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Marlana R. Smith
Tennessee Technological University, mrsmith43@tntech.edu

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Gender Microaggressions: Experiences from a Doctoral Student

Marlana R. Smith, Tennessee Tech University

According to Sue (2010), “Microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership” (p. 24). Have you ever sensed that an entire room of people thought less of your abilities and character because of your group membership? I have. Most of the time society teaches us that these feelings are our own fault. We are simply labelled as paranoid or insecure. This is the main reason that microaggressions go unaddressed. Whether covert or overt, microaggressions often lower the self-esteem of their targets (Sue, 2010). This has been my experience with the impacts of microaggressions.

When I was 23, I began working for a public university. After a few months, I decided to apply for admission to a doctoral program at the university. To my surprise, I was accepted despite my immense feelings of inadequacy. I was thrilled beyond measure to be accepted into such an exciting graduate program. I was concerned that my young age would be somewhat of an issue when trying to relate to my peers who were predominantly older than me. I was wrong. Age was not a problem at all. My experience in the program was going so well that I decided to fully immerse myself in the program. I had the opportunity to become a research graduate assistant. This was so exciting because it meant I could focus on my academic goals. Little did I know that a different and unexpected issue would arise with my peers.

On my first day as a full-time student and research graduate assistant, I walked into my new office space. I was thrilled to have a space on campus where I belonged and where I could work from each day. I

was so thrilled that I did not mind how small it was or that I would be sharing the space with other graduate assistants. The enthusiasm faded about as quickly as my life appeared to be moving. Though I did not care, my officemates were all male. Based on my past experiences, I did not find it unusual to be the only female in some graduate school settings. It was in that first meeting that I realized my peers were not as comfortable with my presence in the office as I was. “They must not have room for you anywhere else,” one of my peers asserted. This statement was repeated two more times before I left the office for the day. My heart was pounding, and no words left my mouth in defense. I was so upset with myself. Why was I feeling so terrible, and why had I not said anything to defend myself? Now I not only felt worthless to the office, but also to myself. I could not even advocate for myself in that moment when I needed it most. Eventually it occurred to me that with one statement my security and excitement was torn away from me. I also realized that I had not said anything because I worried it was true. Maybe these men were right, and there was no room for me in this program.

As time progressed, I decided to withdraw into myself to avoid unwanted encounters. I ignored and avoided uncomfortable conversations about women, relationships, the men’s restroom, and personal achievements. I began to avoid conversations altogether. Words began to transition into actions of exclusion. I was excluded from invitations to join my peers in work and social activities. To top it off, I was excluded from the mutual respect in my office. My desk was frequently used as communal or *extra* space for my peers to store their belongings, coffee, and documents without my permission. After two weeks of deciding how I would stand up for myself, I finally said something. I expressed that it was not acceptable to treat

my space with disregard, and I expressed that my space and place mattered. To my dismay, asserting my feelings became a joke. Now I was *sassy* and *aggressive*. My fellow graduate assistants laughed at me. Over time, I began to come into the office less and less. I was holding myself back and missing out. Then something unprecedented happened. A worldwide pandemic. Everyone went remote and quarantined for four months. For four months, I felt relief over the geography of my situation. I could avoid the microaggressions of my peers without feeling ashamed over my anxiety. I could simply blame my absence on the pandemic. This was logical, but false.

When I began to return to campus once a week, I learned that my peers had not let COVID19 stop them from entering the shared space regularly. I also learned that my peers did not believe in the virus or its consequences at all. My officemates would often *forget* their required masks or emphasize their overall lack of concern over the virus. My heightened concern and constant precautionary measures were worsening my issues in the office by painting a scarlet letter on my chest. Suddenly, it became clear that there was nothing I could do to conform to be accepted. Even believing in science somehow made me the weakest and most ostracized member of my office. The truth is that none of this backlash was due to my beliefs or choices. If I had been a male, my beliefs and choices might have been fairly heard and respected. None of this had to do with beliefs or actions. It had to do with me.

In the months since my return to my shared workspace, I've had comments made about my accomplishments, abilities, and attire. "Why would they choose you?" "Why did he ask you to be a part of that project?" These are just some of the remarks I heard after discussing projects I was asked to join or accomplishments I had achieved in my

absence. Things really began to escalate when my attire somehow became topic of conversation. Never once did I hear my peers discuss each other's attire or the clothes they chose to wear. I never heard them ask each other why they looked nice that day versus the day before. Why was it acceptable to ask me about my clothing choices and appearance? Apparently, it was acceptable because I am a female.

The weeks kept coming. The comments never stopped. The guilt and feelings of inadequacy never ended. Many people I have discussed my experiences with simply did not believe me. I have been told that I am being dramatic and reading too much into the situation. Perhaps I am. However, maybe I'm not. Perhaps, I am right on the money and these responses to my experiences are exactly the reason most members of minority groups stop discussing, reporting, and rebuking these microaggressions. As a researcher by nature, I needed to know. Am I making this up in my head, or is this really happening? When describing gender microaggressions, Sue (2010) says, "Blatant, unfair, and unequal treatment toward women can be manifested in sexual harassment, physical abuse, discriminatory hiring practices, or in women being subjected to a hostile, pre-dominantly male work environment" (p. 11). This initial definition definitely confirmed my assertion that these microaggressions were occurring. However, I was not physically abused, sexually harassed, or discriminated against in the hiring process, so maybe I was just being overly dramatic.

This thought is exactly part of the problem. My self-blame and dismissal of my own feelings were the worst part of this entire experience. These thoughts were proof that the microaggressions were working. These comments and expressions were giving me proof that I was unworthy and did not belong. If others believe my

work has no value, then why should I believe the opposite? Who am I to believe I belong and have worth? I did not even believe I should apply for, let alone be accepted into, this doctoral program in the first place. How could I, a now 24-year-old female, have anything of value or worth to contribute to this department full of experienced and accredited research assistants and faculty? Behind all of the doubt, I have the answers to these questions. I am a 4.0 student. I am an educator with rich experiences and perspectives. I am young and accomplished. I am a female. I am an excited and eager researcher. I have my own unique and diverse perspectives and experiences that shape my schema and research approach. I am as worthy as everyone else in my office. I am not worthy because my peers told me I am, and I am not

worthy because I am fully accepted and supported by my peers. However, I am worthy because *I* say I am. I have to be strong and refuse to allow my experiences to continue to convince me I am unworthy. These experiences have helped me realize that no one else can assign or undermine my worth. As exemplified in my story, I simply have to believe in myself. The weeks keep coming. The comments have not stopped. In all honesty, the guilt and feelings of inadequacy have not stopped either, but they are now followed by perseverance and belief in myself and my goals.

References

Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life: Sex, gender, and sexual orientation*. Wiley.