

Microaggressions in academic institutions

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What is microaggression?

- Unlike overt hate speech and violence motivated by racism, misogyny, homophobia, islamophobia and class hatred, microaggression constitutes a mundane – often subtle and automated – ‘language’ of exclusion.
- Microaggressions are utterances and actions that link people to stereotypical perceptions of ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality or other social divisions (systemic rather than occasional).



- Microaggressions are far from obvious to everyone but nevertheless mark asymmetrical relations and create unequal conditions for women and men, as well as for majority and minority populations.
- It could be verbal remarks making those on the receiving end feel subordinated or marginalized.
- It could also be non-verbal markers of difference, such as ignoring or staring at someone, or meeting someone with suspicion, based on their appearance or characteristics (stereotypes).



Group photo

illustration



- ‘As you can tell [from looking at the photo], there are quite a few foreigners in the group, and there is a good mix of senior and junior scholars.’
- The white, male, middle-aged professor implicitly equates Norwegianity with whiteness, thus coding people of colour as non-Norwegians.
- It is also as though we could tell from a group photo whether a person is senior or junior in rank.



More examples

- A male colleague suggests that I bring along another male colleague, known for his 'pirate voice', to establish order in a slightly noisy auditorium.
- A male employee learns that the staff is getting a new female employee and excitedly remarks: 'Then we'll finally have something nice to look at here.'
- An academic said 'nice dress'. Would complaining make me a snowflake?



What's the problem?

- Typically, the triggering remarks or actions are seen as insignificant or trivial, and the cause of the conflict is attributed to those who point out the problem.
- The problem is compounded by the fact that the offended (when calling out the offender or raising the issue) is seen as a snowflake, hypersensitive, paranoid, hysterical etc.



Double bind (Catch 22)

- If one *does* address the issue, the spotlight is likely to be on the person pointing out the problem rather than on the problem itself, thus exacerbating the problem.
- If one *does not* address the issue, the problem is being ignored while the damage continues – its impact reverberating far beyond the single episode.



Paradox

- Insofar as the discrimination mechanisms fall outside the scope – or fall off the radar – of formal anti-discrimination measures, the problem is not limited to mere omission.
- The official language of inclusion and equality measures could work as a dismissal mechanism, deferring investigations and covering over actually existing discrimination in academic institutions.



- Based on the principle of equal treatment (predicated on difference blindness), bias-induced privileges are not considered discrimination.
- On the other hand, affirmative action or quotas for women can be recast as discrimination against men (targets of identity politics, political correctness or, more recently, woke ideology).
- *Formal* policies targeting women and minority groups are conspicuous as long as *informal* support of socially privileged groups is not.



Bottom line

- Constituting a mundane and often automated ‘language’ of exclusion, microaggression marks asymmetrical relations and effectively creates unequal conditions for women and men, as well as for majority and minority populations.
- Paradoxically, the official language of inclusion and formal anti-discrimination measures tend to overlook and even cover over the informal, every-day mechanisms of exclusion in academic institutions.



N. Puwar: *Space Invaders* (2004)

- Burden of doubt: women and minority people are subtly marked out as intruders – through little encounters casting doubt about their right to belong.
- Infantilization: women and minority people are assumed to be inferior or more junior in rank than they actually are, through little encounters signalling lack of competence, skill or intelligence.
- Based on pre-conceived notions of what it takes to be a proper member of staff or to belong



S. Ahmed: *Being Included* (2012)

- Ahmed draws a connection between the problem of non-white people being asked where they are from (signaling a doubt: 'she or he is not really from here') and the question of doubt often asked about female professors: 'Is she really a professor?'
- 'When you look like what they expect a professor to be, you are treated like a professor' (176).
- 'You have to "insist" on what is simply given to others. Not only that, you are heard as insistent, or even as self-promotional...' (177).

