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Microaggressions: Intervening in three acts

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ABSTRACT

The deleterious effects of microaggressions on members of marginalized groups are well documented. Less clear are the practice skills needed to intervene when microaggressions take place, particularly in ways that maintain strong relationships with students, colleagues, and/or clients. Furthermore, too often discussions of responses to microaggressions are restricted to the position of bystander, ignoring the ways that human service providers may also perpetrate or be targets of injustice. Using vignettes from our practice experience, we provide guiding principles for constructive microaggression intervention from three key social locations: perpetrator, witness, and target.

KEYWORDS

Community practice;
practice areas/fields; racial
justice; social work
education and training

Robin is in town for a visit. We meet for dinner, then walk to the local ice cream shop. The sign at the entrance proudly lists the shops' signature flavor: Trailer Trash. It stops Robin cold. As I look at my friend, who has shared and written openly about the physical and psychological pain of being raised without enough money for food, dental care, and shoes that fit, she says, "Huh. So that's what they think poor people are – human garbage."

From an ice cream shop to an master of social work (MSW) classroom, microaggressions occur everywhere, all the time. These seemingly small, ostensibly singular acts of oppression permeate the lives of people of color and other marginalized groups. Ample testimony and empirical research make evident the ways that microaggressions compile and compound to have deleterious physical and mental health effects and to create hostile climates for members of oppressed groups (Sue et al., 2007). In an era when educators and employers alike are increasingly concerned with recruiting and retaining a diverse cohort and creating equitable conditions within our schools, communities, and institutions, it is widely recognized that human service professionals must be able to recognize microaggressions (Constantine, 2007; Sue et al., 2007). Less clear are the practice skills needed to intervene in these settings, particularly in ways that maintain strong relationships with students, colleagues, and/or clients. Even as our collective analysis of the causes and consequences of systemic inequalities

becomes more complex, many people remain dissatisfied with their capacity to interrupt oppression in their everyday lives. In seeking to help answer that need, we also hope to complicate the question.

In our experience as educators and practitioners, we (Amie and Robin) often witness microaggressions and must determine if, when, and how to respond effectively. As white people occupying these same roles, we also *perpetuate* microaggressions, which require a different set of skills related to critical reflexivity, accountability, and restorative action. Further, as women, a person raised poor (Robin) and a Jewish person (Amie), we are both at times *targets* of microaggressions. In these moments, we depend on yet another set of practices related to centering, discernment, and reclaiming voice. In the pages that follow, we present considerations for responding to microaggressions in three acts, addressing these three distinct social positions. In each case we introduce a vignette, drawn from our practice experience of being witness to, perpetrating and being the target of microaggression. We then offer core principles for responding in each type of scenario. Intentionally broad, these principles serve to illuminate possibilities rather than proscribe specific responses. We then return to the vignette for each act, exploring how we applied these principles in a single, highly contextual, moment. Though the three vignettes are presented as singular examples, they are not anomalies. We selected stories that embody patterns we have experienced repeatedly working in diverse regions and practice contexts in the United States. Through the following dialectic process – moving between depth and breadth, between abstract and concrete – we hope to nuance human services professionals' understanding of our responsibilities to students, clients, one another and ourselves in the face of microaggressions.

Act 1: Witness

My colleague Mary, an African American woman, and I are co-leading an anti-racism workshop for a mixed-race group. Mary is leading the section on internalized racial oppression. She prefaces by noting that it is a very sensitive to discuss internalized racism in the presence of white people, and asks the white participants to just listen. As she begins sharing some of the ways that people of color are impacted by racism, a white woman repeatedly interrupts to question her. Finally, in response to an example Mary provides of how people of color experience internalized racism, the white woman states, "I think it's more complex than that."

These are familiar moments for most of us. We are sitting in a meeting, attending a conference, or teaching a class and somebody says something we find deeply problematic. We feel compelled to respond in some way, but are not sure what we should do. As a witness to microaggressions, there is no one right way to answer the questions of if, when, and how to respond, though there are some principles that may help us to discern our next steps.

Rather than ask what will be gained by intervening, ask what will I lose by not acting

Some people decide whether or not to respond to microaggressions based on their assessment of whether or not their intervention will make a difference. Unfortunately, you cannot fully know in advance the impact of your actions. Given the hopelessness many people feel in the face of systemic oppression, you will likely underestimate your ability to effect positive change. But acting in solidarity is in itself an intervention, even if you do it poorly or do not see immediate results.

Speaking up, and the risk-taking that involves, can be empowering for witnesses to microaggressions. In situations in which you fear there may be repercussions because someone is present who holds more power in the specific context – a supervisor, for example – a different kind of courage is needed: the courage to elevate the decision to take righteous action above the *possibility* of backlash. Ultimately, this is a personal and ethical decision: Do I protect myself and collude with systemic oppression, or do I engage in liberatory practice and accept the risks that may go with it? Most often, all that is at risk is a moment of discomfort (and with practice, even this can dissipate over time). There is much more to lose by not acting: integrity; alignment of your values with your behaviors; the trust of those targeted by the microaggression, passive collusion with oppression and; peace of mind.

Clarify your goals

Discerning how and when to act is often determined by who you want to influence. Do you want to shift the understandings and/or actions of those perpetuating harm? Are you seeking to provide support to, stand in solidarity with, or protect those targeted? Are you concerned with raising the consciousness of and/or mobilizing other bystanders? Depending on who you want to reach, you may determine that immediate action is needed, or that additional time is needed to craft a strategic response. However, the stakes surrounding when to act and who to influence change when people are directly and immediately harmed by a microaggression. In these instances, inaction may signal agreement with the hurtful beliefs and behaviors, and an immediate intervention may be necessary to disrupt this collusion.

Ground your actions in care

Once you have decided if and when to act, you are left with determining how. What exactly do you say? If only we could offer a flow chart of possible responses to microaggressions: *If the perpetrator is your supervisor, then...; if there are members of the target group in the room, then...* but in reality, every situation is

unique and there are a multitude of possible responses. Even the most skillful response can be met with resistance, causing unintended negative consequences; there are no guaranteed right moves. That said, the Social Work Code of Ethics is instructive, requiring us to “treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion,” to promote “socially responsible self-determination,” and enhance other’s “capacity and opportunity to change” (NASW, 2008). In the context of responding to microaggressions, this means that we care not only for those who may be harmed by hurtful comments or actions, but that we care for those who perpetrate harm. To be clear, caring for those who enact microaggressions does not entail excusing harmful behavior, privileging the sensitivities of the oppressors over the pain of the oppressed, or colluding with dominant group fragility (DiAngelo, 2012). To privilege the temporary feelings of discomfort the perpetrator may experience over ethical intervention on behalf of the marginalized is not an act of care, it is an act of collusion. Authentic acts of care serve to support human development by providing opportunities for critical self-reflection and reparation of relationships, even though they are uncomfortable. Indeed, dominant group discomfort – when engendered by interruption of the status quo – is necessary for socially just transformation.

It is often presumed that the most sensitive way to respond when someone perpetuates a microaggression is to “call them in” rather than “call them out.” Calling out is associated with shaming someone into re-evaluating their actions, while calling in is associated with *inviting* someone to reevaluate their actions (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014). Calling in is based on the recognition that people are more likely to change when they do not feel defensive, and thus may be more willing to reevaluate when they are addressed one-on-one rather than publicly via social media or other forms of critique. We contend that the framing of the intervention is often more important than whether the intervention takes place in the public or private sphere. A private conversation is not guaranteed to be more caring than a public one, and a public intervention is not necessarily without care. Further, as discussed above, changing the thinking of the individual perpetrating a microaggression is only one possible goal for the intervention. A public harm often calls for a public response. Whether done privately or publicly, approaching an intervention with compassion increases the likelihood that the intervention may foster growth in the aggressor. Equally important, a compassionate response engenders humility. Recognizing someone else’s microaggression today offers no assurance you will not be perpetuating a microaggression tomorrow. Returning to the vignette that opens Act 1, we provide one example of how we applied these three principles in context.

“I think it’s more complex than that.” *As Mary’s white co-trainer, I was painfully aware that there had been no interruptions or questions during my earlier facilitation. Further, given that Mary had specifically asked white people to just listen, I felt unsettled by the continued questions from this white*

woman. Her behavior invalidated Mary's presentation, conveying that she knew Mary's reality better than Mary herself. In claiming that internalized racial oppression was "more complex" than Mary – who actually experienced it – described, the white participant ultimately reinforced the racist premise that African Americans are not as intelligent as whites.

I did not want to take over and "rescue" Mary by assuming she needed my intervention, as that would risk reinforcing the same problematic dynamics already at play. Yet to sit back as a white woman and leave Mary to deal with this aggression on her own was not acceptable. I decided to check in with Mary. I leaned in and quietly asked her if she would like me to intervene. She said yes. I spoke up, saying, "I would like to pause for a teachable moment here." I then laid out what was racially problematic about the participant's engagement. The room erupted, with half the group defending my intervention and the other half claiming by naming the dynamics in the room I was mistreating the white participant. I quickly checked back in with Mary on next steps, and she suggested that we break the participants into racial affinity groups to diffuse the tension and allow each group to discuss the racial dynamics in the room. Although I wish I could say that the white woman received my intervention well, she did not. She withdrew in anger. However, it was a powerful lesson for the rest of the group. The people of color were reassured that I would not be complicit in Mary's invalidation through silence, and white participants were able to see a white person take a constructive stand in the face of microaggressions while not undermining the leadership of a person of color. While it was anxiety-producing to speak up and to bear the back-lash of white fragility, it was critical for me personally and as a model for other white people to break with white solidarity and step into the risk of conflict in service of racial justice.

Act 2: Perpetrator

I was co-leading a training for a racially diverse group of human service professionals about racial disparities in the child welfare system. In sharing an example of the racism tribal communities endure, I recalled an incident in which white adults and their children hurled the epithet, "praire-n...", at indigenous youth participating in a cultural event. My use of that term – in full – had an impact on the African American people in the room that I did not see or understand. I continued with the workshop; they could not.

Most of us occupy at least one dominant social location, by virtue of our professional status, age, ability, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, or other social identity. We are socialized into these power relations without our choice, and they shape how we understand the world, ourselves, and others. It is inevitable, often despite our best intentions, that where we occupy positions of dominance, we will act in ways that perpetuate oppression.

Look into rather than away from our oppressive patterns

Social workers have a responsibility to attune to our interactions within and across group lines, to notice how we are responding to others and how others respond to us (Taylor, 2013). We can train ourselves to become more aware of our internal frameworks, which include implicit biases and assumptions, as well as our external behaviors – the ways we act from these frameworks. While it is our obligation to be self-reflective, as people socialized into color-blind ideologies and thus trained to *not see* oppression, it is inevitable that we will have blind spots (Bonilla Silva, 2014). Further, because mainstream society teaches us that people who engage in oppressive acts are immoral, we often respond to the suggestion that we have acted in ways that are hurtful with defensiveness and denial. However, because most microaggressions are unaware and unintentional, it is imperative that we openly receive and honestly consider this feedback whenever it is offered. We can assume that racism, sexism, and classism are always operating in every social setting, whether it is visible to us or not. Given this, the question is not, *did oppression occur*, but rather *how is it occurring in this specific context* (DiAngelo, 2016)?

Accountability is a process, not a procedure

There is not a single action one takes to “be accountable” for one’s actions and move on. Rather, accountability requires a long-term commitment to assuming responsibility for the consequences of our actions, regardless of our intentions. We are accountable to those immediately affected as well as those with whom we will have future contact. We are also accountable to ourselves and our profession, and to the alignment of our professed values with our actual behaviors. The process of accountability begins with an initial assessment of the impact of our actions. Results of our microaggressions may include causing others pain, contributing to oppressive messages and representations, damaging group functioning, weakening community trust, tarnishing our credibility, and jeopardizing our personal and professional relationships. It is often essential to seek consultation from someone who can help us process our own feelings (such as confusion, shame, and grief) and assist us in thinking through the consequences of our actions and possibilities for reparation.

Seek restorative action

When we learn that we have acted in ways that cause others harm, it is often appropriate to meet with persons directly affected by our actions. In so doing we can acknowledge our conduct, articulate how we plan to change our behavior, invite them to share the impact of our actions, and ask if there is anything they need to say or hear in order to continue our work together.

Microaggressions that occur in a group setting often require restorative action within the group as a whole (though additional one-on-one work may also be needed). In an organizational context, microaggressions can be an indicator that institutional responses are needed, such as improved staff training or revisions to outdated protocols.

The purpose of restorative action is to ameliorate oppression, not to ask for forgiveness or reassurance. Trust is rebuilt over time, and we should not press people in order to relieve our own impatience and/or anxiety. There is always a risk that we may not be able to repair the relationship with a person or group, but we certainly can't move forward in a constructive way without first taking responsibility for our behavior. More often than not, we have found that people targeted by microaggressions respond to authentic attempts at restorative action with appreciation, generosity, and a desire to move collective work forward. We return to the vignette opening Act 2 to illustrate these principles in practice.

I continued with the workshop; they could not

Looking back, it is painful to remember the arrogance and ignorance I now realize that I exhibited in that training. It only came to my attention at the end of the day, when a white woman approached me and said, "We have a problem. A number of the African American people are upset about what you said." Although not a novice educator at the time, I was stunningly unaware I had done anything problematic. Oblivious, I asked her what I had said. "The n-word." I glanced toward my co-facilitator, an African American woman, and noticed she was intently listening to a group of African American participants who were obviously distressed. Clearly, we did have a problem.

My co-facilitator and I spent the next several hours talking through what happened and formulating a plan for our last day with the group. Much of this time was spent with her generously investing in my continued education. As I listened to my colleague, my awareness of my own internalized dominance deepened. I had believed that I had the authority to use the hurtful language as a teaching tool because my intention was clearly good – I was advancing dialogue about racism. As my understanding of the impact of my language grew, I ached for the suffering I had caused, burned with the humiliation of not having known better, and was furious at myself for letting down my co-facilitator, a woman I deeply admire. I had compromised my credibility, and my actions reflected poorly on her and the work we were leading together. Nonetheless, by the end of the day we had a plan.

The next morning my colleague opened the session. "When we lead this work, inevitably someone – a participant, a co-trainer, or yourself – will do or say something that is unintentionally hurtful to someone else; someone will make a mistake. Part of what we want to model today is how to clean up

those mistakes. Amie made a mistake yesterday. I'm going to invite her to say something to the group, and then invite you to share what it was like for you to have this happen in yesterday's session." *I then addressed the group. I acknowledged the harm I had caused, apologized for my behavior, and made a commitment that I would never make the same mistake again. My colleague then invited participants to share their reflections. Several African American participants thanked her for creating the space to share, reflecting that it had been incredibly hard to hear me use that word. One woman said, "I know what you were trying to do, but once I heard that word I couldn't hear anything else all day." One man said that if I could make that mistake, then clearly I did not belong in this field. Several younger African American participants said my use of the word – given the context – didn't bother them, and one of the few indigenous women in the room shared, "That word didn't bother me; I've heard it my whole life."*

When there were no more hands raised, I thanked everyone for sharing their perspectives, acknowledged the range of impacts, and apologized again for the pain I had caused. We then continued with the training. As we closed out that afternoon, we asked for highlights from the three-day session. One older African American woman spoke up, "My highlight of the three days was this morning. It's not uncommon that white people make mistakes. It is uncommon that they apologize. Thank you."

Act 3: Target

I am a participant in a week-long training designed to help educators make pedagogical connections between the Jewish holocaust and the genocide of indigenous North American tribes. Asked to share what drew us to the course, I speak of my Jewish heritage. When the introductions reach the other side of the room, a white, Protestant-identified woman shares that she was motivated to attend by her pain over the continued injustice in the world, including that perpetrated by the state of Israel. She swivels her head toward me, points her finger at me accusingly, and says, "You and I will have to have a talk."

Our multiple social locations become more or less salient in any given context. In the previous vignette my (Amie) racial dominance was most salient. This time, my Jewish identity was at the forefront of my experience. Responding to microaggressions when you are the target poses distinct challenges.

Your first responsibility is to yourself

Whether seemingly indirect and impersonal, or specific and targeted, experiencing microaggressions can be deeply disorienting. You may immediately feel pulled *out of* your body, unmoored, adrift, numb or shut down. You may immediately be pulled *into* your body, aware of little else beyond the

pumping of your blood and the beating of your heart. You may feel fear or anger, pain, or shock. Because they are so common and so often denied, you may not even notice the offense at all. When we, as human service professionals, find ourselves targeted with microaggressions, it is critical to notice and affirm what we are feeling, and take time to re-center. You don't have to – and often are unable to – respond in the moment. Re-centering practices might include physical activity, a cultural and/spiritual ritual, talking it through with others who share your identity or an understanding ally, journaling, or quiet reflection. Centering reconnects us to the internal and external resources available to help address the harm we have experienced.

Consider possibilities for action

Our initial reactions to microaggressions often come before we have time to reflect and center. In the absence of such time, we simply do our best – we are sometimes thoughtful, sometimes reactive, and sometimes avoidant. Yet regardless of how you respond in the moment, there are almost always follow-up opportunities. Considering these possibilities requires discernment, beginning with identifying what you hope to achieve. You may have short-term objectives related to follow-up with a specific person or group, or longer-term changes related to policy or broader social change efforts. Once you have identified your goals, you can evaluate possible strategies for moving forward. It is critical to weigh possible risks and benefits to your own and others' well-being, security, and safety. Talking with a trusted friend or colleague can provide useful clarity and perspective, although ultimately it is up to each of us to decide for ourselves how to respond.

Reclaim your voice

When targeted by microaggressions, you may feel an internal responsibility to speak out on your own behalf or an obligation to speak on behalf of others who share your identity. You may also receive external pressure to respond from colleagues or supervisors. Yet targets of oppression do not *owe* a response to anyone. You always have the choice to respond, and given the risks of confronting microaggressions that may be perpetrated by people with social and/or institutional power over us, you may choose not to respond at all. To *not respond* directly when you are the victim is not the same as not responding when you are a witness or perpetrator; because of the difference in power positions, it is one of several *valid and strategic choices* in service of your mental health.

Should you choose to act, you can reclaim our voice in powerful ways: speaking up to the aggressor, enlisting allies, going to an affinity group for support, or starting a campaign or other political action. You can also use silence as an act of resistance to oppressive interactions, refusing to educate

others about the impacts of their behavior and refraining from opening yourself up to further attack. We return now to the opening vignette to illustrate how these principles shaped one response to being the target of a microaggression.

“You and I will have to have a talk.” *I had been listening intently to this stranger’s introduction, and was shocked to suddenly find her remarks directed at me, and with such apparent hostility. The room was full of seasoned educators and our facilitators were highly skilled. Yet after a brief pause, the next person began their introduction as if nothing had happened. Had something happened? I looked around for a reassuring glance from someone; no one met my eyes. I felt my face flush and my throat constrict. I wrote down her words so I wouldn’t forget. Through the rest of the day I struggled to remain present, stewing in shock, anger, pain, confusion, isolation, disappointment, and surprise by my surprise. I was clearly unprepared for this experience.*

The day included time for reflective writing, which I used to process my initial reactions. By the end of the day, though still disappointed that no one in the room had intervened, I felt compelled to speak up. I approached the woman and asked if she had a minute to talk. She did. “So,” I began, “It sounds like you have some strong feelings about Israel.” She took the invitation to recount her concerns about the treatment of Palestinians, speaking with both passion and the fierceness of someone waiting to be challenged. I listened, thanked her for sharing, and reflected, “It also sounds like you made some decisions about where you thought I stood on Israel.” After an awkward moment of silence followed by some incomplete references to the couple of Jewish people she once knew, she softened: “You’re right. I did make an assumption – I don’t know what you think.” I suggested that if she wanted to know what I thought, she could ask. She agreed and we moved forward.

Conclusion

Microaggressions cause harm, damaging people’s sense of humanity as well as our social relationships. After just a few hours or weeks of studying oppression, many the people we work with grow impatient and want us to *just tell them what to do* when they see a microaggression. This is a lifelong journey without a quick fix. The desire for easy answers may be driven by a deep discomfort with *not knowing*, a sense of desperation and feelings of powerlessness. While these feelings are understandable, the drive to skip over the hard work of critical analysis and self-reflection must be resisted. Even if there were a recipe for interrupting microaggressions, handing human service providers a list of quick-fix behaviors before people fully understand the issues risks making behavior more problematic, rather than less.

Instead of a recipe for action, we offered a set of guiding principles for responding to microaggressions from the positions of witness, perpetrator, or target. Yet even this is an oversimplification. Each of us is embedded in complex socio-political power relations, and embody multiple and intersecting identities. We may find ourselves as witness, perpetrator and target of microaggressions in a single day, or even in a single interaction. Developing the skills, perspectives, and capacity to repair the harm caused by microaggressions requires us to challenge our socialization in new and often uncomfortable ways. While we do not suggest this process is easy, we can testify that taking the risk to respond to microaggressions offers a powerful opportunity to restore humanity and repair relationships in the face of oppression. We don't have it all figured out before we act. The deepest learning often comes from our mistakes. We may not get it right by everybody, but what is most important is that we step into the struggle for justice. Doing so is the most exciting, powerful, intellectually stimulating and emotionally fulfilling journey we have ever undertaken.

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