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**Consequences of the Ambiguous Insult: A Review of Literature on Gender, Race, and
LGBTQ-Based Microaggressions**

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Abstract

For over thirty years, microaggressions have been studied for their weight on members of groups like ethnic and racial minorities, women and members of the LGBTQ community.

Microaggressions are the routine, derogatory interactions like slights gestures, snubs or minor insults. Microaggressions yield physical and psychological distress to victims and communicate to marginalized groups the biases and prejudices against them harbored by majority group members. This taxonomy divides the experiences of microaggressions into the categories of gender, racial and LGBTQ-based sectors, as well as the subcategories that are relevant to the experiences of the members when faced with microaggressions.

Keywords: microaggressions; sexism; racism; LGBTQ; minority groups; discrimination

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Microaggressions are defined as “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” (Sue, 2010, p. 1). Microaggressions have been explored across a wide variety of identities, including racial and ethnic minorities, members of the LGBTQ community, gender minorities, those with disabilities, and mental health consumers. Nadal, et. al (2014) found a negative correlation between victims of racial microaggression and self-esteem in undergraduate students. Seelman, Woodford, and Nicolazzo (2017) found that the presence of microaggressions were associated with lower self-esteem, increased stress and increased anxiety among LGBTQ students.

Sue (2010) hypothesizes that microaggressions are manifestations of societal perceptions of marginalized groups, acting as virtual reflections of hate and prejudice. Wells (2013) compares aspects of microaggressions to specific aspects of assault. While perpetrators of microaggressions usually lack intent to wound the victim, an important aspect an assault, victims do experience the same feelings of vulnerability, embarrassment, fear, stress, and emotional harm. Microaggressions have been reported in the classroom, at work, and even at the hands of friends and family members.

Berk’s (2017) article serves as a meta-analysis of evidence past research has provided for impacts of microaggressions, focusing on the impact of microaggressions in the academic workplace, including feelings of isolation, decreased productivity and problem solving, promotion of physical and mental health issues (Alexander & Moore, 2007; (Salvatore &

Shelton, 2007; Wong, et. al 2014). Furthermore, microaggressions contribute to a polarizing and hostile college campus (Caplan & Ford, 2014). Many studies have explored microaggressions in relation to race, gender, and sexual orientation and the impact on mental health.

Defining Microaggressions

Microaggressions can often be perceived as being so insignificant or subjective that they become disregarded as innocent or harmless. However, research has shown that repetitive exposure to microaggression has serious ramifications on the victims. The term microaggressions was first coined by psychiatrist Dr. Chester Pierce in 1970. Dr. Pierce created the term to describe the casual, everyday degradation of African Americans by non-African Americans. He compared microaggressions to macroaggressions, which he characterized as extreme or overt forms of discrimination, such as lynching (Pierce, 1970).

In addition to racial microaggressions, previous research has revealed other marginalized groups that experience microaggressions including gender, members of the LGBTQ community, and those who live with disabilities. Sue (2010) categorized microaggressions into three distinct categories: Microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are deliberate, discriminatory actions or words that are intended to directly harm the victim, such as using a racial slur.

Microinsults are slight snubs, gestures or verbal slights, that are less overt than microassaults. For example, a majority member asking a member of an ethnic or racial minority “But where are you actually from?” is an example of a microinsult. A microinvalidation serves to ignore or invalidate the psychological reality of marginalized groups; for example, a member of a dominant group stating that racism or sexism does not exist simply because he or she has not

experienced it. Sue (2010) states that microaggressions seek to affirm the stereotypic ideologies of marginalized groups created by the majority group. They also function as means to establish the majority as the model for normality.

Gender-Based Microaggressions

Modern society has started to shift its expression of sexism from overt sexism into microaggressions. In a study of graduate students enrolled in astronomy and physics programs, female students reported less expressions of overt expressions, but almost all participants cited subtle expressions of sexism in the form of microaggressions. Examples of gender-based microaggressions include catcalling, sexist slurs, and determining gender roles as “women’s work.” Gender-based microaggressions occur in a variety of settings, and when they occur in the workplace or in academia, they can prove to be detrimental to the victim’s performance (Basford, 2014). Subtler means of discrimination allow certain prejudices to persevere in an institution where the veil that once protected perpetrators of more overt discrimination and harassment has been perforated with movements like the Me-Too movement.

Race-Based Microaggressions

Like sexism, overt racism has covered behind aversive racism. Aversive racism is a theory proposed by Dovidio and Gaertner in 1986 which is a shrouded form of racism characterized by avoidance of interactions with members of racial or ethnic minorities and changing behavior when interaction does occur. Nadal (2011) created the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scales, in which they found participants of their study cited six categories of race-based microaggressions. These include assumptions of inferiority, second-class citizen and assumptions of criminality, microinvalidations, exoticization or assumptions of similarity,

environmental microaggressions, and workplace and school microaggressions. Williams, Printz, and DeLapp's (2018) study found that racial discrimination can contribute to the traumatization of African Americans, whom have the highest rate of post-traumatic stress disorder and reportedly experience more racism than any other ethnic or racial minority group. Discrimination based on race also has the power to alter the cognitive functioning of the victim, especially if the perpetrator is a member of a different ethnic or racial group (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007).

Sexual Orientation-Based Microaggressions

Research has shown evidence of disproportionate rates of mental health disorder attributed to stressors associated with minority status and subsequent discrimination (Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014). Nadal and colleagues (2011) have classified eight categories of sexual orientation-based microaggressions. They include use of heterosexist language and transphobic terminology, endorsement of heteronormative or gender normative culture or behaviors, assumption of universal LGBTQ experience, exoticization, discomfort and disapproval of LGBTQ experience, denial of societal heterosexism or transphobia, assumption of sexual pathology or abnormality and denial of individual heterosexism or transphobia. Nadal and colleagues (2011) characterized three types of reactions to microaggressions: behavioral reactions (being passive or confrontational), cognitive reactions (conforming, and thus feeling resilient) and emotional reactions (the various feelings victims have post-microaggressions).

Conclusion

Microaggressions have long term ramifications on the victims. Higher occurrences of microaggressions were associated with greater internalizing problems, health risk behaviors and self-reported stress (Lui & Quezada, 2019). As manifestations of social stereotypes, it is

important to have initiatives in place to educate the public on the ramifications of microaggressions and to ameliorate the effects of these ramifications, if possible. Programs that target students at all levels could be beneficial, as microaggressions that have been experienced in academia negatively impact student performance (Caplan & Ford, 2014). For example, at the undergraduate level, intercepting these toxic ideologies before graduation could gradually unburden the workforce and universities of microaggressions, thus creating an environment for people of all backgrounds to perform to their greatest ability. Adapting such programs for those in the workplace could aid in educating those who did not go to college or whose schools did not have such programs. Future studies could further explore specific health symptoms that microaggressions could be positively correlated with as well as analyze the perspectives of perpetrators and bystanders of microaggressions.

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