Microaggression experiences of different marginalized identities

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Abstract

Purpose – Given the nascent stage of research on microaggressions, the study is an attempt to better understand the experience of microaggressions and examine it from the point of view of different marginalized minority identities. The purpose of this paper is to report on the subjective experience of microaggressions from the lenses of gender, race, religion and sexual orientation.

Design/methodology/approach – To explore how microaggressions are experienced by different identities, the authors conducted four focus group studies with university students at a prominent Midwestern university. Each focus group focused on the experience of microaggressions for a particular identity group.

Findings – The authors discuss the nature and forms of exclusion that occur through microaggressions, and offer six microaggression themes that emerged as common across the marginalized identities studied. The authors add to the microaggression taxonomy and highlight the role of repetition in how microaggressions are perceived. The authors also discuss intersectional microaggressions.

Originality/value – While various studies have focused on reporting microaggression themes with regard to singular identities, this study is potentially the first that explores microaggression themes across different marginalized identities. The findings highlight novel forms of microaggressions such as the revealing or making visible of marginalized identities, and microaggressions emanating from within a minority group directed at other members within the same identity group, what the authors call as in-group microaggressions. The authors highlight and point to the need for more work on intersectional microaggressions.

Keywords Gender, Religion, Sexual orientation, Race, Intersectional identities, Microaggression

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

There has been much debate and research interest in recent years on the concept of microaggressions, which denotes subtle form of bias and discrimination such as slights, snubs or perceived insults directed toward minorities, studied predominantly through the lens of race. Racial microaggressions are defined as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal and Torino, 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal and Esquilin, 2007, p. 273). Although the focus on microaggressions is somewhat recent, the term was first coined in the 1970s referring to "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal ex-changes which are 'put downs'" (Pierce *et al.*, 1978, p. 66). Since the mainstreaming of research on racial microaggression by Sue and his colleagues (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal and Torino, 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal and Esquilin, 2007; Sue *et al.*, 2008; Sue, 2010), the concept has begun to be applied to other marginalized groups and demographics such as ethnic minorities and people of color (Clark *et al.*, 2014), gender (Basford *et al.*, 2014; Gartner and Sterzing, 2016), discrimination based on one's religion (Husain and Howard, 2017) and sexual orientation (Shelton and Delgado-Romero, 2011; Woodford *et al.*, 2013).

Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal and Torino (2007) and Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal and Esquilin's (2007) first forwarded a taxonomy comprising of three different forms

of microaggressions, with microaggressions classified as microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidations. Microinvalidations would refer to things that invalidate a person's unique identity. An example of this would be the use of heterosexist language, such as when a male pronoun is used when addressing a mixed gender group. Microinsults can take forms such as when someone acts surprised to find an African American doing well in math or engineering (Sue, 2010). Microassaults tend to be blatant slights, intended often as a willful put down by the perpetrator or aggressor.

Microaggressions are typically less visible and have also been linked to more subtle forms of discrimination and racism (Nadal *et al.*, 2014). In his book on microaggressions Sue (2010) argues that microaggressions can be much more detrimental to those with minority identities such as women, people of color, or those with non-conforming sexual orientations, than active exclusion or discrimination expressing itself as explicit racism, sexism or homophobic behavior. This is particularly so, since microaggressions are often invisible and subtle, passing under the radar of active consciousness even for those expressing the microaggression. Sometimes, the perpetrator of the aggression is unaware of it, or other times the slight may not even be intended. These can still be damaging (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal and Torino, 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal and Esquilin, 2007) because it operates beneath the surface and might express racist attitudes that might otherwise be consciously disavowed.

Some like Lilienfeld (2017) argue that the microaggression research program is at an embryonic stage of development being underdeveloped both conceptually and methodically. Lilienfeld offers a number of recommendations for taking the microaggression research forward, such as providing greater clarity on the operationalization of microaggressions and acknowledging the multiple dimensions along which marginalized identities can experience acts of microaggression. Others like Sue reiterate that given their complexity and the experiential reality of it, microaggressions are best studied from exploring the lived realities of marginalized groups.

A step in this direction, our study is an attempt to understand the nature and forms of microaggressions directed at people with minority identities. It is in response to scholars like Holmes (2010) who call for redefining how we look at and study diversity by paying attention to the more subtle forms of discrimination and exclusion. Through in-depth focus groups with different identity groupings along race, gender, religion and sexual orientation, we explore the varied ways in which microaggression can translate to perceptions of exclusion. We also consider the intersectional microaggressions experienced by subjects when they subscribe to more than one minority identity. Before we report on the results of our study, we first examine the extant literature on microaggressions directed at some of the marginalized identities.

Microaggressions directed at marginalized identities
Racial microaggressions. The study of microaggressions, while somewhat recent, has seen a lot of interest and focus directed at microaggressions pertaining to race and ethnicity (Nadal *et al.*, 2014; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal and Torino, 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal and Esquilin, 2007; Sue *et al.*, 2008). Racial microaggressions are the slights, snubs, insults or environmental indignities that are racially charged and directed at people of color or racial and ethnic minorities in any context. Much of the work on racial microaggressions has focused on the microaggressions directed by Whites at Black Americans (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal and Torino, 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal and Esquilin, 2007). Some studies have looked at the experience of microaggressions among students of color. Harwood *et al.* (2012) identified four racial microaggressions themes with regard to the experience of students in residence halls, such as the presence of racial jokes or racial slurs written in shared spaces. In a separate study

examining microaggressions in K-12 classrooms, it was observed (Kohli and Solórzano, 2012) that many students of color encounter cultural disrespect with regard to their names, with such internalized implications of inferiority having a negative impact on student self-perceptions. In a study by Nadal, Davidoff, Davis, Wong, Marshall and McKenzie (2015) and Nadal, Wong, Sriken, Griffin and Fujii-Doe (2015) it was found that racial microaggressions predicted general mental health problems among Asian Americans. Many scholars (Endo, 2015; Nadal *et al.*, 2014) have pointed out that regardless of the intent, racial microaggressions are demeaning or belittling to people of color as they signal an othering or exoticization of other races.

Gender microaggressions. Like racial microaggressions, slights, snubs, demeaning comments or any kind of invalidations directed at women are generally referred to as gender microaggressions. In his book on microaggressions, Sue (2010) discusses gendered microaggression as another type of microaggressions, the basis of exclusion being one's gender. Considering perceptions of gender microaggressions in the workplace, Basford *et al.* (2014) in their research observe that women tend to detect greater discrimination than men, especially the kind that are more subtle in nature. Gartner and Sterzing (2016) argue that gender-related microaggressions can become a form of sexual violence and serve as a gateway to more problematic offenses if left unchecked. Others like Leung (2017) have shown the link between gendered microaggressions and sexual harassment. Some studies have focused on gender microaggressions directed in specific contexts, such as microaggressions directed at female athletes (Kaskan and Ho, 2016).

Sexual orientation microaggressions. Studies have shown the negative health impact of microaggressions on various marginalized groups based on race and gender, however, little is known about the mechanism and impact of microaggressions on sexual minorities (Sterzing *et al.*, 2017). Some argue that while there is ample research on the detrimental effects of homophobia and overt sexism on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people, the effect of subtle bias in the form of microaggressions has not received much attention (Shelton and Delgado-Romero, 2011).

Sue (2010) offers a seven-category characterization of sexual orientation microaggressions, with themes such as oversexualization and assumptions of abnormality. Adding to the theoretical taxonomy, Nadal *et al.* (2010) offer additional themes such as discomfort or disapproval of LGBT experience and exoticization. Woodford *et al.* (2013) find a common microaggression with regard to non-conforming sexual orientations – the expression "that's so gay" – linked to holding negative perceptions of gay people. Adding to the potential impact of such microaggressions, McClelland *et al.* (2016) conclude that negative stereotypes heard early in one's life can have an effect to minimize discrimination through rationalizing.

Religion-based microaggressions. Previous research on microaggressions has focused on microaggressions pertaining to race, gender and sexual orientation to some extent. However, there is a dearth of research focusing on microaggressions toward people from religious minority groups (Nadal *et al.*, 2012; Husain and Howard, 2017). Some have pointed to the increase in microaggressions directed at Muslims post 9/11 America (Husain and Howard, 2017). Based on interviews with Muslim American participants, Nadal *et al.* (2012) offer some themes of religious microaggressions such as the stereotypes of Muslims as terrorists and the notion of being an alien in one's own land.

Intersectional microaggressions. Intersectionality, as a term coined by the legal scholar Crenshaw that highlights the "multidimensionality of marginalized subjects' lived experiences' (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139), has been receiving increased attention in recent years. While most of the microaggression research has focused on one kind of minority identity such as racial- or gender-related microaggressions, a few studies have looked at the intersection of multiple minority identities, such as microaggressions directed at Black women. Lewis *et al.* (2016)

focus on the microaggressions experienced by Black women in academia. Their findings suggest that Black women experience invisibility, but in the form of being silenced and marginalized based on gendered racial stereotypes, taking forms such as questioning the competence and authority of colored women academics. Gendered racial microaggressions were also studied by Endo (2015) with regard to Asian American women, suggesting that such microaggressions tend to be complex and multilayered, with emergent themes such as hypersexualization of Asian women because of how Asian bodies and femininity have been traditionally objectified in the West. Elsewhere, using a case study approach, Caraves (2018) explores the experience of lesbian/queer Latinas in the prison pipeline and finds the intersection of gender, race and non-conforming sexual orientation leading to compounded stigmatization and insults for the prison inmates. These studies point to the unique ways in which microaggressions play out at the intersection of multiple identities. Some researchers like Sterzing *et al.* (2017) argue that new frameworks are required to capture the multidimensional impact of intersectional microaggressions.

In attempting to understand the microaggression experience, we focus on uncovering the varied forms and nature of microaggressions experienced by different marginalized identity groups and examine the microaggression experiences from an intersectional lens where subjects subscribed to multiple minority identities. We reference intersectionality as an analytical strategy that provides new angles of vision (Collins, 2015) on the phenomenon under exploration, that of microaggressions.

Methodology
Given the difficulty in operationalization of microaggressions (Lilienfeld, 2017) and the early stage development of research in this area, we employ a qualitative lens to understand the concept of microaggressions and the experience of exclusion. The methodology involved detailed focus group discussions with participants who qualify as holding one or more marginalized identities, and then engaging in a phenomenological analysis of the data. While participant recruitment was not specifically intersectional, in the focus groups, an intersectional discussion naturally emerged. We conducted focus groups with subjects of each identity category to identify the types and nature of microaggressions and related behaviors that may result in exclusion. Focus groups are considered an effective means of obtaining in-depth information on concepts such as microaggressions, which are still in nascent stages of development (Creswell, 2013).

In total, 25 students across four focus groups participated in our study. The four focus groups each focused on the themes of gender, race, religion and sexual orientation related microaggressions. Participants self-identified themselves as belonging to one or more minority or marginalized identity having experienced some form of microaggression, with four focus groups organized around the identities of female ($n = 7$), racial minority ($n = 7$), religious minority including absence of a religious affiliation ($n = 8$) and self-identified as LGBTQ ($n = 3$). Each focus group was structured around one identity, but the experiences discussed were still driven by participant's intersections. Average age of participants was 28.2 years, with the youngest participant being 20 years old, and the oldest 39 years. Females comprised 62 percent of our sample while 38 percent were male. All participants were students of a large Midwestern university in North America. Majority of the participants were graduate students (76 percent), and 24 percent were undergraduate students.

Data collection
For each of the focus groups, we used a semi-structured interview protocol adapting Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal and Torino (2007) and Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal and Esquilin's (2007) guide for interviews on microaggressions. The questions were also

modified for each focus group type. To initiate dialogue, we began each focus group by defining/describing the concept of microaggressions and then inviting participants to share their thoughts and experiences, or by asking a few directed questions from our developed focus group guide. All questions were kept open-ended to provide sufficient room for participants to articulate their thoughts and elicit participant's real-life experiences of microaggressions. An example of a question we used in our protocol was – "Have you ever been in a situation where someone has said something to you, knowingly or unknowingly, that made you feel invalidated, discriminated against, singled out, slighted, or snubbed, owing to your minority identity?" Another sample question: "What are some of the subtle ways in which someone has made you feel uncomfortable about your minority identity, perhaps without intending to?"

Participation in our study was solicited through advertising in student clubs, invitation mails sent to students enrolled in our respective classes and through the respective program offices to the entire student community, and by word of mouth. Participants were compensated for participating in our focus group through student WePay cards ($40), as our study was funded by the University Research Council's funding on diversity.

Each session lasted between 90 and 120 min. Two of the authors, alternating between the roles of facilitator and note taker, facilitated all focus groups. The focus groups were all audio taped with the permission of participants, and then later transcribed removing any identifying information prior to the data analysis.

Analysis

Since microaggressions are best understood by exploring the lived experience of the recipients themselves (Lilienfeld, 2017), our qualitative analysis followed a phenomenological approach that focuses on uncovering the commonality of a lived experience, using the guidelines of Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2013). This included: developing the transcripts of the interviews/focus group sessions, a detailed reading and re-reading of the transcripts to get a sense of the whole, extracting relevant and significant statements, identifying the central themes and/or subthemes and integrating these emergent themes into the description of the phenomenon of microaggressions.

Two members of the research team read all transcripts independently to develop themes, and then a third member of the research team looked at the data independently to offer a neutral perspective. Themes that were similar or in common were collapsed into one and named accordingly. Any disagreements were resolved through consensus by all team members. This helped to establish the validity and integrity of the coding (Creswell, 2013).

Our analysis revealed some underlying themes across the different identity groups studied. Instead of focusing on a single identity dimension, our analyses examined the common themes and experiences shared across marginalized identities experienced by participants in our research.

Underlying themes of microaggressions

Our analysis of the varied microaggressions as perceived across the identity categories of race, gender, sexual orientation and religious affiliation, led to a delineation of the following six themes linked to the perception of exclusion for marginalized identities: denial of full self-hood, invalid assumptions, invisibility and visibility, misplaced nicety, implicit othering and in-group reductionism. We discuss each of these in the following sections.

Denial of full self-hood. These are the kind of microaggressions that deny an individual's full-personhood through remarks, actions or behaviors that lead recipients of such microaggressions to feel they are viewed in stereotypical terms, caricaturized or reduced to a token representative of their identity category, which then becomes invalidating of their full self. Some of these microaggressions emerged from being perceived singularly through the

prism of race. For example, one of the participants questioned motives behind his involvement in certain groups and networks as merely a form of tokenism that deprives him of full self-hood:

> Just because you see a black person and then does that mean that I am a benefit to you? Like am I around you because I make you feel better about yourself because you have one black friend or two black friends in the group?

Even when the individual is viewed in positive terms, but in a limited way through the prism of race or gender, it can be interpreted as a microaggression, as the following excerpt illustrates:

> So for National Black conference this year, I was asked to join the team afterwards, first because they had changed the requirements for it because Prospanica had joined with National Black this year and I'm pretty much like the only female Latino representation in our year. And so while it was a positive thing of why they're asking me, it wasn't to me! It was like you're asking because I'm the only person. You're not asking me because you wanted me to be here, you're asking me because you need me to fill this role […].

Here the microaggression is located at the intersectionality of race and gender. The participant in this case subscribed to two minority identities (female and bi-racial), and the microaggression was perceived in relation to both of these identities. This kind of reductionism also happens with regard to gender, through everyday conversations conveying a denunciation of the full self for women:

> I get congratulated on being married over getting the MBA. Really […] marriage doesn't take up a skill, I mean you have to meet a good person and all. Really, I'm in graduate school right now, can we talk about that? Congratulate on me that. It's a huge accomplishment!

While comments like the above are perhaps innocuous and would rarely be intended as a slight, if the recipient perceives it as a denial of their full self, especially when professional accomplishments are cast as less relevant for women in comparison to their familial roles, it can be construed as a form of invalidation and thus a perceived microaggression.

Invalid assumptions. Microaggressions that carry a messaging of some kind of invalid assumptions made through either direct remarks or innuendo, fall into this category of invalid assumptions about the targeted individual or their identity category.

For someone who identifies as being bisexual, the following excerpt highlights the frustration of having to deal with some invalid assumptions pertaining to her sexuality:

> People will just make a comment like, oh, you're a lot of fun to be! The implication is, oh, I must obviously be okay with threesomes! Whoever the man that I'm dating is so lucky, because I'm gonna fulfill all of his fantasies about bringing other women home with us. Because that must be what I'm into! Just a lot of assumptions.

Here the microaggression is at the intersection of gender and sexual orientation. The slight is perceived to both the identities (woman and bisexual), potentially rendering the aggression even more potent, much like the microaggressions perceived by Latina lesbian prison inmates in Caraves's (2018) research.

When it comes to women, assumptions about the careers of women being subordinate to their familial responsibilities were a kind of noted microaggression:

> Part of the reason I left my previous job was I got married and my boss kind of thought like, oh, she's gonna get married and have kids. And he would say, "Don't have kids and leave!" I felt like they were subconsciously thinking I would leave and giving me fewer responsibilities when the reality is I don't have any children. You don't know if I will, or if I want to.

Sometimes, it is the implicit pressure to confirm to a religious identity, and the invalid assumption about religious affiliations or preferences, which serves as a microaggression.

As one participant noted, this was especially true with regard to her mother's assumptions about her son's religious identity:

> My Mom is Catholic. I have a son, and when he was born, she just assumed that I would have him baptized, even though I've been a very outspoken atheist for pretty much my whole adult life. And when I informed her that that would not be happening, she was just aghast. We literally had a conversation that went like this: If you don't believe in this, then it won't hurt to have him baptized. But mom, I don't believe in this, so why should I do this? Well just do this to make me happy! But it's not my belief.

Assumptions such as these that signal ignorance of one's identity or professed beliefs, hostility or derision of the marginalized identity, can all serve as a slight, especially when they entail invalid assumptions.

Visibility and invisibility. While the theme of invisibility has previously been identified in the microaggressions literature (Sue *et al.*, 2008), our analysis revealed that there is a corollary to invisibility, that of visibility – one's marginalized identity being made visible, usually in an uncomfortable way – that can also translate into a microaggression.

Invisibility refers to the notion of feeling left out, or negated through snubs or invalidations, such as what one participant observed:

> Once somebody came into our classes to advertise their class, and he said – "your wives must be so proud of you." And he didn't address both genders, when the class is like 40% women. And I was like, what is going on! It stuck with me.

Visibility, on the other hand, is when one's identity is brought front and center, and the process of highlighting the differing identity, creates an othering, and therefore signals a slight. An example of one such religion related visibility is offered, where perceived pressures to participate in prayers of the dominant faith in a public sphere when someone did not subscribe to the same faith, led to discomfiture:

> And I remember the one time 'cause we had like a chore chart, and I was in one of the chores at one of my summer camps, and it was my turn to do grace, and I had no idea what to do. And I was like panicking the whole night before, and I remember I ended up going up to my counselor and telling her that this is not something I have ever done.

Thus, while being made invisible can clearly hurt, being thrust in situations where one's otherness is clearly made visible can be an equally uncomfortable space for marginalized identities to occupy.

Misplaced nicety. This category of microaggressions refers to those unintended comments or actions that might appear on the face of it as offers of help, benevolence, chivalry or even compliments, but if you scratch the surface, the recipient of this communication may likely perceive the seeming nicety impregnated in the dialogue as a microaggression. To make this clear, here are some examples offered by some of our interviewees:

> I remember when I (African American male) moved to Indianapolis and they were giving me a salary way above the popular. So I ended up reaching out to a person who was showing the apartments and then I told them specifically I wanted to see these three or four apartments. He showed me those three or four apartments then he brought me to a low income housing and it's like if you qualify, you'd be able to move into an apartment at a ridiculously low rate. But you know, at that moment I didn't think about it, I thought he was just being nice. But then I'm like, wait, that's not right. Like why are you showing me? You are not going to show my coworkers the same apartments.

Here, it is possible that the realtor offered up additional choices as a potential offer of help, well intended and hoping to save his client some money, but the client, on afterthought, took it as a racial affront. So even a potentially well-meaning action that may have a subtext of prejudice, or an unconscious bias at play, can translate into a microaggression.

A number of women in our focus group, spoke about actions and behaviors directed toward them by men that appeared as offers of help or even chivalry, but in the work context, made them feel incapable and seemed misplaced. An example of this is highlighted below:

> During the summer, I worked at a moving company. So like moving, lifting things up, and carrying them around is literally my job. And so any time I was back in the warehouse, if I will pick something up, the big guys around would automatically jump up and say "No, No […] put that down." They would take it just because they thought I couldn't carry things. And then if it was heavier and I would carry it they would be like – oh wow, you could carry this! It made me so mad. I hated it!

While microaggressions such as the ones mentioned above are often unintended, and may appear as niceties, chivalrous behavior, or respect and courtesy extended to the women at hand, such communication is often laden with micro messaging. On the surface, they may seem okay, but it winds up subscribing to the stereotype that women are weaker and can signal an invalidation of the professional worth of women, who may well be capable of carrying out the task, especially when it is within their sphere of work. There thus appears to be a fine line between being helpful or acting chivalrous, and stepping on one's professional competence and thus offending.

In-group microaggressions. Much of the microaggressions literature has focused on microaggressions directed by one identity group to another, usually a more powerful or higher status identity group directing the microaggression to a minority identity group, such as microaggressions issued by Whites to Blacks, men to women or straight people to sexual minority groups (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal and Torino, 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal and Esquilin, 2007; Sue, 2010). Surprisingly, one of the themes that emerged in our focus groups was this notion of microaggressions issued within the same marginalized community, where there is an othering or a put down, slight or snub directed by a person of a marginalized group, toward another person within the same marginalized community or identity group:

> Within the black culture people are more like microaggressive towards each other within black culture than outside of it, honestly. Interactions about skin tone, hair, male-female interactions. Things like […] oh well you're light skinned, you're yellow bone, you're better, you're cool. Your hair is nicer than the other person's hair. Like within black culture there's so many different layers of that which exists in terms of how you are perceived or welcomed even within your community and your own blackness.

Similar comments were also observed with regard to the LGBTQ community, as the following quote makes evident:

> There's also a lot of uncomfortable pushback from within the LGBTQ community itself. Where we're not quite gay enough to be gay, or we're not quite straight enough to be straight.

With regard to a gendered microaggression directed by one woman to another, one participant reflected:

> One time I was in Starbucks studying for my GMAT, and there was this woman who was asking me about it. I was like, oh, it's really difficult. She goes "well you're pretty, you'll be okay in life!" So as a WOMAN, I was like, we cannot do this to ourselves.

Comments such as these, where an othering or a put down is issued to a person from within the in-group (whether intentional or unintentional), were seen as being more microaggressive, than when a microaggression is issued by an out-group member. These comments were registered as more invalidating or insulting to the perceiver, viewed as being far more detrimental to one's identity and self-hood, as it struck to the core of one's identity.

Implicit othering. What we label as implicit othering is the class of microaggressions where exclusion is rendered implicitly, seeping through the cracks in everyday conversations, where a process of othering is set in motion, oftentimes inadvertently. Casual references, conversations or actions and behavior that bring to the surface implicit biases or denote exclusion.

For example, in the excerpt below, a form of greeting connotes an othering that is also misplaced:

> I used to work at a French bakery and every time someone comes in we had to say, "Bon Jour" and I said that like normal, and this lady came in and she was like, "Oh Hello! Or actually, I guess I can also say Namaste!" I mean there was no reason for her to say that, and also, you are assuming I am Indian. I guess it was not necessarily to be rude, just that there was not any reason for her to say anything.

Statement, such as these based on implicit assumptions, carries with them an othering that is received by the recipient as an exoticization, and when misplaced, becomes even more of a slight. Whether through compliments, or well-intended gestures, when an othering is generated during the course of the conversation, it takes the form of a microaggression.

Latent prejudices or feelings of superiority that an individual may not be aware of, or may even actively disavow consciously, but still comes through in inadvertent slips that surface those beliefs, can also serve as microaggressions, as this quote suggests:

> When I was in High school, one of the guys on our football team was doing an interview or something on our local radio. I can't remember exactly what he was talking about, but he had said something along the lines like […] "We have a lot of minorities, and women, and normal people […]" And later he felt bad about it and everybody was trying to defend him, but it obviously was like a subconscious thing, like some part of him must have believed that!

Such inadvertent slips were also observed in the use of exclusionary language and choice of pronouns in our everyday discourse:

> So when people say, do you have a girlfriend, I have to say I don't, but I have a boyfriend. So just say, do you have a partner.

These varied forms of othering, often delivered unconsciously, serve to invalidate identities or signal an implicit bias at play.

Microaggression perceptions influenced by frequent exposure. In delineating the underlying themes of microaggression directed at marginalized minority identities categorized as denial of full self-hood, invalid assumptions, visibility and invisibility, misplaced niceties, in-group reductionism and implicit othering, we also observed that perceptions of microaggressions are particularly sensitive to the frequency and exposure to similar occurrences in the past for the recipient. For example, many African Americans noted that comments or questions about their hair or weave, while emerging from a space of curiosity, can also be construed as microaggressions. As one Black woman noted:

> I understand it's about curiosity, but it's also just annoying because if I just came every day and obsessed about one little thing about you from dozens of people, every time you slightly changed something. Like you have on red today. If you came in tomorrow wearing green and every time wore green I'm like, oh my God, where did get it? So why did you pick green? So did you purposely buy green or did someone give it to you? Like after a while it's like, leave me alone about my hair! But we don't have the luxury of saying that, then you're rude, and then you're this angry black woman […].

Acknowledging that questions about their hair may only be borne out of curiosity, and the person asking may not be intending it as a slight, our participant noted that

it is the repeated exposure to such comments and othering, which renders the perception of a microaggression:

> And it might be that one person for whom this is their first time asking or learning, but for the person who's receiving it, that's just the straw that broke the camel's back.

Thus, it is often not the severity of the specific microaggression at play that may contribute to the perception of slight, but the compounded effect of similar microaggressions that the receiver has had to contend with in the past. In this case, there exists a certain pre-conditioning to things like hair for African Americans, where seemingly innocuous questions (curiosity about a Black woman's hair) has the potential to be interpreted as a microaggression, owing to the history and cycle of repetitions that signal a constant othering and exoticization.

Discussion

Microaggression, or the varied forms of knowingly or sometimes inadvertently communicated slights, snubs, rebukes or invalidations that signal some degree of exclusion, is an area of increasing research interest. Because these are tacit and subtle in nature, they sometimes slip through the cracks of awareness, even though their effect on the recipient can be potent. If someone perceives the words, actions or behavior of another individual as a slight, put down, or invalidation of some sort, even when that may not be the intent of the other party, it would still qualify as a microaggression if it is experienced as such. Existing literature on microaggressions has tended to focus on singular identities, and even within that, understandably so for a phenomenon whose understanding is still evolving, there is much variation in how microaggressions are classified or categorized (Lilienfeld, 2017).

Our research is an attempt to shed greater light on the complexities of the nature and forms of microaggressions for different marginalized minority identities. Through focus group discussions with individuals across four identity categories of race, gender, sexual orientation and religious affiliation, we unearth some common themes of microaggressions across the identity categories, using a phenomenological approach.

In analyzing the nature of microaggressions across the minority categories we studied, we found some common themes and types of microaggressions that marginalized minority identities faced, be it from the perspective of race, gender, sexual orientation or even non-majoritarian religious affiliation. Thus, we classified the microaggression themes pertinent to the marginalized minority identities we studied as: denial of full self-hood, invalid assumptions, invisibility and visibility, misplaced nicety, implicit othering and in-group microaggressions. While some of these themes like invisibility have been identified in the literature previously (Sue *et al.*, 2008), our research also points to other kinds of microaggressions that have not been discussed before.

Our findings suggest that while invisibility can lead to exclusion, it is also "visibility" that can be problematic. We highlight how the act of making visible (drawing attention to one's marginalized identity) can be a form of debasement that contributes to the experience of exclusion. Our analysis also reveals that acts of seeming kindness, courtesy or offers of help, which are misplaced in some way with regard to minority identities, can also jar and serve to invoke a sense of inadequacy, ineptness or othering. Thus, even when an apparent slight is not intended and on the surface appears as a positive remark, comment or behavior, it can still have the potential to evoke a slight or to offend. Similarly, while microaggressions are subtle, they can be explicit or even implicit, surfacing unconscious biases that slip through the cracks ever so often in everyday conversations.

Based on our identified categories of visibility, misplaced nicety and implicit othering, we also attempt to extend Sue's (2010) taxonomy of microaggressions delineated as

microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidations, by adding a fourth form, called micro differentiation. This would refer to things like visibility and implicit othering, where words, expressions, actions or behaviors draw undue attention to the minority identity when not warranted, lending to an othering and discomfiture for the recipient of the microaggression.

What is also noticeable in our emergent themes is another class of microaggressions, what we call as in-group microaggressions or in-group reductionism, which alludes to microaggressions directed by people from within the in-group to other in-group members. A focus on this kind of microaggression is warranted, since much of the microaggression literature thus far has tended to focus on microaggressions directed by someone in power or of higher status toward those with perceived less power or lower status (Sue, 2010). One of the contributions of this paper is to highlight the kind of microaggressions that exist within and between in-group members. These slights or rebukes were perceived by recipients as being far more damaging to their self-worth than if they came from an out-group member, as the blow from within hits at the very identity they share with the perpetrator of the microaggression. The resulting exclusion is also felt more excruciatingly in this case. Such in-group microaggressions could also manifest through the internalization of Eurocentric beauty norms and heteronormativity, such as when Black women feel pressure to conform to certain beauty standards and are judged on the degree of their blackness. Further research would be needed in this area to fully understand the nature of these in-group microaggressions.

Many things can impact the severity of the experienced microaggression, and while it was not our explicit intent to examine all the influencers of microaggressions, our research did highlight that the perception of the microaggression rarely occurs in a snapshot, or is colored by the singular experience at that moment in time. Many of our respondents spoke of how the microaggression has to be viewed in the context of the history of similar experiences encountered in the past. The repeated and cyclical nature of a particular type of microaggression (such as questions or comments about hair for African Americans, work–family balance expectations directed at women, or some stereotypes about lesbian or bisexual women) has the potential to render even a seemingly innocuous comment or question as much more incisive and aggressive when considering the compounded effect. From the point of view of the subject's own sensemaking, even an unintended slight becomes an innuendo and a microaggression when considering the debris of past sedimentation of analogous slights. This is also true for intersectional identities, when subjects with more than one minority identity, perceived a microaggression along more than one axis, thereby doubling the impact of the microaggression, as also observed in Caraves's (2018) research. Thus, one of the implications of this research is to highlight the importance of repetition and pointing to the need for sensitivity to intersectional identities, in how the aggression can potentially move along from being perceived as "micro" or minor to more resounding in its impact on perceptions of exclusion. Institutions and organizations considering diversity training for their organizational members should not only focus on sensitization to microaggressions, but also shine a light on the damaging effects of frequently repeated microaggressions, however, low intensity or seemingly innocuous, that can have an additive effect in translating to the experience of exclusion.

Actions and behaviors such as "denial of full self-hood," "invalid assumptions," "in-group reductionism" and other types of microaggressions can also have a delegitimizing impact on members of marginalized groups. This is especially true when these individuals assume roles that are seen as outside of the norm or stereotyped expectations for that marginalized identity group. Thus, one area of attention in future work would be examining microaggressions through a legitimacy lens and how it impacts the perceptions and responses to individuals from these marginalized identity groups. Adopting a legitimacy lens would mean consideration of factors that influence perceptions of legitimacy and

attention to topics such as backlash, status attributions, and the role of power in the experience of microaggressions. This would be especially useful in developing tools and practices to limit the self-reinforcing cycle of illegitimacy that is often experienced by people within marginalized identity groups such as women in leadership roles (Vial *et al.*, 2016).

Another area of future exploration that our research underscores is the need to focus on intersectional microaggressions. Our findings suggest that microaggression experiences can also be located at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities (such as race and gender, gender and sexual orientation, etc.). Intersectional microaggressions offer a rich domain of inquiry for future research to unpack the ways in which intersecting marginalized identities impact the experience. Further research could also explore what impact the microaggression has on intersectional identities. Does an experience of microaggression directed at one of the minority identities, make that particular identity more salient or less so? Not just in terms of impact on identities, but also in terms of dealing or coping with the microaggression, intersectionality opens a more complex frontier for exploration in diversity research. Thus, future research in this substantive area could benefit from an intersectional recruitment of participants to allow for a deeper exploration of intersectional microaggressions.

Conclusion

Given the nascent stage of the microaggression research program, our study is an attempt to add to the body of knowledge on microaggressions, from the perspective of the recipients of such aggressions. We examine the microaggression experience along differing minority identities that include race, gender, religion and sexual orientation. In exploring the nature of microaggressions, analysis of the focus group transcripts reveal some common themes across the microaggressions directed at marginalized minority identities. The six emergent themes are discussed and we draw attention to an important influencer of the microaggression experience, namely, the frequency or repetition of occurrence and the historical experience of the experiencer. We highlight new forms of microaggressions, add to the microaggression taxonomy and draw attention to the experience of intersectional microaggressions, an avenue for future exploration.

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