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Gender Microaggressions in Low-Context Communication Cultures: A Perceptual Study in the Context of Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

In recent years the concept of microaggression has increasingly spurred the academic debate resulting in a number of classifications to express its several forms. This contribution seeks to shed light on gender microaggressions as they occur in higher education settings and discusses a number of perceptual aspects from an interpersonal, systemic and environmental level. It is attempted to relate these brief and commonplace verbal and behavioural indignities to the perceived level of hostile and derogatory insults towards the investigated members of the stereotyped academic group.

In doing so, both overt and subtle daily acts of discrimination are identified in the form of microassaults, microinvalidations and microinsults and the extent to which women in academia face particular microaggressions is explored. In particular, it is looked at women's experiences that pursue a scholarly career in low-context communication cultures such as Austria and Finland. It was found that the largest amount of microaggressions occurred in terms of microinvalidations which classify female gender experiences as non-existent insofar that perpetrators invalidate or negate realities of women by pretending that such aggressions have never happened or that women are just reacting in a hypersensitive manner. While it is recognised that a low-context communication culture is defined along the lines of explicit and non-personal communication styles, there are still a number of differences as to the extent of perceived gender microaggressions in both countries. In Austria - considered as a masculine country and expressed as such by the Finns - females seemed to be exposed to more microaggressions than their Finnish colleagues. Also the identification and elimination of such inequalities appeared to be a greater issue in Finland than in Austria. This cross-border contribution explores perceived factors for negative stereotypes and discriminatory acts against women in academia and relates them to the societal and institutional context of the investigated countries.

1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of microaggression, coined by Pierce (1970) to describe insults and negative racial slights against Afro-Americans, was soon taken up by women's and social rights activists to include similar aggressions directed towards women (Rowe, 1990, Nadal & Haynes, 2012), people with different sexual orientation (Sue, 2010, Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011) or people with disabilities (Keller & Galgay, 2010). Over the last decades a growing body of literature discusses the many forms and sizes that microaggressions and microinequalities can take against marginalized groups and how they have evolved into a new face of racism, one that- at first glance- appears to be more subtle but was found by no means less painful

(Constantine, 2007; Sue, 2010; Capodilupo et al, 2010; Nadal, 2013), often intended to hit their victims as a full-fledged (and not 'micro') insult.

Hence, strategies of turning to indirect allusions for evading bold dehumanising messages when addressing marginalized groups seem to increasingly become the rule in societal and political arenas. For this reason, it is a most urgent scholarly task to decipher this "code of dehumanization" and lay open how individual speakers mould its narrative motifs and how degrading allusions in the form of microaggressions potentially take shape in the recipient's perceptual encoding of emotions.

This contribution looks at gender microaggressions that occur among female teaching staff at higher education institutions in Austria and Finland. More particularly, it is investigated how women in academia perceive verbal or behavioural indignities, especially in the light of low-context communication cultures that are characterized by explicit verbal communication patterns, frequently independent of its context (Hall, 1976).

2 GENDER MICROAGGRESSIONS

Gender microaggressions can be commonly described as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities" (Nadal, 2008, p 23) that are directed towards women to communicate hostile and disparaging insults. Intended or unintended dismissive looks, gestures or expressions against women are a form of systemic discrimination against members of this stereotyped group. Although it was found that in the Western world blatant expressions of sexism are on the decline, negative stereotypical discriminatory acts are still on women's daily agendas (Basford et al, 2013). Such gender-biased reactions embrace being overlooked, getting unwanted stares or dismissing accomplishments.

What has changed is that discrimination is becoming more subtle and ambiguous, but also a subtle form of degrading allusions has still a major impact on work-related factors such as limited mentoring and network options and family-related issues. The glass ceiling is even today an ever-present obstacle in today's business environment (Bible & Hill, 2007, p 65).

Sue (2010) identified nine forms of gender microaggressions which can be expressed on an environmental, systemic or interpersonal level. These messages comprise sexual objectification, second-class citizenship, use of sexist language, assumption of inferiority, restrictive gender roles, denial of the reality of sexism, denial of individual sexism, invisibility, and sexist humour.

While interpersonal microaggressions go hand in hand with verbal threats or dismissive body language, which frequently tend to be met by avoidance behaviour, environmental microaggressions become more apparent on a systematic and institutional level and are reflected in their history of exclusion. Such aggressions take form in countless "demeaning and threatening social, educational, political, or economic cues that are communicated individually, institutionally, or societally to marginalized groups" (Sue, 2010a, p. 25).

2.1 Forms of Microaggressions

Perpetrators of microaggressions may sometimes be unaware of their biases and prejudices that they hold against marginalized groups and are hence more unlikely to identify discriminatory acts or tend to downplay dismissive remarks or even ignore them. People with low levels of feminist identity (Downing and Roush, 1985) are mostly unable to unveil sexism and discrimination against women which is why awareness-raising activities need to be reinforced, particularly in view of the fact that "privilege is invisible to those who have it" (Kimmel, 2008).

Against this backdrop, Sue et al (2007) conceived a model of categories and relationships among microaggressions which they divided into conscious and unconscious acts of indignities. Although this model was set up to shed light on the existence of racial bias, it can also serve as foundations for gender-related discrimination since forms of sexist behaviour are likely to span from ambiguous microinvalidations to slightly more overt microinsults to explicit microassaults.

2.1.1 *Gender related Microinvalidations*

By ignoring the gendered lives of women, perpetrators of microinvalidations often unconsciously negate female realities and invalidate or nullify their psychological experiences. Such actions may include expressions such as “there is no such thing as sexism” or “we are all human beings” or “I am totally gender-blind, may the best person get the job” or making assumptions about females due to their status as women. Such interactions in form of verbal comments or dismissive behaviour discredit the thoughts and feelings of women based on their gendered experiences and are intended to deny the individually perceived acts of sexism.

2.1.2 *Gender related Microinsults*

Microinsults can be described as “subtle snubs, frequently unknown to the perpetrator, but clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient” (Sue, 2007, p 274). Such messages may include gender-related allusions such as “you are not competent”; “your idea is not valid” or “you do not belong here”. This more covert form of microaggression mostly occurs outside the perpetrator’s level of conscious awareness and can be associated with what Glick & Fiske (2001) call ‘benevolent sexism’, a subtle form of prejudice that “allows members of dominant groups to characterize their privileges as well-deserved, even as a heavy responsibility that they must bear” (p 110). One of such actions disguised as a compliment may be translated in being a “gentleman” and carrying a box for the “lady” or a comment such as “I am the breadwinner and assume so much responsibility for the financial wellbeing of my wife”. Another comment in form of a microinsult may be expressed as “you are highly numerate for a woman”. Examples for environmental or institutional microinsults may include displaying nude pictures of women at the workplace or a male-only working environment.

2.1.3 *Gender related Microassaults*

Gender microassaults are similar to overt and old-fashioned sexism (see Swim & Cohen, 1997) insofar as they are conscious biased beliefs and derogations held and made by the individuals and intentionally targeted towards women with the aim to make reference to their alleged inferiority. This bias is directly and consciously expressed through sexist statements and actions and can take the form of catcalling as a woman walks by or calling her a “bitch” whereas her male colleague may have been qualified as “tough and assertive” in the same situation. Other purposeful discriminatory actions may result in giving second-class service to women or displaying avoidant behaviour as a deliberate act of the microaggressor who intends “to hurt, oppress or discriminate” (Sue et al, 2007, p 331).

In framing the existence and perception of gender microaggressions in academia in two low-context communication cultures, namely Austria and Finland, it is sought here to also reveal their communication patterns to help discern perceptual processes that are linked with the above-described forms of microaggressions.

3 LOW CONTEXT-COMMUNICATION CULTURES

Some research has been undertaken to define and compare cultural characteristics and speech patterns that are predominant among Austrian and Finnish citizens (Chydenius & Gaisch, 2015; Chydenius & Gaisch, 2014; Gaisch & Chydenius, 2012; Santonen et al, 2012). In terms of cultural categorization, Hall (1976) suggested a differentiation between high context (HC) and low context (LC) cultures to better understand differences in their communication patterns. While in HC cultures, speech patterns are affected by clearly structured social hierarchy and strong behavioural norms in which the deeper meaning of a message is usually embedded within the information or frequently even internalised in the person, LC cultures tend to expect that the majority of the information is part of the transmitted message (Hall, 1976). As such their communicative styles are generally characterized by direct and linear patterns and described as precise, dramatic, open, and based on feelings and true intentions (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988).

While Austria as a German-speaking country is clearly outlined as a low-context communication culture with preference for explicit, detailed, direct and precise statements (Kepplinger et al, 2012), the table below does not explicitly position Finland on the low/high context scale.

Table 1. High/Low context by culture (Hall & Hall, 1990).



Still, much scholarly attention has been devoted to Finland and what has been called its communicative dilemma which has been described along the lines of a Janus face (Nishimura, 2008, p 5). Thus, Finland seems to have been a high context culture in many regards, but in view of the speech patterns of generation X (Coupland, 2015), it has increasingly been turning into a low-context culture. Today, Finland is faced with a young generation that explicitly states meaning through language, so that reading between the lines is no longer a linguistic prerequisite.

In any event, communication (within cultures) goes beyond pure information exchange and negotiation of meaning, and is - to use Bibler's words - "the co-being and mutual development of two (and many) totally different worlds — different ontologically, spiritually, mentally, physically (1991, p 298).

As to Finland, it appears that this dilemma holds particularly true since this country appears to "have Western European values cloaked in an Asian communication style" (Lewis, 2005, p 67). The growing tendency of not shying away from conflict (Mikluha 1998, p 148) might, however, provide further evidence that they gradually shift closer to the low-communication style indicated by Hall (1990).

Against this background it becomes particularly interesting to explore how gender microaggressions are perceived by female academics that are socialized in a culture where direct communication with minimum ambiguity is the norm and expectations are high that information is “elaborated, clearly communicated and highly specific” (Andersen 1986, p 22).

4 METHODOLOGY

A qualitative focus-group research design was used to explore collective interactions on how female academics experience their institutional climate with regard to gender-related issues. One guided group discussion was conducted in Austria in order to capture a broad understanding about the agents’ perceptions of gender microaggressions and their lived gendered experiences with such social and verbal cues. The results were then presented to Finnish women in academia who reflected on these gendered experiences and related them to their own societal and institutional contexts.

4.1 Participants

The focus group participants were recruited through purposive sampling and consisted of nine female academics working at six different Austrian institutions of higher learning (four universities of applied sciences and two traditional universities). To meet the predefined criteria, the subjects needed to hold a teaching position within the relevant higher education institution for at least two years. This should ensure that the female professors were sufficiently familiar with their institutional culture and its communication structures. The group discussion was set in a climate that allowed all nine participants to voice share and reflect on each other’s personal experiences and lasted approximately 140 minutes. Upon permission of the participants, the collective interactions were tape-recorded and analyzed along with field notes and research memos. In Finland, seven female academics were interviewed; five in the form of a focus group and two by phone interview. All of the Finnish respondents were middle-aged and had senior lecturing positions.

4.2 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, a method for “identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p 79) is one methodological approach that has been gaining increasing popularity in qualitative data analysis (Al Ghazali, 2014). One of the reasons for its growing appeal may be attributable to the fact that it allows for both descriptive and interpretive accounts of emerging data, another one may be found in its rather pragmatic approach towards data analysis and its theoretical freedom. Braun & Clarke (2006) do not call for the level of detail in the transcript that is normally indispensable in content or narrative analyses but claim that both the transcription convention and density of information shall suit the purpose of analysis.

The aim of a thematic analysis is to get familiar with the data, generate initial codes and search for and review themes. In a second step, they are defined and named and a scholarly report is produced. Since “data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p 84) and no guidelines - apart from making it true to its original nature - are provided as to the philosophical or theoretical underpinning of this method, it needs to be stated here that Halkier’s (2010) method of analyzing focus group interactions was used. By systematically analyzing social enactments, a moderate social constructivist stance and a practice theoretical perspective were adopted in which “social life is understood as performativity” (Halkier, 2010,

p 85) in which everyday agency in accomplishing habitual practices embrace discursive processes as well as bodily material ones (also see Butler, 2010).

5 RESULTS

In the following, findings of the Austrian focus group interview are presented and, if applicable, related to the Finnish setting.

Four main themes emerged from the thematic analysis: environmental inequities, power relations, implicit bias and disciplinary pecking order. To gain insights into the nature of the data contained in each theme, a number of vignettes are presented below. These extracts were chosen in view of their informative and/ or representative value and also served as a point of departure for the Finnish academics.

5.1 Environmental inequalities

Seven out of nine women explicitly stated that they perceived a societal and institutional climate of inequalities based on a long history of female exclusion in academia. They regarded the WHAM (white, heterosexual, able-bodied men) phenomenon (Shevills & Killingray, 1989) as normative institutional forms that were perceived to be in line with national policies.

The maintenance of male homosociality (expressed in male-male relationships) and hegemonic masculinity were identified as a particularly Austrian feature that was seen as deeply embedded in a masculine society that did not provide sufficient mentoring possibilities for female teaching staff. Most of the interviewed women sensed the glass ceiling in view of their lacking networks as the following vignette shows:

“In Austria everyone is for emancipation, to let the token woman in the door; it would be unfair if not. But when it comes to power, status and wealth, then this is purely a male domain. You can see this in politics, in academia or simply in society. Streets and buildings are named after men, awards and prizes are given to men, the big wheels are all men and no one questions anything.”

Four academics stated that in Austria societal aggressions against women are so common and systemic that major awareness-raising activities are required to “open men’s eyes to these inequalities”. On a more positive note, they acknowledged the efforts undertaken by their universities to systematically rise the percentage of female teaching staff and also approved of a variety of measures taken to promote women. At the same time most participants gave account of a number of humiliating social cues that were conveyed to them both on the institutional and societal level. Three felt that women quota were just seen as necessary evil imposed by the law and thus only half-heartedly applied. They also added their perception that female academics needed to perform twice as much as their male colleague to receive “half of the recognition.”

The latter was also supported by the Finnish academics who stated that female teaching staff needed to invest way more effort than men to prove their expert status. They found this to be particularly true for young female academics.

5.2 Power relations

This is the theme where most microinvalidations were perceived. Eight out of nine women provided evidence of structural inequalities based on gender-related power relations. There was common agreement that privilege was invisible to their male colleagues and once addressed, the female academics were confronted with numerous micro attacks in the sense of “why do women always take everything personally” or “shall I do the calculating, women are

apparently better at talking” or “why are you girls always so hyper-sensitive” or “aha, now I obviously get a woman’s perspective”.

All women reported of incidents where their realities as women were negated as this vignette shows:

“I don’t know of any of my work-mates that gets comments on his looks, hair or shoes. No one would dare asking my male colleagues in a reproachful voice why they were not attending last week’s meeting and no male professor would be asked to take the minutes if a female colleague is in the room. When I bring up these issues, I always get dismissive responses as if I was just overreacting and such things were not true”.

There was common understanding that especially among administrative staff (predominantly women) feminist views were seen as unnatural, even counter-productive and that there were only few women with high levels of feminist identity that identified unequal power relations due to their status as women.

A number of incidents were brought up that showed high levels of solidarity with their male superiors and a low degree of appreciation for female teaching staff. One participant even stated that it seemed as if “they were copying the behavioural patterns of their male seniors and applying them to those women that dared to stand out from the crowd”.

In this sense, it became obvious that deviant and non-traditional behaviour was not only little appreciated but it was even punished by dismissive remarks, denial of individual performance or devaluation of one’s accomplishments. Four women stated that these power relations were not openly displayed. Rather they were kept under a cloak of silence and only now and then they came to the fore. Here again, the experimental reality of female academics appeared to be nullified as the following vignette demonstrates:

“I tried to talk to our administrative staff, to make them aware of gender issues, but all I get is a cold shoulder. They ask me what is wrong with me, if I don’t have real problems and genuine work to do. Everything is fine and perfect as it is”.

5.3 Implicit and Explicit Biases

This theme provides a collection of critical incidents and statements that largely fall in the category of microinsults and shows how intentional and unintentional acts of discrimination are guided by perpetrators’ implicit and explicit biases. While stereotypical attribution of characteristics is a common sign of explicit bias, verbal derogation of marginalized groups is an indicator for implicit bias which often resides invisibly in the unconscious of the perpetrator as some introspectively unidentified prejudice.

The first vignette foregrounds a mother of three children that – after giving birth to her third child- was referred to as follows: “There is no more need for her business cards; just throw them away, she has just delivered her third brat, she won’t come again”.

The next one relates to status that a female professor would like to have, just as all her male colleagues and this is what she hears from one of them: “I don’t get you, what is your point? I really would not care about that. This is so not important to me”.

In the following, you can read a comment on a female appointment that was voiced by a male teacher of a school that is composed of 87% of male teaching staff: “What, again a woman? The poor lad has to manage yet another chick.”

The next extract provides evidence of a male teacher’s discomfort when he hears that his female colleagues have bi-weekly “women only” meetings. “What are you women plotting against? I bet this is a conspiracy against us.”

5.4 Disciplinary Pecking Order

The last category was found to be particularly interesting since it links gender to disciplines. It came to the fore that disciplines with a high proportion of female professors (social work, sociology, psychology, humanities) seem to be generally rated of lesser value by male and some female colleagues. A number of vignettes supported this assessment such as “You could have also learned something decent, but you girls always go for social things, helping others and stuff.” or “Haha, research in your field? This is not research; it is stringing words together without any real value”.

What was striking was the fact those women who worked in the hard sciences (e.g. engineering) seemed to deliberately turn a blind eye to microaggressions, even used a number of microinvalidations themselves. It appeared as if they wanted to disguise their femininity for the sake of being perceived as “one of them” as the following extracts demonstrates: “We don’t need anything extra, all those gender-related issues, gender-sensitive expressions and so on; what for? This is all nonsense, we are just like them”.

A similar pecking order was also perceived among the Finnish respondents who claimed that their subject fields tended to be frequently looked down upon by their male colleagues who worked in the hard sciences.

6 DISCUSSION

This contribution showed that low-context cultures express gender microaggressions in academia at different levels. While macro-level systemic aggressions are frequently expressed in rather high-context patterns due to internalised societal and institutional historical developments, microinvalidations were found to be a frequent method of demonstrating incomprehension when being confronted with the gender card. The position frequently expressed by male teaching staff that everyone can succeed in our society/institution if only they work hard enough, was a constant reminder of the second-class status of women.

In Austria it was found that microinsults moved beyond the micro realm and their cumulative nature exposed unequal power relations. In Finland, however, which is generally considered as a feminine country (Hofstede et al, 1997) with a much more balanced work-related male/female ratio where equality, compromise, and support from managers with a focus on well-being is foregrounded (Boudreau, 2013), these findings were not supported. On the contrary, in the Finnish focus group interview, three respondents even stated that their male colleagues tended to be downplayed in their higher education institution, which had to do with the greater majority of female teaching staff in the relevant institutions. While the Austrian respondents recalled a number of statements that were directed to them in person by one male individual, the Finnish were more inclined to think that such aggressions happened more in group constellations. This would support the theory that although both countries tend to be low-context cultures, the Finnish are nevertheless higher in context and shy away from too direct derogatory insults.

A common denominator between Austria and Finland was found in what was identified as a “deliberate exclusion of females in male-only power networks”. Another one was seen in the disciplinary pecking order which translated in the fact that especially young women were overlooked or treated in a dismissive way.

Interestingly, the Finnish made a much stronger point in denying or not admitting gender inequalities. They had the overall perception that there was a lacking recognition of microaggressions which may be supported by general societal equality endeavours.

7 LIMITATIONS AND OUTLOOK

This section discusses limitations and gives recommendation for future research. One limitation of the study was that the communication culture was not measured within the sample. Both societal and institutional cultures are highly diverse in their communication patterns, which makes it necessary to measure the perception of the communication culture within the sampled institutions to avoid jumping to false conclusions. Another limitation is the lack of substantial background information regarding the institutional culture in terms of gender ratio, hierarchy or size and the fact that the sample was very small.

One possible avenue to obtain a wider set of data is to extend the sample size. This could be done by taking account of the different faculties they work for. Another recommendation for future research is to differentiate between different sample populations (engineers, social scientists, academics working in the humanities).

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