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Diversity Dialogues . . .

About Microaggressions

Ronald Wheeler

Professor Wheeler discusses the concepts of microaggressions (including micro-assaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations) specifically against LGBT individuals, and proposes some solutions for preventing microaggressions from occurring within one’s organization.

Definitions

¶1 Marginalized populations in our society commonly experience microaggressions. They are a fact of daily life, showing up in contexts such as families, workplaces, and neighborhoods. AALL members have even written about their impact.¹ The most commonly used definition found throughout the literature defines microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative . . . slights and insults toward the target person or group.”² However, also true is that microaggressions are experienced by members of oppressed groups³ differently,⁴ they negatively impact performance in the workplace,⁵ they can contribute to physical and mental problems,⁶ and they can

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² Director of the Fineman and Pappas Law Libraries, and Associate Professor of Law and Legal Research, Boston University School of Law, Boston, Massachusetts.
evince illegal discrimination and lead to employer liability. Given the pervasiveness and impact of microaggressions, I therefore consider them important enough to warrant discussion here as part of our Diversity Dialogues series.

¶2 I will structure my discussion in a meandering and somewhat unorthodox way. Most of the literature on microaggressions in the workplace focuses on race and racially motivated microaggressions. Nevertheless, a growing body of research addresses microaggressions targeting women and LGBT people. Because discussion of race can be especially emotionally fraught, and because I have not yet discussed LGBT issues in this series, I will frame this discussion using the literature on both race and sexual orientation. I will focus my personal anecdotes using my experiences as a black gay man touching on issues of race and sexual orientation. However, when I move to discussing illegal discrimination, I will again rely on the more robust body of literature on racial microaggressions as there is no federal legislation that protects LGBT people from employment discrimination.

Types of Microaggressions

¶3 The modern evolution of antidiscrimination law combined with other social and political developments have caused contemporary forms of discrimination to become “subtler than the overtly prejudiced behaviors of the past.” Subtlety makes these contemporary microaggressions easy to dismiss as unimportant or insignificant. It can also allow perpetrators to label targets as hypersensitive or somehow neurotic. Several types of microaggressions are identified in the literature, and it can be helpful to label them and explore them in the context of some personal anecdotes and examples. No matter what the type, microaggressions can be used as evidence of illegal discrimination, and if severe and pervasive, they “may rise to the level of harassment under certain circumstances.”

7. See, e.g., Fujimoto, supra note 5, at 137–42 (discussing the Stray Remarks Doctrine); King et al., supra note 2, at 57–58, 60 (discussing how the article will describe “ways in which judges may weigh evidence of microaggressions in line with extant laws and decisions” and asserting that “reports of microassaults, or frequent experiences of microinvalidations and microinsults, will support disparate treatment claims”).


10. King et al., supra note 2, at 55.

11. John M. Robinson, The New Face of Exclusion: Microaggressions, STATE MAG., Nov. 2015, at 6, 6 (quoting a letter from the U.S. State Department chief diversity officer warning that microaggressions may count as harassment).
Microassaults

¶4 “The first and most overt form of microaggression is microassault.” Microassaults are “attacks meant to harm the victim” thus they are fairly easy to identify. Most of us are used to thinking about these types of attacks because they are similar to traditional forms of overt discrimination that we have all witnessed, read about, or at least heard about. Although it is difficult for many of us to imagine facing this form of attack at work, it certainly does happen.

¶5 Growing up in Detroit in the 1970s and 1980s, I was extremely lucky to have remained somewhat sheltered from much of the racism that permeated our existence at the time. My father worked for Ford Motor Company in the famous River Rouge Complex located in Dearborn, Michigan. Our home in Detroit was situated just a few blocks from Detroit’s border with Dearborn, which was convenient for my father’s daily commute. It was also a source of stress for my parents. Dearborn is infamous for its segregationist policies. Its notorious mayor, Orville Hubbard, was mayor from 1942 to 1978. His popularity and consistent reelection are attributed to his dedication to the campaign promise to “keep the niggers out.”

¶6 Although my parents feared that my sister and I might be harmed if we rode our bikes into Dearborn, and my father tells of repeated harassment by the Dearborn police as he drove to and from work daily, I really did not experience any overt attacks that I can recall until law school in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I recall with surprising clarity that during my first year of law school, as I strolled through campus with friends one evening, a car full of white men drove by, and as they passed someone yelled the words, “nigger faggot.” Although this incident did not happen in the employment context, I relay it here for a couple of reasons. First, because it is one of the few terrible and trauma-provoking examples from my personal life that I clearly recall. But second, because it happened on a university campus while I was in law school. Admittedly, this happened in 1988, but when I speak with students of color and queer students today, it becomes clear to me that these things still happen. Surprisingly, what has stayed with me for all of these years is the overwhelming fear and helplessness that I felt that night. I recall being
overwhelmed by terror and the realization that if that car stopped, I could be killed or severely injured. I also recall feeling surprise and chagrin that this could happen in liberal Ann Arbor, the Berkeley of the Midwest. I remember that my fear developed later into anger, which I carried around with me to classes and elsewhere. So when I attempted to engage in conversations concerning race in my law school classes and when well-meaning yet insensitive comments were made, I became unable to respond or to engage. I became overwhelmed. This incident definitely impacted my academic performance at the time in negative ways.

¶7 In 1988, there was no one on my law school faculty with whom I could comfortably speak about these issues. I was a pariah even among other LGBT students for being “too out.” The one black professor at Michigan Law School at that time, Sallyanne Payton, was either visiting another law school or on sabbatical, and there were no LGBT law professors or people writing, teaching, or thinking about LGBT issues. In my opinion, these facts helped to sustain a culture where an incident like this could happen. The young men who yelled insults at me that night had every reason to believe that they would not face consequences if they were caught or if I told someone. There was no precedents of the university caring about, investigating, or punishing what we now call hate crimes. If there had been an organizational culture in existence at the university where a student would have been expelled for incidents such as these, would this incident still have occurred? I ask this question because creating and sustaining a culture that either tolerates or condemns these kinds of microassaults is everyone’s responsibility.

Microinsults

¶8 The second type of microaggression are called microinsults. These “include behaviors that are insensitive, rude, or inconsiderate of a person’s identity.” Microinsults are especially difficult for people to understand because “they tend to be subtle in nature and may be unconscious and unintentional, but [they] nonetheless demean the target or their group.” An example used in some of the literature is telling a racial minority that they are a “credit to your race.”

¶9 An odd type of microinsult used to happen to me fairly often when I was younger. It occurred in various contexts and revolved around shaking hands. I would be introduced to someone, a work superior or a professor or some other authority figure, and that person would interact with me differently than with my white colleagues. When introduced to the others, the authority figure would say “hello Robert” or “hello Greg” and shake their hands in the normal way. However, when introduced to me, the authority figure would say “hey Ron” or “hey Ron my man,” and then begin an elaborate and unorthodox hand-shaking ritual involving twisting out of a traditional handshake and into what I presume was considered a black handshake.

While I felt clear that the authority figure meant well and was trying to demonstrate

18. King et al., supra note 2, at 56.
19. Id.
20. Id.
21. Id.
coolness, compassion, or liberalism, I always felt singled out, insulted, and belittled. It seemed to me that he felt I somehow required more than a normal hello and a traditional handshake to communicate a warm welcome. The person committing the microaggression probably thought he was building a relationship with me; however, the message I received was that I am not as professional as my white colleagues. Often, when a microaggression occurs, the person who commits the act does not realize she is actually being offensive—in fact, she may think she is giving a compliment or building a relationship. Though the intent was not to hurt my feelings, the impact was that I felt stereotyped, misunderstood, and marginalized.

**Microinvalidations**

¶10 The third category of microaggressions are called microinvalidations. Microinvalidations “are characterized by behavior that minimizes the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiences of targets.” Like microslights, microinvalidations are subtle and often unintentional. They are sometimes labeled “interpersonal discrimination,” “incivility,” or “microinequalities,” and they can be either verbal or nonverbal.

¶11 One example of a microinvalidation from my personal life happened to me recently. I was on vacation, and I was with a couple of fairly new acquaintances. We were walking through an inner city park when we encountered a group of people that my new friends knew. I was introduced, and I began chatting with the people whom I had just met. At one point, one of the women in the group asked, “I see you’re wearing a wedding ring, is your wife here with you?” I responded with, “I have a husband not a wife, but he is not with me on this trip.” She was clearly embarrassed. Her previously radiant smile turned to a look of embarrassment and discomfort, and she said, “Oh?” Then someone changed the subject, and we all pretended that my husband had never been mentioned.

¶12 People have asked me why this incident in particular is so upsetting to me. What I felt most at that moment was put on the spot. I felt singled out on a really nice day with really nice friends. I felt unfairly and without any warning forced to make a really difficult choice. I could choose to swallow my pride, to grin and bear it, to simply answer “no,” and to become invisible and closeted and irrelevant. That choice, for me, has psychological consequences.

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23. King et al., supra note 2, at 56.
24. Id.
25. Id.
26. It is important to note that asking this question itself minimizes my experience, implies that I am hypersensitive and histrionic, and suggests that I am somehow overreacting.
27. There are many well-documented psychological consequences of either staying silent or speaking up. See, e.g., Nadal et al., supra note 6, at 22 (discussing the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional reactions to microaggressions and their impact on targets).
28. I recently realized that my numerous and ongoing LGBT involvements, from student activism to grassroots organizing, fund-raising, nonprofit work, AIDS direct action, and AIDS services provision are not chronicled in a publicly available place. Readers may contact me directly for more information.
29. See Steven Seidman et al., Beyond the Closet? The Changing Social Meaning of Homosexuality in the United States, 2 Sexualities 9, 12–19 (1999) for a detailed discussion of the origin, evolution, and meaning of “coming out of the closet”.

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aspect of my life and to remain out and proud and positive, which necessitates pushing back against those who would, intentionally or unintentionally, render me invisible as a gay man. So, failing to address the incorrect assertion that I am married to a woman would belie all of that work as well as the ongoing work I do to maintain positive self-esteem and a positive sense of self. That is why, although I knew it would make everyone uncomfortable, it would make me look hostile and confrontational, and it would possibly cause a well-meaning and friendly woman some embarrassment, I chose to answer in the way that I did.

### Sexual Orientation in Particular

¶ 13 Modern researchers have created a taxonomy “to identify and demonstrate the specific types of microaggressions that affect LGBT individuals.”30 As one might guess, microaggressions manifest themselves differently when targeting sexual orientation and gender identity. Heterosexism, defined as “marginalizing LGBT persons while praising and normalizing heterosexual people,”31 plays a huge role and is more subtle in contemporary society, yet nonetheless it is harmful.32 Moreover, its impacts “may cause even more psychological distress in LGBT women and LGBT people of color.”33

¶ 14 The taxonomy created by Nadal and his colleagues has seven categories: (1) the use of heterosexist terminology, (2) the endorsement of heteronormative or gender-conforming culture/behaviors, (3) the assumption of universal LGBT experience, (4) exoticization, (5) discomfort/disapproval of LGBT experience, (6) denial of societal heterosexism/transphobia, (7) assumption of sexual pathology/abnormality.34 These categories really resonate with me, so I will share a couple of anecdotes about how some have impacted me personally.35

### Assuming a Universal LGBT Experience

¶ 15 The third category, the assumption of universal LGBT experience, is one that I used to experience fairly regularly. I would be at a work event or meeting with a social component during which people were casually discussing spouses and home life. At some point I would mention my husband, thus outing myself and asserting my gayness.36 For some, however, my opening the door to my sexual orientation publicly signals an openness to be questioned about anything related to or assumed to relate to gay life.37 So, the next question to me would sometimes be, “So, which gay clubs do you like to go out to?” When I was living in San Francisco and visiting another city, the question might be, “You probably live in the Castro, right?” There are other even more bizarre and presumptuous questions that people

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30. Nadal et al., supra note 6, at 23.
31. Id. at 22.
32. Id. at 25.
33. Id. at 23.
34. Id. at 23–24.
35. The wedding ring anecdote discussed in ¶ 11 is an example of a microaggression that falls into categories 1 and 2 of this taxonomy.
36. This is, of course, an overstatement because I am fairly certain that most people experience me as a gay man in the world.
37. This is, in itself, absurd because there is no monolithic gay life.
have asked me over the years. As I’m sure readers can see, these questions presume that all gay men love and frequent gay clubs\(^{38}\) and that all gay men in San Francisco live in the Castro neighborhood. These types of comments provoke all types of emotions for me, including sadness, anger, and frustration. They make me feel as if no matter what I say or do, no matter what degrees I earn or what professional accomplishments I achieve, I will always be first and foremost a dance club frequenter and a resident of the Castro. It’s not that I don’t want to be perceived as gay.\(^{39}\) That is not the issue. The issue is that although I want to be out to the world, I also want to be perceived as and recognized for all that I am, and not just a stereotype or preconception. To help illustrate, one would almost never, in the same context, ask a person “so which straight clubs do you like to go to?” Right?

**Disapproval of the LGBT Experience**

\(^{16}\) The fifth category, discomfort/disapproval of the LGBT experience, manifests itself in numerous ways. The most poignant example for me is experienced by my lesbian friends who are parents. It is really rather shocking the extent to which people will scowl, make disapproving statements, use disapproving and defensive body language, and even ask disrespectful and intrusive questions to lesbian couples who are parents. Questions like “Who is the mom?” or “She’s really your daughter and not hers, right?” or even “How did that work?” Honestly, it sounds insane, but you just can’t make this stuff up! After considering these examples, it is hopefully clear how intrusive, disrespectful, and maddening these kinds of questions would be and how it might cause stress, anxiety, anger, and frustration for lesbian parents and other LGBT parents. I recently saw a short video titled “Straight Parents Answer Questions that Gay Parents Always Get Asked” that is not only hilarious but perfectly illustrates the absurdity of the situations gay parents are constantly forced to navigate.\(^{40}\)

**Assuming Gay Pathology or Abnormality**

\(^{17}\) The seventh category, the assumption of gay pathology/abnormality, is one that really angers me in a way that very few other things do. For approximately thirty years, gay men have been banned by the FDA from giving blood. This fact has enraged me more and more over the years, and it impacts my life directly. I have a relatively rare blood type, and I sometimes think about people like me, especially children, who may need blood and find that their blood type is difficult to find. People like me should give blood, and we should also be encouraged to give blood. Yet I have been prevented from doing so for thirty years in spite of my HIV negative status, in spite of whether or not I was or am sexually active, in spite of the advancement of HIV detection and testing methods, and in spite of the subjective nature of

\(^{38}\) Although I do love dance clubs of all types, the reality of middle age has taken its toll, and sadly I have no idea where most gay clubs are, even in my current hometown of Boston.

\(^{39}\) In fact, the opposite is true in my case. To illustrate my point: a very long time ago my father once asked me, in a sincere desire to know and to learn, why I had to be so obviously gay? My reply was that I would be a failure as a gay man if no one knew I was gay. What would be the point?

\(^{40}\) Alex Temblador, *Straight Parents Answer Questions That Gay Parents Always Get Asked*, HUFFINGTON POST (Jan. 30, 2016, 8:07 AM), http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/straight-parents-gay-questions_us_56ab9c67e4b0010e80e9d1e1 [https://perma.cc/NL5A-5SU7].
the term “gay.” It really makes no rational or scientific sense to me. It may have at one time in history, but it certainly does not now.

¶18 Astonishingly, in 2015, the FDA announced that it would be lifting the so-called gay blood ban by changing its recommendations. When I heard this news I was elated, and I felt vindicated, but only briefly. The FDA did change its recommendation, but it now recommends that men who have sex with men be prevented from giving blood for twelve months after sexual contact with another man. Gay men, or any men for that matter, who have had sex with other men in the past year continue to be ineligible to give blood. The message to me seems clear. You can be straight or you can be celibate, but you cannot be gay and give blood because gay blood is tainted. This message reinforces stereotypes and misconceptions about pathology, it legitimizes irrational fears about LGBT people that fuel violence, it ignores good science, and it just does not make good sense from the public health perspective of maximizing reserves of usable blood. “Donations [of blood] should be considered on an individual basis . . . as some gay men—like some heterosexual men and women—are at far greater risk of H.I.V. infection than others.”

Solutions

¶19 So now that I’ve described a form of discrimination that is usually unintentional, occurs in many contexts, and has a negative impact on the recipient, how do we prevent microaggressions from occurring? There is no panacea here, but I can offer a few suggestions for both individual and organizations, particularly related to LGBT microaggressions. The first, which you are already participating in if you’ve read this far, is to learn more about microaggressions. Having a deeper understanding of microaggressions, including what constitutes a microaggression, makes you less likely to commit one. Second, do not make assumptions about anyone’s race, sexual orientation, or gender identity. This seems like an easy thing to do, but often we ascribe a gender or a race to students, patrons, colleagues, and others unconsciously and without giving it any real thought. When we say things like “How may I help you, sir?” or we refer to someone we don’t know using gender pronouns such as “he” or “she,” we’ve made our uninformed presumptions. Granted, it’s hard to use gender-neutral language all of the time, but by removing gender from our conversations (unless someone has self-identified with a gender), we may avoid inadvertently calling someone by a pronoun that the person doesn’t identify with.

¶20 Organizations can also take steps to ensure their environments are built so that microaggressions are less likely to occur. One suggestion is that “[o]rganizations should review their stated policies in light of the vision, mission, and values

43. Assumptions made about race are more complex, and I am not advocating eliminating race from our conversations.
of the organization to ensure there is no disconnect, as inconsistencies may send confusing messages to employees.”

For instance, if your organization has a policy that protects people from harassment on the basis of sexual orientation but does not include LGBT topics in the sexual harassment training, a mixed message is sent to employees. Relatedly, if your organization has a policy that protects people from racial discrimination but does not include race as a topic in employee antidiscrimination or other employee training, another mixed message is being sent. Providing training to employees related to race, sexual orientation, and gender identity can only be helpful. As an example, studies have shown that when employees receive training about gender transitions, sensitivity and understanding is increased toward transgender employees. Finally, if there are rules or policies in place that would prevent a microaggression from occurring, make sure everyone within the organization has a clear understanding of what the policy is and how it is enforced. For instance, if employees can change their names to align with their gender, all offices (i.e., human resources and technology services) should be informed of how to process the change so the individuals don’t have to repeatedly explain themselves.

Conclusion

¶21 The point of this essay is not to make people too nervous to talk to their colleagues or make us all afraid that we’re constantly offending the people around us. Rather, it is to make us aware that even though we’ve come a long way since the civil rights movement in the 1960s and blatant discrimination occurs less often, subtle forms of discrimination occur every day. As librarians, if we collectively address microaggressions through our own actions, our libraries and our greater organizations will not only be more welcoming to colleagues, but to students and other patrons as well.

44. Galupo & Resnick, supra note 9.

45. Melanie E. Brewster et al., Voices from Beyond: A Thematic Context Analysis of Transgender Employees’ Workplace Experiences, 1 PSYCHOL. SEXUAL ORIENTATION & GENDER DIVERSITY 159, 164 (2014).