# A Cross-Cultural Experience of Microaggression in Academia: A Personal Reflection

**Munacinga Simatele**
http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9182-2701
Nedbank Chair in Economics
University of Fort Hare, South Africa
munasimatele@gmail.com

## Abstract

Microaggression is defined as subtle and often unconscious or automatic actions or statements made towards a discriminated group. It causes distress, anxiety and isolation. Microaggression can often lead to demoralisation and a feeling that one is in a constant psychological warfare. It is also ubiquitous in nature. This paper is a reflection on my experiences of microaggression as a black female academic gathered from working in six universities across five countries and two continents. I use autoethnography underscored by critical race theory thinking. The reflection has a multicultural face and is done in light of the extant literature on gendered, racial and non-native microaggression in the academic world. I find close similarities in my experiences with others. I conclude that microaggressions are ubiquitous and are inevitable in a multicultural setting. Victims need to acknowledge microaggressions and be assertive in order to mitigate the associated negative effects. Further, counterspaces provide a very useful platform for challenging the inaccuracy of victims' lived experiences and serve as a source of validation.

**Keywords:** microaggression; prejudice; gender; race; non-native; academia; counterspaces

## Introduction

Microaggression as a concept has gathered a lot of momentum in academic research since the term was coined by Pierce (1970). Several papers have been written highlighting how

microaggressions are exhibited and the topic has been the subject of many blogs[1] (Campbell and Manning 2014; Gomez et al. 2011; Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto 2015; Houshmand, Spanierman, and Tafarodi 2014; Schacht 2008; Sue 2010b; Sue et al. 2007). Microaggressions happen both within and outside academia. They take various forms including people of colour being suspected of being criminals, incompetent and inarticulate or endorsing normative gender and ethnic cultures. The concept is not without conflict however. Etzioni (2014) for example has suggested that much of what is termed microaggression may in fact "be standard noise, normal sounds of human rambling." Lilienfeld (2017) and Campbell and Manning (2014) suggest that the increased dialogue around microaggressions is creating a culture of victimhood.

Research however indicates that microaggression, though subtle and often done unconsciously, has real effects. The most commonly observed immediate effect is stress. Long-term effects can be both mental and physical. They include depression and anxiety (Nadal et al. 2014; Reid 2017), loss of self-confidence (Orelus 2013; Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto 2015), limited social and academic progression (Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto 2015; Orelus 2013), exhaustion (Orelus 2013) as well as debilitating guilt and embarrassment (Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto 2015). Despite these effects, the law falls short of criminalising microaggression (Lukes and Bangs; Wells 2013). As I show in the discussion below, the very nature of microaggression makes it difficult to criminalise. There is often no immediate harm intended and where it is intended, no immediate harm is evidenced. Further, it is difficult to criminalise unconscious thought and behaviour.

This paper documents my personal experiences of microaggression as a black female non-native academic, gathered from experiences in five universities across five countries and two continents. The reflection therefore has a multicultural face and is done in light of the extant literature on gendered and racial microaggression in the academic world. By sharing my experience, I hope to highlight the perverse and multicultural nature of microaggression and thus underscore its nature and highlight possible responses that can minimise the negative effects associated with microaggression.

## Defining Microaggression

Microaggression can be defined as social and verbal cues, subtle verbal and non-verbal insults that make an individual feel unwelcome and is often targeted at minorities (Solórzano, Allen, and Carroll 2002; Wells 2013). It encompasses both subtle and overt or intentional behaviours and communication. Microaggressions have mainly been exhibited in the area of race, ethnicity and gender. Sue et al. (2007) have categorised microaggressions into three categories: microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidations. Microassaults are deliberate verbal and nonverbal actions aimed at hurting the intended victim but expressed in "micro" or private environments. They are

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[1] These include http://www.microaggressions.com/, https://www.facebook.com/microaggressions/, https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/microaggression, among others.

more likely to be perpetrated in environments which afford the perpetrator some form of anonymity or where there is peer support. It is difficult to distinguish microassaults from blatant racism given their overt and deliberate nature. This ambiguity may explain the focus on microinsults and microinvalidations in the literature (Wong et al. 2014).[2]

Microinsults are less obvious. They comprise mainly subtle snubs with a hidden insulting message to the recipient. Microinsults are therefore more difficult to decipher except as seen within the context in which they are presented. A high-level example of a racial microinsult was when Senator Joe Biden of the United States described then Senator Barack Obama as "the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean" (Thai and Barrett 2007). Microinvalidations relate to verbal or nonverbal cues that invalidate the thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of an individual. This behaviour can result from the blindness of the majority or elite group to their own privilege such as white students or faculty to their race (Sue 2010c) or males to their privilege and power (Wells 2013). Reactions to racial or gender aggressions are seen as unwarranted and overreactions. In some cases, microaggression is interpreted as an obsession with the creation of victims ( Lilienfeld 2017; Runyowa 2015). Campbell and Manning (2014) for example refer to microaggressions as "perceived slights" and argue that the increased discourse around microaggression, especially through documented evidence such as websites and blogs, is creating a "culture of victimhood."

Microaggression as a construct comprises two ideas: micro—extremely small in scale or scope or capability, and aggression, which includes attacking, invading, offending or launching an onslaught. Microaggressions happen in small, private situations. Consequently, they can easily be misinterpreted as interpersonal, normal human interaction. The related aggressions are seen as small and insignificant particularly to the perpetrator. In many cases, these experiences are not observed by the majority. Subsequently, those affected by these remarks or actions are left to pretend that nothing has happened. Exhibiting any form of anger or frustration as a result of the aggression is considered immature and too sensitive (Wells 2013). Consequently, microinsults and microassaults quickly metamorphose into microinvalidations.

The second aspect of the concept is aggression. A useful insight into aggression can be found in comparing microaggression with assault. Both assault and microaggression cause  the recipient fear, stress and emotional harm and may also have material impact in that they may deter the victim from pursuing or achieving his or her own interests (Wells 2013). Wells (2013) and Lukes and Bangs (2014) suggest three key differences between assault and aggression by using tort and civil discrimination law. While these perceptions are based on the American legal system, they provide lucidity into the problems associated with microaggression as a concept.

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[2] Wong et al. (2014) provide a good overview of research on microaggressions and review Sue et al.'s (2007) taxonomy of the construct of microaggression.

The first difference is that assault requires proof of intent while microaggression is mainly unconsciously done and sometimes unintentional. In many cases, the microaggressor may not realise that harm has been inflicted (Sue 2010b; Wells 2013). Second, microaggression mostly consists of words, which do not typically constitute assault. Words used in a microaggression, however, are not just spoken as those in an ordinary argument. They are often related to a broader historical context of discrimination and oppression. Moreover, they are often used in a subtle derogatory manner that implies inferiority of ability or intelligence for the broader group to which the injured individual belongs in terms of gender, race or class.

Third, assault is only actionable when there is fear of physical harm. While research shows that long-term microaggression can be debilitating and can lead to physical illness (Hall and Fields 2015; Torres-Harding and Turner 2015), there is no fear of physical harm at the time such microaggression takes place. Further, while fear may be implicit, the action or words spoken and even the associated circumstances appear different from the perspective of the victim and from that of the majority. There is often a divide based on race, gender and nationality. The dominant majority see no wrong in the action and it is often interpreted as a minor action (Sue 2010b; Wells 2013). The impact of such "minor" actions is compounded because the majority or the dominant group are the ones that tend to establish the norms that are used to make a judgement as to whether the action could have invited or resulted in harm or not (Onsaloo, Boske, and Newcomb 2016; Wells 2013) .

## Methodological and Theoretical Considerations

The objective of this paper is to review my experience of microaggression as an academic. I explore the meanings and implications of these experiences with reference to those of others—black academics, females and non-natives in academia. Most of the experiences reviewed refer to my Africanness as well as my non-native status. I have not reviewed specific gendered experiences. This may be because of the intersectionality between my being black and female. The "black" experiences tend to stand out more. I have interpreted most of these experiences in the context in which they most closely resonate with my overall experience as an academic. With this in mind, I adopt an autoethnographic approach.

A fundamental aspect of autoethnography is that it allows personal experiences to be analysed in a cultural context (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011). Culture is key in understanding how microaggression manifests itself and how it affects both perpetrators and recipients. In a microaggressive context, individual and group "cultures" intersect. The experiences of the individual and the aggressions experienced every day in the work place are a reflection of the subculture to which both the perpetrator and recipient belong—black versus white academics, female versus male academics, native versus non-native academics—each reflecting the values, beliefs and behaviours of that group. When culture is only seen as a characteristic of the group, people are defined from the

perceived characteristics of the whole and individual differences are minimised (Chang 2016). I would argue that this is precisely the problem with microaggression. The line between an individual and the whole is blurred, leading to stereotyping and resulting in microaggressive behaviour towards the minority. As a method therefore, autoethnography allows for the "cultural connection between self and others" to emerge (Chang 2007); it is an intersection of the writing of self and past experiences, and of culture and cultural experiences (Adams, Ellis, and Holman Jones 2017). Moreover, autoethnography allows for reflexivity, enabling me to embed my perspectives and reflect on how these perspectives are influenced by the wider behaviours, habits and processes as an insider within higher education (Adams, Ellis, and Holman Jones 2017; Anderson 2006; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011). I discuss how I have navigated my way around microaggression in the institutions where I have worked. Selected experiences from my time at five universities between 2005 and 2017 form the autobiographical data. The ethnographic data is derived from others' experience with microaggression as depicted in the literature. This forms the "observations" of cultural communities within higher education.

Maso (2001) indicates that ethnography aims to study "a culture's relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping insiders (cultural members) and outsiders (cultural strangers) better understand the culture" (cited in Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011, 275). Further, the behaviours exhibited through microaggression are acquired within specific cultural contexts and are driven by cultural norms and peer behaviours. For example, microinsults can only persist if the perpetrator is supported by peers whether actively or inactively as in the case of Wells (2013).

For the purpose of this paper, culture is defined, following Ballard (2002, 12), as a

> set of ideas, values and understandings which people deploy within a specific network of social relationships used as a means of ordering their inter-personal interactions and hence to generate ties of reciprocity between themselves; in so doing it also provides the principal basis on which human beings give meaning and purpose to lives.

Culture is therefore the foundation for creating meaning or codes, which allow insiders to decode behaviour within the relevant subculture. Any attempt by outsiders to understand the meaning of observed behaviour leads to distortion or complete lack of understanding. For example, a person who is reacting to racial or gender microaggression may be seen as overreacting or being too sensitive (Lilienfeld 2017; Wells 2013). A male academic is unlikely to notice when a female academic is consistently overlooked in favour of male counterparts and is unlikely to understand the female academic's reaction. Similarly, a white academic may not make sense of a statement such as "you are very eloquent for a black African." In both cases, whether consciously or unconsciously, the outsiders are trying to understand the experiences of the insiders without a clear understanding of the meaning attached to their statements or behaviours (Ballard 2002). This underlines the importance of the stories of insiders as promoted by autoethnographic enquiry.

Critical to this understanding is the culture of power relations embedded within institutions of higher learning. This often arises when a dominant group believes that its culture is superior to that of another group. Such a group's values, beliefs and ways of being give it a sense of privilege and eliteness, which is legitimised by its commonness and therefore accepted as normal (Barton and Yang 2000; Delpit 1988). Kivel (2004) argues that this culture of power can make outsiders feel insecure, unsafe, disrespected, unseen or marginalised—traits that are common in shared stories of microaggression.

Critical race theory (CRT) embodies the views expressed in the discussion above. Although the theory directly relates to race, its tenets are relevant to other aspects of subordination such as those based on gender, class, language or ethnicity and can be extended to understand inclusivity in higher education (Hiraldo 2010; Yosso et al. 2009). The CRT framework has five core tenets. Using Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso's (2000) taxonomy, these include the following: (1) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination, (2) the challenge to dominant ideology, (3) the centrality of experiential knowledge, (4) the commitment to social justice, and (5) the transdisciplinary perspective.[3]

Of these tenets, I find the first three most relevant to unpacking my experiences of microaggression. First, the three forms of subordination that I talk about in this paper are endemic in institutions of higher learning (Basford, Offermann, and Behrend 2014; Proctor and Truscott 2012). Gendered, racial and ethnic microaggressions are often intertwined and difficult to separate. I have found it difficult to separate my gendered and racial microaggressions, leaning more towards race as this seems to be more common and obvious. Second, the need to challenge the dominant ideology or story that everyone has equal opportunities and that society is objective appeals to explanations of experiences of microaggressions. While the standard story is that society has become equal and everyone has equal opportunities, research into microaggressions has shown that many black, female or non-native academics do not experience this in reality. They often feel they have to work much harder to achieve the same goals—not because of lack of ability but because of unequal opportunities by virtue of the subculture to which they belong (Trottman 2009). An imposter syndrome creeps in and they feel like imposters as their success does not seem to emanate from their abilities despite apparent achievements (Clance and Imes 1978; Parkman 2016). A good example is that of graduate students on diversity scholarships in the United States. Despite diversity scholarship processes being as competitive as mainstream ones, the quality and validity of the professional achievements of the recipients are often questioned (Omotade, King, and Kahn 2017). Such individuals are left feeling that they are incompetent and not qualified but rather the recipients of handouts by virtue of their native status. As one student (cited in Omotade, King, and Kahn 2017) reflected,

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[3] Hiraldo (2010), Delgado and Stefancic (2006), and Yosso et al. (2009) provide a good discussion of the development of CRT.

In addition to negatively affecting my perceptions about my personal qualifications for fellowship applications, these feelings of imposter syndrome also spilled over into other aspects of my professional career, such as research seminars and symposia. On multiple occasions, I wondered if my audience was less inclined to provide feedback and engage in scientific discussions because they might think I was only there to fulfil a diversity quota.

Finally, the centrality of experiential knowledge is the core driver for this paper—that lived experiences of microaggression are important and that such experiences should help shape the solutions to the predicaments of those who experience it.

## The Manifestation and Effects of Microaggression

Etzioni (2014), Lilienfeld (2017) and Thomas (2008) have argued that a lot of what is now being termed microaggression may just be normal human ramblings. What distinguishes words that constitute microaggression from those of everyday human ramblings? I argue that it is the repetitive, prejudicial and ubiquitous nature of microaggression which often leave the victim weary, unsure of themselves and confused that distinguishes the two. In this section, I use the manifestations of microaggression as conceptualised above to review my experience.

### Unconscious and Often Unnoticed

Microaggressions are mostly committed unconsciously (Burdsey 2011; Lewis et al. 2013; Wells 2013). Everyday conversations or words are generally spoken with a conscious intent to communicate a given message. Consequently, the person speaking or acting in a specific manner is aware of their actions and the possible implications of those words and actions. Microaggressions, on the other hand, are often inflicted unconsciously and therefore the effects of those words or actions may not be intended or thought through. They emanate from the subconscious and are underscored by the individual's inherited or acquired biases. Take for example my experience with the school office at a predominantly white university in the UK. I often had to go to this office to drop off and collect student work. Almost every time I went to this office, the administrator would say to me "only members of staff are allowed in here." Each time I had to indicate that I was a member of staff and had to show my identity card. The individual would respond by saying, "you look really young for an academic." I repeatedly encountered the same individuals who gave the same excuse but did not seem to be bothered or aware that they had done this countless times. I almost started to believe their excuse, except for the fact that I was 35. Further, there were a number of other white academics within my age group who freely went in and out of the office. I concluded that what these administrators really meant to say was "you look really young to be an academic *for a black person*."

The unconscious nature of microaggression at least in part seems to stem the blindness of the majority to their privilege (Sue 2010b; Wells 2013; Wildman and Davis 1995). The microaggressive tendencies and behaviours are acquired over time. Sue (2010a) suggests that "White Americans have inherited the racial biases of their forbearers; that the most

harmful forms remain outside the level of conscious awareness." The danger with this subconscious nature of microaggression is that perpetrators of microaggression on a conscious level see themselves as fair-minded people who would not discriminate and in most cases are genuinely not aware of their biases. As a result, when their unconscious biases and prejudices "leak" out, any attempt to make them aware of their actions often leads them to feel assailed and subsequently they either become defensive or suggest that the recipient is self-victimising (Sue 2010b).

Related to this, Goldberg (2010, 90) argues in the context of racial microaggression that in the modern neoliberal society race is "shifted to less formal domains for the most part, embedded in structures without being explicitly named, where it is more difficult to identify, more ambivalently related to, more ambiguous." This can make microaggression more pervasive and undetected by the broader public. The victims therefore have to constantly evade "invisible bullets" because only the victims tend to see them. Even the shooters are often not aware that they are shooting. Perhaps the women in the school office in the incidence described above did not see anything wrong with what they were doing. It was likely a "normal" response acquired in their everyday interactions.

## Prejudice and Repetition

Words and actions associated with microaggression are generally prejudicial and repetitive. More often than not, they are targeted at specific groups of people in the broader context rather than at an individual. Moreover, because of their nature, such comments or actions tend to resonate with deeply held understandings of related stereotypes; they are targeted at individuals who are already structurally disadvantaged. The actions and words typically remind victims of microaggression of their status in a way that undermines their sense of well-being. As Wells (2013) argues, resonance can convert an ostensibly favourable comment into one that feels demeaning. For example, the statement "you are very articulate" would in most cases be well received and engender a positive response. A common comment I get—"you are very articulate for an African"—provokes negative feelings and responses within and from me. First, because historically Africans are considered to be inarticulate, and second, because the statement is not directed at me but rather at Africans as a whole. Sue et al. (2007), Orelus (2013) and Runyowa (2015) highlight the prevalence of such statements.

Prejudice is not only targeted at racial minorities. One of the groups of academics that are often targeted by microaggression is non-native academics. Working in predominantly white universities, African academics tend to stand out more than others. Furthermore, non-natives stand out even at predominantly black universities because of their accents. Moreover, they often need to learn a new curriculum and a completely new way of doing things which makes them vulnerable. Learning a new way of doing things is less daunting in the UK universities. This is because they more often than not have a standard "practice" manual. Therefore, while one may be new to a way of doing things, the standard practice manuals provide a way to learn quickly. The African universities on the

other hand are different. There is often no practice manual and one has to rely on experience from previous institutions. Whereas this should be an advantage, I have been told "that is not the way we do things here," implicitly isolating me from the rest of the "we" who have been at the institution long and are predominantly natives. Repetition over time turns such comments into a microinvalidation and lead to a sense of isolation, emotional fatigue, loss of effectiveness and exhaustion. As a result, I have sometimes given up on things I would have done to advance both my career and the institution.

Second, non-native academics stand out because of the way they speak. I would like to use my experience in predominantly black African universities in order to underline the fact that this is not a racial, but rather a non-native microaggression. In the two African universities I have worked for, I look just like all the other black academics until I open my mouth. Both students and faculty made repeated references to the fact that I have a bit of an accent. The repeated reference to my accent and in the same breath to my non-native status result in a microaggression. I can be passed over for certain privileges on account of being a non-native. Further, when it is used in a way that demeans an individual, it becomes a microinsult.

In my first year at a predominantly black African university, my accent was constantly referenced by the students. At one point the students were overheard discussing the problem with "these foreign lecturers who do not understand that we did not go to model C schools"—a subtle reference to me because of my slightly non-African accent.[4] Some students alleged that my accent was the reason they were not performing well, which was a source of great anxiety for me. The fact that this was communicated by the head of department caused me particular distress.

The second "accent" experience happened when I worked for a predominantly white University in the UK. Teaching at this university was my first encounter with a typical Welsh and Scottish accent. I had a number of Scottish and Welsh students in my class who were very quick to pick up on the fact that I could not clearly understand what they were saying. They took every opportunity they could to speak in as native a dialect as possible to make it as hard as possible for me to understand what they were saying. Unlike the unconscious microaggressions cited above, this was a deliberate microassault on me. Despite being the "teacher" in the class, I felt inadequate because of my inability to understand some of my students. Under normal circumstances, all I needed to do was to ask for clarification and ask the student to be clearer (which is where I started from). However, it was clear that the students wanted to exert their advantage over me; being natives gave them a position of power over me. I was rather helpless and going to teach this class became a very terrifying experience in the early weeks. Eventually some of my

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[4] Model C schools in South Africa are government schools that are partly funded by parents and a governing body. They offer some of the best education in the country. They typically have exceptional facilities and high academic standards.

students took it upon themselves to "interpret" for me. This gave me some confidence and eventually the microassault died down.

When I took up a job at a different UK university, I was terrified of the same thing happening. Fortunately, this new class experience was more positive. Yosso et al. (2009) and Houshmand et al. (2014) provide other examples of accents as a target for microaggression. In isolation, most of these references to race or "foreignness" are unlikely to create microaggressions. In fact, the associated words and actions could be seen as part of normal human interaction as argued by Etzioni (2014), Lilienfeld (2017) and Thomas (2008), except that they are repeated many times by different people and in situations that imply subordination and disadvantage the individual they are targeting (Alleyne 2004; Sue 2010b; Wells 2013).

The exposure to repeated microaggression can lead to continuous psychological distress and can erode an individual's willingness to engage with larger society. A typical manifestation of such innocuous actions is when faculty meet with silence when a supportive response would normally be expected (Alleyne 2004). I am typically a very active person in whatever spaces I find myself. It was no different therefore when I joined a predominantly white university as a member of the faculty for me to actively participate in school meetings. However, it soon became apparent to me that my contributions were not noticed. In many cases, my contributions would meet with silence but would soon be repeated by a white colleague (male or female) and would then attract a very lively debate. At some point, the head of the school at the time took to mentioning that I had already made the point. This didn't make much of a difference in further meetings. Eventually, I withdrew from participating in meetings. Although I continued to attend the school meetings, I made no further contributions in any of the meetings until I left the institution many years later.[5] I always wondered whether it was my lack of eloquence as language could never have been the problem. I speak fairly clear English. I can imagine that my colleagues never took any notice of this, *it was never their intention to be microaggressive*.

Microaggression can also lead to a loss of self-confidence, demoralisation and an inability to pursue vital interests (Orelus 2013; Wells 2013). This is compounded in the case of black faculty because black academics are presumed to be incompetent. Our abilities are challenged by both students and fellow faculty (Orelus 2013; Stanley 2006). Consequently, there is constant pressure to measure up at several levels. During one of the annual supervision meetings I had with my line manager while working for the same university I refer to above, I indicated that my long-term goal was to become a reader

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[5]This is similar to the concept of psychological departure as suggested by Griffin et al. (2011).

within five years.[6] This was after nearly seven years of working as a senior lecturer at the same university. My line manager responded by saying that I was being too ambitious.

Seen in isolation, this may appear as a case where the line manager had no confidence in my abilities. However, this statement was made after a series of other subtle expressions suggesting that I was incompetent in the area of research, which has a very strong bearing on whether I could become a reader or not. My research interests lie mostly in African development and the journals I was mostly publishing in were not A* journals. My "failure" at publishing was therefore intricately linked to my Africanness. I was left trying to decipher what being "too ambitious" meant. Was I being too ambitious because I was not capable or was I being too ambitious because I was an African, or because I was a foreigner? It could not be because I was a woman as there were quite a number of female professors in the school. Almost reflexively, I concluded that it had to do with my Africanness. This is typically the kind of response that a recipient of microaggression is left with: confusion, then an instinctive reversion to what has most frequently underpinned the behaviour—my race or ethnicity. Similar experiences are indicated in the literature. Nettles and Balogun (2003, 21–2) point out that

> The perception that African American women are incompetent pervades much of their career, forcing upon them the undeserved stress of providing a defense they should not need to give and fighting to prove merit when merit is unquestionably apparent.

Given the history of other microaggressions within the institution, one of which I have narrated above, I was left with very deep feelings of inadequacy. By the time my head of department told me that I was being too ambitious, I was "battle weary" and felt depressed. I seriously considered resigning my position at the university. I thought that I could not stay in a job where there was no possibility of ever developing myself. I was left feeling that my abilities would never be recognised and consequently my career would stagnate.

**Exclusion**

Microaggressions in academia engender a sense of exclusion (Chambers 2011; DeCuir-Gunby and Gunby 2016; Harwood et al. 2012). The norms and standards in institutions of higher learning are set by the majority. For this reason, groups of people who do not conform to the dominant demographics such as people of colour, women and non-natives tend to feel unwelcome. Many black and female academics end up leaving academia (Chambers 2011; Griffin et al. 2011). Microaggressions targeted at these groups tend to create feelings of  exclusion and only work to amplify  the feelings of alienation (Runyowa 2015). Microaggression also causes polarisation in the wider community. More often than not, microaggressions look different depending on whether a person

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[6] In the traditional UK academic hierarchy, a reader is a position higher than a senior lecturer but below a professor.

identifies with the aggressor or the recipient of the aggression. Consequently, it creates and deepens existing divisions and can exacerbate polarisation within an academic setting.

An example of polarisation is a mailing list for black academics which circulated in one of the predominantly white universities in South Africa. The mailing list was used by black academics to encourage the nominations of black academics to key university positions such as the promotions or university appointments committee. Black faculty felt that they were grossly underrepresented in strategic areas. The presence of a black academic on such committees could mitigate implicit barriers to career progression for black academics. The mailing list represented a response to systemic microaggression within the institution. While the list indicates some form of voice for the black academics and provides a place to belong, it also magnifies divisions within an institution. This kind of polarisation can be very damaging to the functioning of an institution—certainly in the case of a university where transformation is expected to be a priority. Polarisation is visible in other forms as well. For example, I consistently found myself unintentionally paying special attention to black students in order to ensure that they did not end up at the bottom of the class. Again, this is an unconscious response on my part to what I had experienced as repeated insinuations that black students were intellectually inferior.

**Strategic Consequences**

Microaggressions have strategic consequences. Those who are traditionally privileged are inevitably there first (Wells 2013). Even those who are not privileged tend to stake out their territories so that microaggression can be used to push others out of the way. One area in academia where the strategic consequences of microaggression are visible is through student evaluations. Many universities accept student evaluations as an accurate reflection of an academic's abilities in class and use them as part of the promotion and tenure process. Research however has shown that non-native, black and female academics experience microaggression through student evaluations (Chambers 2011; Gomez et al. 2011; Merritt 2008; Wells 2013).

While in the UK, I worked for a university that had a partner institution whose foundation programmes were linked to the main university. The teaching environment and facilities for these groups of students were virtually identical. The difference in the two student groups was that the college's group had a good combination of racial, gender and country backgrounds while the student group in the main programme was made up of principally white students. Despite the close similarities in the curriculum, I was scored significantly lower in the mainstream programme. The early classes in each year were a challenge. I had to be ready for those students who were intent on proving that I was not able to teach. Similar experiences are related in Joshi, McCutcheon, and Sweet (2015) and Van Slutyman (2015). Some of these students became some of my highest performing students but there is no way of judging how they scored me in the student evaluations. Relatedly, while working for a predominantly white university in South Africa, I was

approached by a group of black students and told that the black students would deliberately score me very highly because they had been approached by some white lecturers to score the black lecturers poorly. This came as a shock to me. There was no way of confirming these allegations. However, it gives an indication of the strategic importance of student evaluations. Rather than being a microaggression, student evaluations provide a platform for expressing deeply held prejudices against minorities. Because evaluations are done by many students at the same time, it can feel like the prejudices are repeated many times over at once.

## Responding to Microaggression

The nature of microaggressions often leaves victims unsure about how to respond to the microaggression. The immediate reaction is often a series of questions to try and understand firstly what has happened, then to determine whether the person really meant what they said or did. This is followed by trying to calculate how to respond. This process is compounded by the fact that the victim is often in the minority. Mellor (2004) suggests that coping with racial microaggression requires skills beyond those required for everyday emotions and situations. Consequently, they are draining. In this section, I reflect on how I have coped with microaggressions. I follow this by comparing my experiences to others' experiences as expressed in the literature. Having already underlined the ubiquity of microaggressions, a reflection on coping mechanisms will highlight the fact that victims can flourish even in the presence of microaggressions if the "right" skills or responses are adopted.

I have found that being assertive and using safe counterspaces have helped to extenuate the impact of microaggression. Safe counterspaces can exist both within and outside an institution. The predominantly white university I worked for in the UK had no counterspaces that addressed my need. There was no organisation for non-native academics. That made it difficult for me to find refuge within the institution. However, counterspaces outside the workplace mitigated the impact of microaggressions. Similar to findings by Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto (2015), spiritual counterspaces served to validate me and my abilities. Through my church, I was able to use my skills to teach and mentor youth in my community. External counterspaces, however, do not completely ameliorate the effects of microaggressions. Despite my spiritual counterspaces, the constant invalidations wore me down and as many have indicated in the literature, I found myself battle weary. This affected my output which only served to suggest to me and perhaps my line manager that I was probably incompetent. The effect of external counterspaces therefore is limited.

Perhaps what has helped me the most in dealing with microaggressions is being assertive. I refer above to a supervision meeting with my line manager where he indicated that I was being too ambitious by wanting to become a reader. After that meeting, a thorough thought process led me to confront him. The decision to not cower and withdraw the way I had done for many years changed my life. I suggested ways in which the institution

could help alleviate the effects of the invalidations I had experienced over the years. The response was positive and although I am now in a new job, the decision to confront my situation changed my life and career. I still experience microaggressions where I work. However, I am better equipped to deal with them. Being assertive about the situation has made it possible for me to play a big role in determining my career path and has made it much easier for me to make a meaningful contribution to the institution.

In a similar manner, I decided that I would take the microaggression about my accent and use it positively. I discussed it openly with the students. I was upfront about the potential problems associated with the fact that I have a "bit of an accent" and indicated that they could freely discuss how I pronounced words. Moreover, I now start with each new cohort by giving a little background about myself. I discuss with the students some of the challenges they might face because of my foreign accent. Confronting it this way has pre-empted some of the comments that I have experienced in the past and it has helped the students to be more open-minded about me. It has also improved our interaction, enhancing their learning and my teaching experience.

The literature suggests various ways that individuals in academia have responded to microaggression. I have aligned these with my own experience and put them in three categories: safe counterspaces (such as church and youth organisations), assertive responses (confronting my line manager), and resistance (speaking out, psychological and physical departure). Table 1 shows examples of coping mechanisms within this taxonomy as identified in the literature. Victims of microaggression may create safe counterspaces which provide a platform for validation and where invalidations encountered in the wider space can be challenged. These counterspaces can take different forms depending on the type of environment in which an individual operates. For example, Ong, Smith, and Ko (2018) identify five counterspaces for black women in STEM education. These include peer-to-peer relationships, mentoring relationships, diversity conferences and campus groups. Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) also show that Afro-American students create their own student organisations and sororities. These counterspaces can provide an environment in which academics foster their own learning and career development. These spaces also allow victims of microaggression to learn strategies to resist the effects of microaggression and glean support. Some counterspaces require more involvement and serve to validate one's abilities, for example, involvement in community projects in disadvantaged communities or collaboration on projects with other women or academics of colour (Butner, Burley, and Marbley 2000; Harwood et al. 2012; Houshmand, Spanierman, and Tafarodi 2014; Lewis et al. 2016).

Some victims of microaggression respond in a proactive way. This may include speaking out or being assertive by taking actions that minimise the effects of the microaggression (Lewis et al. 2013; Nadal 2014). In the first case, individuals are proactive not in the sense of pre-empting the action of the perpetrator, since this is unknown in advance. Rather the victim is proactive in the sense that they can verbalise the frustration in some

way. This can include speaking out against the microaggressions or advocating for minority groups within one's institution. The literature however shows that although such reactions may be normal and healthy, they will often engender negative consequences (Sue et al. 2007). The microaggression may become more aggressive. Proactive responses may also come in the form of being assertive. However, as some have argued, in the face of microaggressions, assertiveness can be a privilege of the majority (kw237335, 2012). As pointed out above, microaggression is trivialised by the majority. This can make being assertive by those in the minority very difficult. The difficulty is exacerbated as perpetrators become defensive when confronted with their biases. When black women voice their frustrations for example, they are labelled as "loose cannons" and this negatively affects their career prospects (Trottman 2009).

A final response is resistance. Resistance may take several forms such as passive aggressive responses (Nadal 2014), departures (Chambers 2011; Houshmand, Spanierman, and Tafarodi 2014), and active action against the microaggression (Lewis et al. 2016). A person may respond in a passive-aggressive way by either joking or making a sarcastic comment about the microaggression. In many cases, because of the apparent invisibility of the victim, passive-aggressive responses may take the form of a silent protest such as refusing to cooperate, giving non-verbal cues such as angry looks and other body signals to show anger or displeasure. Departures may either be physical removal from the environment or a psychological departure. Academics sometimes leave the academe or move to more racially diverse institutions (Chambers 2011). An example of psychological departure from an academic perspective is the fear of competitive situations and withdrawal from academic spheres (Houshmand, Spanierman, and Tafarodi 2014). For example, victims of microaggression will not apply for senior positions for fear of failure and therefore validating the microaggression.

**Table 1:** Responses to microaggression

| Creation of safe counterspaces | Proactive responses | Resistance |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Self-mentoring through collaborations (Butner, Burley, and Marbley 2000) <br> 2. Seeking comfort in surrounding multicultural environment (Butner, Burley, and Marbley 2000; Griffin et al. 2011; Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto 2015; Houshmand, Spanierman, and Tafarodi 2014) <br> 3. Creating networks within academic communities amongst own ethnic groups and gender (Butner, Burley, and Marbley 2000) <br> 4. Involvement in community projects with the disadvantaged (Butner, Burley, and Marbley 2000) <br> 5. Leaning on support networks (Constantine et al. 2008; Hall and Fields 2015; Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto 2015; Robinson-Wood et al. 2015) <br> 6. Withdrawing and engaging only with groups one identifies with (Cueva 2014; DeCuir-Gunby and Gunby 2016) | 1. Using one's voice as power (Constantine et al. 2008; Cueva 2014; Lewis et al. 2016; Pittman 2012; Robinson-Wood et al. 2015) <br> 2. Self-supportive activities such as increased skills training (Cueva 2014; Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto 2015; Robinson-Wood et al. 2015) | 1. Using one's voice as power (Constantine et al. 2008; Cueva 2014; Lewis et al. 2016; Pittman 2012; Robinson-Wood et al. 2015) <br> 2. Avoidance (DeCuir-Gunby and Gunby 2016; Robinson-Wood et al. 2015) <br> 3. Withdrawing from academic spheres (Constantine et al. 2008; Griffin et al. 2011; Robinson-Wood et al. 2015) <br> 4. Aggression or retaliation (Houshmand, Spanierman, and Tafarodi 2014; Robinson-Wood et al. 2015) |

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have reviewed my experience of microaggression with reference to the literature. Using autoethnographic methods underpinned by the critical race theory, I show that microaggressions are pervasive. They are not confined to any type of environment or culture. I have experienced different forms of microaggression in most environments in which I have worked. They take different forms depending to which minority group one belongs. They may be racial, gendered or may relate to one's nationality or ethnicity. I suggest that victims of microaggression accept that microaggressions are inevitable. I have found that acknowledging the ubiquity of microaggression is empowering and has left me with an increased capacity to deal with its effects. Acknowledging microaggressions allows the victims to be more assertive and hence more productive. Having acknowledged the microaggressions I faced and their effect on me, I am now able to be assertive in a microaggressive environment and therefore more effective at my job. As with others' experiences cited in the literature, I find counterspaces to be a very good sanctuary. I now have safe counterspaces within the university that meet my needs. Management of academic institutions can provide a more enabling academic environment by being proactive in mitigating the effects of microaggressions and encouraging the creation of *safe* counterspaces and platforms that allow victims to address their experiences.

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