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## Microaggressions in Academia: One Black Woman's Story

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## Microaggressions in Academia: One Black Woman's Story

### Cover Page Footnote

4.15.2021- Final revisions (based off JMA Copy Editor) made and highlighted in red.

## **My Story: A Subtle but Personal Attack**

*Victoria Carter Jones, Educational Consultant*

As a professional young Black woman in higher education, I have numerous stories and experiences with microaggressions. When I was a graduate assistant at an R1 research institution, I quickly noticed that hardly anyone looked like me. Since my school was predominantly White, it was not shocking that I was the only Black American student (in my department at the time) to receive a graduate assistantship. I will never forget the day I decided to wear a long, African-print skirt. It was bold and beautiful, extremely colorful, and reminded me of several countries I traveled to in Africa while on study abroad trips. Now, on a regular day (outside of work), wearing African attire was not out the norm. However, I didn't realize the attention my skirt would draw on campus until I walked to my office building. Some people gave a double glance, others smiled at me and complimented my skirt, while some gave me strange looks. I wondered about the attention, but stares did not bother me. Then, I realized I had forgotten about a meeting I had with one of the professors. In the past, she always had random questions about Black people, so I knew my attire would definitely not go unnoticed. I wasn't embarrassed, but I knew, with this particular professor, it might be another annoying history lesson I would have to discuss with her regarding my clothes.

When I knocked on her door, before I could say hello, I became startled by the frown on her face. She didn't look upset or offended, simply curious and confused. I gave my usual greeting, and she replied, "Oh my, you look beautiful!" She spoke as if she was surprised. "I didn't know you were African, that explains a lot." I smiled and tried not to show my confusion. We had

known each other for more than three years; surely, she knew I was Black American, right? I tried to change the subject by casually laughing, and said, "You are so funny, you know I am not African. So, how are you doing?"

Persistent, she kept on and said, "But your clothes, I've never seen you in such beautiful, fancy clothes. What is the special occasion?" I told her there was no special occasion, that I had always dressed like this, but apparently, she had never paid attention. She continued, "Let me see, it's Black history month, isn't it? That makes sense now, why you would wear something unprofessional like that to work, but it's so beautiful! What message are you trying to get across?" She looked at me puzzled, determined to guess correctly. I told her unless Black history month had changed from February to April, without me noticing, that wasn't why I was wearing African attire. I could tell that she wouldn't stop asking me questions until she was confident of the "hidden agenda" behind my choice of clothes that day.

So, I finally told her that I had an engagement to go to after work, and some people would be wearing their African attire. Was I really going to an engagement that day? Yes, but we could wear anything we wanted to the function. It was not until after our meeting that I realized, with all of her assumptions and statements, she was telling me that my identity required an explanation. At times, even in my choice of attire, I had to share my intentions with White people, even those with whom I had a relationship. Then, if they questioned my attire, I would attempt to convince them of who I am as a Black woman. It has been my experience that my work attire musters up unsettled feelings. The majority of the time, with my attire, I am not trying to make a statement; I am simply wearing clothes I believe are appealing.

When I think back on this scenario, I was not angry about this professor asking me questions. However, I was frustrated that (a) she didn't know I was Black American, even though we've had several heart-to-heart meetings about race and culture, (b) she claimed she was an activist and "marched in the Civil Rights Movement" for justice and peace, yet she was oblivious that Black History Month was in February; and (c) I am positive she was unaware that her assumptions and ignorance were offensive to me. In past conversations, she had always been quick to give reasons why she was not a racist, but I truly believe she was oblivious to her own prejudice and ignorance. Her curiosity made me feel as if I never dressed nice at work until I was in African attire; that she was not really listening to me when we had (what I thought were) breakthrough conversations, and that she assumed I had to be African since I attended one of the best R1 research institutions in the country. After all, she did say, when she thought I was African, that it "explains a lot," as if I should not be here if I was really just a regular Black American.

This personal experience is an example of how microaggressions (even ones that are intended as a compliment or innocent to some people) are incredibly hurtful. Microaggressions, defined as negative unintentional or intentional statements and/or actions toward a member or members of historically underrepresented groups (Sue, 2010), are extremely damaging. When people make assumptions, even when they are trying to be kind, or simply curious, they still do damage because the underlining message is, "I know more than you" or "you can't possibly know as much as me and you certainly don't know more than me." All of these experiences are determined by microaggressions and racial assumptions about who is deserving and who is worthy. When White people in positions of power

make these kinds of assumptions, it determines who gets a seat at the table, or a leadership position, who gets the job, or tenure, who gets a promotion, who gets selected for the committee, and overall, who wins the prize. Overwhelmingly, when these individuals get to be the ones who make that choice, everybody else loses.

### **Another Story: A Professional Opportunity Stripped**

As an instructor in higher education, I know all about the challenges that marginalized people face on a regular basis. Bell (1992) said it best when he explained that racism is entrenched in the DNA of our American culture and society. So, I guess I should not have been surprised when a senior professor (I believe intentionally) used her microaggressive assumptions so she did not have to work with me on a writing project. I remember, once again, preparing for a meeting with another professor to discuss a writing project that was still in the works, but potentially was an opportunity to get a publication and work with a senior professor that had just received a grant. As a new instructor at my institution, I understood the political culture and made a conscious effort to create relationships with people that had access and resources.

When I went to this particular professor's office, she greeted me, and we had small chit chat. I told her I was excited to work with her and had several ideas to contribute to the project that might prove beneficial. But before I could share any of those ideas, she said, "Let me stop you right there. This is the first time we have officially met, face-to-face, so do you mind if I ask you a few questions?" With a smile on my face, I told her, "Sure, what would you like to know?" When she began to talk, she started to ask me what my areas of

interest were and about other projects I had worked on in the past. As I began to tell her my areas of interest, as well as my research agenda, she interrupted me a second time and asked, “So what do you think about plagiarism?” In my mind, I thought, is this a trick question? What does this have to do with anything I am currently talking about?

She continued when I didn’t say anything, but I could tell her facial response was trying to read something, as if to ask: Do you know how to write? Have you ever plagiarized? I began to speak again, about my background and how I would be an asset to the team, when she interrupted me again and said, “As you know, I received a grant and I need help building a team of people that work hard. But more importantly, I need someone that is proficient in math and science and can collect data. Are you good in math and science?” I opened my mouth to answer the question. She replied before I could respond, “You know, you seem great, and appear to be a nice person. However, after meeting you, I’m not sure this project would be suited for someone like you. Why don’t you come back tomorrow, and we can discuss this in greater detail?” Perplexed and shocked at what had just happened, I tried not to think the worst about this senior level professor and returned the next day.

When I knocked on her door, she did not ask me to sit down, and she did not even say hello. Instead, she told me that she did not think I was well suited for this particular project and she needed someone that was good at math and science. As she spoke, all I could think was, when had I ever told her or demonstrate to her that I was not proficient in math or science? We literally had just met the day before, and I had not been able to share anything about myself. In fact, she spoke with another instructor who was from Africa and confirmed that instructor would

be a better fit for the position. I asked how long she had known the other instructor that she selected, and she stated, “Oh, I haven’t met her yet, but I’m positive she will excel in this area because she is African.”

Through an act of discrimination and an ideology of prejudice, this professor attempted to pit a Black American and an African against one another. This mindset creates a situation where both groups fight for access and resources. Her actions implied that I lacked some level of intelligence to complete tasks she required. She then said not to worry because a fellow colleague needed assistance with a grant and was asking around for anyone that could assist. She made clear that she put in a good word for me and told her colleague that I was exactly what she was looking for. I did not bother inquiring about the other professor, but later I learned the “help” she needed was that of an administrative assistant.

After this experience, I was enraged to the point that I had to take a day off work to replenish my mental health. After all, this White woman did not know me or my skill sets, but she assumed that because I was Black American, I was not proficient in math or science. Then she had the audacity to tell another professor that I would be a perfect administrative assistant. What made it even worse was that she assumed the African woman would be an expert in math and science before she met her. Microaggressions, loaded with assumptions like this, hurt people. Even if someone honestly believes they are looking out for someone’s best interests, it still does harm. Maybe this professor thought she was doing me a favor, but I truly believe she knew everything she was saying and was making a firm statement about who she would and would not work with on her grant.

## Conclusion

Too often, I find myself getting enraged when I experience microaggressions in academia. I am a Black American woman with a PhD in Educational Administration, and I know my experiences, knowledge, and skill sets are valuable. However, I have concluded that racism is so prevalent and deeply rooted in our society that my skills, worth, and what I can contribute will always be questioned. I believe this stems from a prejudicial mindset established within the foundation of our country. Further, based on my experience, I have concluded that we live in a society in which those in power prejudice based on race, rather than

qualifications. This is the case in a high percentage of instances in higher education, and undoubtably Black Americans are experiencing these types of interactions as a norm. Yet, because I am new to the profession, it is my hope that more positive encounters lie ahead.

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