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Nina M. Ellis-Hervey
Stephen F Austin State University, ellishernm@sfasu.edu

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**Déjà vu, or the Repetitive Nature of
Microaggressions: An Account of Two
Life-Changing Experiences,
10 Years Apart**

*Nina M. Ellis-Hervey,
Stephen F. Austin State University*

Growing up in the hearts of St. Louis, Missouri and Memphis, Tennessee taught me not only grit, but swift intellect, ingenuity, courage, wit, and softness to balance it all. According to Duckworth (2016), grit is often described as passion and perseverance for very long-term goals, while encompassing courage, conscientiousness, perseverance, resilience, and passion. Embodying such characteristics has supported me in thriving in various conditions and situations. Grit further assisted in my overcoming many obstacles while remaining resilient, open-minded, and inquisitive. At various points in my education, more specifically my time in undergraduate and graduate school, and further in my pursuit of tenure as a young professor, I was met with overt and covert exposures to microaggressions of many kinds that could have changed the course of my life.

The term microaggression wasn't always very clear to me. I was quite ignorant to it being a term that encompasses many variations, especially prior to being aware that I had experienced them. According to Sue et al. (2007), microaggressions are subtle behaviors that are verbal or non-verbal, conscious or unconscious, directed at a member of a marginalized group, and have a derogatory, harmful effect. Microaggressions are also quite harmful, as experiencing higher levels of microaggressions is linked to negatively impacted mental health, including symptoms

of anxiety and depression. Sue et al. (2007) also organized microaggressions into three categories: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are more overt; the person acts intentionally and knows their behavior might be hurtful. Microinsults are more subtle and are characterized by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity. Microinvalidations are comments and behaviors that exclude or negate the experiences, including their thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality, of marginalized group members.

As an adopted child of a single mother who was raised in the South, one of 12 children, and earned her degree only a few years before I earned my own, my mother made it a point to teach me that as an African American girl, the world wouldn't always treat me fairly, kindly, or like "the flower I am." Of course, I wouldn't understand what she meant until I was no longer within the close grips of her protective nature and immediate guidance. At the age of 17, I packed my bags, and headed for what I thought was freedom. I went 4.5 hours down the highway and left my city for my highly ranked, midwestern university, where there were 6,000 students, of which only 200 were Black and only a part of that population identified as African American. I just knew this would be the glorious educational experience I had been introduced to in all the movies. I expected nothing but open minds, great discourse, and comradery. Not only did the truth of what would be learned begin in the classroom, but the life lessons unfolded as well. Microaggressions of all kinds were included in the plans.

After years of school (10 to be exact) and experiencing what it was like to be "the

only one (African American)” in many of my courses, practicum experiences, and even pre-doctoral internship, I thought I was very ready for the “working world.” My experiences had been vast; I had lived in many states to pursue my education, including Missouri, Oklahoma, and Illinois. I thought that surely my move to a great regional university would be full of welcoming scholars, students, and intellectuals. While that turned out to be true, much like my transition to my pursuit of higher education, I found that I was thrust—both knowingly and unknowingly—right back into the same learning curve of instances of microaggressions of many kinds.

The following discussion recounts two very uncomfortable situations where I was met with microaggressions. One includes a difficult exchange with a fellow classmate while achieving my undergraduate education. The other situation was my exchange with a senior professor during my early years as an educator and psychologist. While both experiences were difficult for me, one prepared me for the other; still, both were quite hurtful and frankly, shocking.

Two Lessons in Microaggressions

Experience 1: The Student Becomes the Teacher

My first semester in undergraduate school was quite difficult, but one course that made it easier, the very course I looked forward to twice a week, was Public Speaking. Though the course was at the most ungodly hour of 7:30 a.m., I enjoyed the professor who was a bubbly, engaging, kind, excited White woman who did not contribute to my feeling that I stood out like a sore thumb. In a class of 20 plus, where I

was the only African American, I dare say I felt accepted and a part of the “college crew.”

I learned so much over our weeks in the class, did well on the tests, connected with some fellow freshmen and sophomores, used many valuable tools in my speeches, and felt I grew from constructive feedback that semester. Then the time came for everyone to give final persuasive-style speeches. In true encouraging and free form, the professor allowed the topics to be more of a surprise as she pre-screened all of our topics except for this final speech.

I was so excited, not just for my own speech, but also to hear what my “colleagues” had come up with, because I knew all were going out with a bang! I was right, but the bang was not what I expected. Charles (a pseudonym) took the podium. Charles was an early 20s, White male business major, charmer and proud fraternity member who always seemed to take the class seriously. He didn't hesitate to jump right into his speech, and I couldn't believe what I was hearing. He had prepared a speech about the “Unfairness of Affirmative Action.” I remember him referencing old statistics, using the word *Negro* many times, speaking about the average of 14–16 seats at 100 medical and other professional schools being guaranteed to people of color, and many times he looked directly at me.

I didn't know whether to feel hurt, ashamed, embarrassed, or unwanted. Maybe I felt all of the above. All I know is the feeling made me ill; right there, in my seat, my heart dropped. I wanted to cry. I did, with very silent tears. All the years of wanting to go college, becoming what I wanted, and remembering “education was the way” didn't include these lessons. At this point, I was over it. I felt numb sitting there, and when he concluded and the class gave

him some reluctant claps, I debated on whether or not I should speak up. Involuntarily, at least that's what I chose to believe, my hand went up. The other students were already looking at me, and the professor happily called on me. In my heart, I believe she knew this would be a teachable moment.

I questioned Charles about his speech. I asked where he found his statistics and how he came to these conclusions. Little did he know, in high school I not only was exposed to much African American history and literature, functions, statistics, and discrete mathematics, but I specifically knew about affirmative action and that it was not originally created for just African Americans. I also made it clear that he mentioned these 14 seats in professional schools guaranteed to the Negro, when in all actuality it was for all people of color and White women.

Meanwhile the other 86 were “open to all” and often times did not reflect those with the same racial background I have. While his speech seemed to target the Negro, I pointed out that instead of being persuasive, in many ways it felt insulting, angry, and disapproving of specifically African Americans. Again, with those 86 seats, I also added that myself and many of my ancestors had been instructed to try harder, so perhaps the same could be applied for the majority, especially since the majority, whether they knew it or not, had privileges that those like myself did not. I told him I was sorry that he felt such a way, but I was not surprised, and I was more hurt that he hadn't thought to be empathetic and careful with the subject.

The room was so quiet after I spoke. The silence was broken by the professor, who thanked me for my words and knowledge and even started a slow clap for

me, which led to louder and happier claps from my classmates. Though I felt hurt, I felt empowered. I realized that my journey in education would be long, and that wouldn't be the last time I would encounter such microaggressions, even explicitly. Charles apologized, and even attempted to make some excuses for his speech. I spoke with him, and I told him I wouldn't allow him to make himself into a victim, that if he wanted to be my friendly associate, he would need to be honest about the situation. That was one of the last times I spoke with him. In reflection, I realized this could have been mistaken for a microinsult, but microassault appears to be more fitting.

Experience 2: Let It Be

Exactly 10 years after my freshman year in college I was in my first year as an Assistant Professor, and I was so excited about everything. I was extra early to every meeting, learned nearly everyone's names and made some friends. This felt so familiar to me, specifically because this was much like my very first introduction to the college campus when I was a student. Again, I was the new kid on the block, motivated and ready to work.

I was assigned to one of my first college committees, and I was excited to have input, bring a fresh perspective, and offer assistance where I could. This committee started some discussions about race relations, what was occurring in the world and how that translated to campus. When I was asked about my educational journey, if I had many classmates of various racial and cultural backgrounds, I was honest and stated that I was often the only person of color and, more specifically, the only African American woman. Ironically, the same was true of the committee.

I further expressed myself and shared that at times I felt isolated, misunderstood, unsupported and not included. Most on the committee seemed to understand how it might feel to be the very different person in a group or cohort of students year after year. Then it began. What I refer to as the “Oppression Olympics,” or when a person of the majority (in this case a White woman), sometimes knowingly or unknowingly, shares a story that could be somewhat like the earlier story, to show they can relate or that it has happened to them, instead of simply being empathetic and realizing that the situation will always be quite different.

This person began telling me that I was not the only one who had been through this, even though I never said I was the only one. She also told me that she and her sister had gone to elementary and middle schools with all Latino children. She said she and her sister were treated badly and didn't feel part of the school. While I would never invalidate her experience, I knew that I needed to speak up and let her know that I wasn't in competition for who had the most oppressed experience. I was quite nervous because she was a senior professor, and I didn't want to be disrespectful. However, I realized educating with kindness and fact might help change the direction of the conversation and create healthy discourse.

After minutes of listening to the conversation, I spoke up and stated that while she and I were in what seemed to be similar situations, the dynamics were very different. As a Black woman, my status is not usually considered to be at the top. However, socially, White women are considered second only to White men in a social hierarchy. This woman and her sister would still seemingly have privilege in a school where they were the only White

women, in comparison to me as an only Black woman. To this, she responded: “I feel it's still very much the same.”

After hearing this, I was a little confused, and I knew I was not the only one. I did not argue and allowed her to have her stance, while I had my own. I realized she seemed a little agitated that I told my story and wanted to ensure I knew that she had experienced the same situation and knew how it felt, even with the explanation of the differences. This appeared to be a microinvalidation, whether knowingly or unknowingly. However, I felt I was prepared to and allowed space for a response, and I realized that with situations that are more difficult to discuss, perception and insights can be shared without argument as to who is right or wrong.

Summary and Conclusion

While the mentioned experiences are more common than some would like to imagine, it is possible for them to become teachable moments. While some of the key stakeholders in these stories didn't seem to understand, nor did they seem to want to show any empathy, there were still some very major victories. I learned early that some allies are adamant about protecting the voice that many of us are afraid to use. They will support our cause and make some space for those who don't always feel heard to have an opportunity. Further, I learned that all stories can be respected, and that individuals, if willing to listen, can truly foster a safe space for not only sharing but making a change by supporting awareness. Finally, when it comes to microaggressions, many times they repeat themselves, and in those situations, educators can share, correct kindly, and choose to impart knowledge.

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