' and 'hostile' climate in higher education for women and minority groups. Hence, in another potential direction, scholars have pointed out the clear need for insight into micro-affirmations and micro-kindness[13] for the sake of mitigating the negative effects of microaggressions. A few studies of microaggressions also hypothesise subtle actions of encouragement as a means to counter negative interactions by building relationships and fostering inclusion in the form of so-called 'micro-affirmations'. Laugther argues that in some of the microaggression studies there are also traces of micro-kindness experienced, for example, through mentions of friendship.[14] However, the highly contextual nature of microaggressions suggests that acts of micro-kindness risk being perceived as patronising gestures towards marginalised individuals.

The question remains: How can higher education diversity initiatives best address micro-exclusion phenomena, and by doing so engage in more 'genuine' inclusion work that acknowledges systemic inequality at all levels, from macro to micro?

Case discussion: Initiating cultural change in pedagogical training courses

In order to answer this, it is useful to consider two examples that may offer a starting point for initiating cultural change in pedagogical training courses.

Classroom teaching microaggressions

Modern democratic ideals of 'coming together in difference' prevail in educational discourse at all levels.[15] The inspiration for this vignette comes from Alison Jones' problematisation of the use of 'dialogue' as a pedagogical tool in classrooms composed of students with both marginalised (Maori, indigenous New Zealander) and non-marginalised identities (Pakeha, white New Zealander).[16] It is based on her experience teaching a course on 'feminist perspectives in education'. In her text, Jones calls our attention to the white educator's genuinely benevolent desire to engage students in exchange across race and cultures:

> Most pressingly, as a teacher I ask, What if 'togetherness' and dialogue-across-difference fail to hold a compellingly positive meaning for subordinate ethnic groups? What if the 'other' fails to find interesting the idea

> of their empathetic understanding of the powerful, which is theoretically demanded by dialogic encounters?[17]

Jones receives feedback from Maori colleagues that the 'words, assumptions, and interests of the Pakeha students and lecturer continued to dominate', despite her attempts to facilitate an open classroom.[18] In what follows, I use Jones' work to show how a well-intended teacher unintentionally sets up a microaggression situation in which certain students are rendered visible and put in a position of 'speaking for their race'.

The event is a lecture in a bachelor-level course on gender equality and diversity at a public university. The student body is composed of predominantly white, middle-class students. The lecturer describes herself as a feminist critical educator and values dialogue as a means to destabilise the teacher–student hierarchy and engage students in the co-production of knowledge. In this lecture, she attempts to connect the course content to student's lived experiences in order to reinforce the idea that such experiences are a valid source of knowledge in feminist epistemology. She also hopes to help students connect the course concepts to their own lives.

The teaching objective for this particular day asks students to come to an understanding about the ways in which long-standing social disparities have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The teacher gives a presentation and then takes care to put students in groups that reflect the 'visible' diversity of the classroom. She gives the following instructions: in groups of four, reflect on the ways in which your lived experiences resonate with, challenge or complicate the theoretical understanding of social inequality presented in today's required reading. The students reluctantly retreat into groups, and the lecturer notes superficial discussion throughout the exercise.

First, the teacher chooses groups in the interest of giving students access to a diverse range of perspectives and in facilitating cross-cultural dialogue. But as she does this, she prioritises the creation of an 'open' classroom over a consideration for the feelings of students of colour, who may not want to be attributed the burden of opening up to share their lived experiences of difference with the white students in the group. A mood of discomfort and silence reigns for the duration of class time. The pedagogical encounter described above therefore leads to several possible microaggressions towards students of colour and a handful of indigenous students whose lighter skin renders their marginalised identity invisible to the lecturer.

These potential microaggressions fall in line with much that we know about such phenomena from the existing literature: they are carried out unintentionally by a caring lecturer; they are fleeting; they are enabled by an institutional context that upholds power differences between teacher and students and marginalised and non-marginalised students; and they ultimately lead to a murky situation in which students of colour are left wondering whether they are 'being too sensitive', whether they should say anything to the teacher (if so, how?), and whether objecting is worth risking the consequences, which may include heightened visibility and

reactions from peers. These microaggressions might even trigger further negative reflection and self-doubt. This situation also highlights a particular type of microaggression, the *microinsult*, but shows that there may also be more micro forms of exclusion at play.

Research environment microaggressions

The following incident takes place in the hallway of a large research university in Norway. It involves a brief yet tense interaction between a recently arrived female post-doctoral fellow from Greece (Eleni) and a senior male professor from Norway (Jan). The shortage of space in the department has led to an online scheduling system whereby employees must reserve meeting rooms in advance. The system, which is in pilot mode, fails and allows two people to reserve the same room at the same time. Eleni has booked the room for a networking lunch organised for gender researchers at the university while Jan intends to use the meeting room for a European project consortium meeting. Eleni has started laying out coffee cups on the table when Jan bursts in, visibly stressed.

ELENI: Hi Jan, how are you?

JAN: I've booked this room for 12:30. You'll need to find another room.

ELENI: Oh, I think there might be a misunderstanding, you see, I booked this room ages ago for a networking lunch. I'm expecting 25 people.

JAN: That's just not possible. I've got an *important* consortium meeting, so you'll have to go elsewhere. It's probably a change for you, all these protocols. We like things to be orderly in Norway.

The interaction between Eleni and Jan lasts only 42 seconds yet triggers in Eleni a series of reflections: Was Jan suggesting that the networking event was not as important as his consortium meeting? Is this an example of gender research being devalued? Does he mean to suggest something about being from Southern Europe or even Greece? Since she is unsure about what exactly happened, she is reluctant to take it up with Jan directly or with her supervisor.

In this example, Eleni ends up conceding the room to Jan but the memory of the experience stays with her in a deeply embodied way for the rest of the day and resurfaces during encounters with Jan in future interactions. Part of this experience for her involves the coming together of a stunning number of dimensions (individual, hierarchy of academic fields, local versus European and the different levels of prestige granted to different academic activities). She continues to try and interpret the event over and over again, always with uncertainty as to what 'really' happened.

Micro events, macro consequences?

In light of the current microaggression literature, we see much to suggest that microaggressions have macro-consequences for a person's well-being and a sense of

belonging for marginalised groups in higher education. As such, it is imperative that they are addressed as an important part of current diversity and inclusion work in higher education. Empirical research is just beginning to emerge about the success of initiatives like by-stander workshops,[19] the implementation of micro-aggression prohibition lists on campuses, consciousness-raising tools adapted from Sue et al.'s typology,[20] and the use of videos and vignettes to expose injustice in a non-confrontational manner. Rather than calling for a complete suspension of microaggression training programmes due to the points raised by critics, it may be useful to develop solutions based on local knowledge through case studies and vignettes.

Summary

The conceptualisation of micro-level exclusion phenomena has served to create an awareness of the ways in which institutional racism and coloniality continue to surface in daily life – seemingly trivial events that have devastating consequences for marginalised scholars and students at Western universities. Importing research knowledge from an American context should be done with caution. Local knowledge and institutional structures should be foregrounded and addressed in attempts to address microaggressions.

- 'Microaggressions' are subtle, thinly veiled, everyday manifestations of racism, homophobia, sexism and other harmful forms of prejudice.
- Much of the current diversity and inclusion work in higher education, although necessary, fails to successfully address micro-level exclusion phenomena.
- There are numerous challenges to advancing research knowledge on micro-aggressions: the openness of the concept, the highly contextualised nature of the phenomena, and the diversification of methods to investigate them have all been raised by critics.
- There is no simple solution for the elimination of microaggressions, and current intervention programmes have not been sufficiently evaluated. This does not mean, however, that those in a position of academic leadership should not take steps towards raising awareness in local contexts. This can be done by using vignettes as a basis for discussion.

Questions for discussion

- Have you ever experienced a microaggression? In which context did it occur? Did your experience fit within the three types of microaggressions identified in the literature?
- How does current diversity and inclusion work address micro-level exclusion phenomena? What data is available about the prevalence of such phenomena?
- Is some form of microaggression awareness built into pedagogy courses so that educators can effectively respond to microaggressions in teaching spaces?

- Does the fact that 'microaggression' is a highly open, malleable concept make it too difficult to instrumentalise it in higher education?
- Will microaggressions naturally be reduced as institutions work toward the elimination of systemic inequality? What is the relationship between the macro and micro?

Suggestions for further reading

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- Torino G.C., Rivera, D.P., Capodilupo, C.M., Nadal, K.L., & Sue, D.W. (2019). *Microaggression Theory: Influence and Implications*. John Wiley & Sons.

Notes

1. Sue et al. 2007
2. Bonilla-Silva, 2001
3. See e.g. Reibold, this volume
4. Sue et al., 2007; Torino et al., 2019
5. Rankine 2014, 16
6. Cook & O'Hara 2020
7. Caplan & Ford, 2014, 35–6
8. See for example, Archer, 2007; Ahmed, 2012; Hughes, 2015; Fjørtoft, this volume; Duarte, this volume
9. Caplan & Ford 2014, 35–6
10. Campbell & Manning, 2014; MacDonald, 2019
11. Lilienfeld 2017, 159
12. Lilienfeld 2017, 161
13. Estrada et al., 2018
14. Laugther 2014
15. See Fjørtoft, this volume
16. Jones 1999
17. Jones 1999, 299
18. Jones 1999, 299
19. Banks et al. 2020
20. Sue et al. 2007

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