

## Hierarchical Microaggressions in Higher Education

Kathryn Young and Myron Anderson  
Metropolitan State University of Denver

Saran Stewart  
University of the West Indies,  
Mona Campus, Jamaica

Although there has been substantial research examining the effects of microaggressions in the public sphere, there has been little research that examines microaggressions in the workplace. This study explores the types of microaggressions that affect employees at universities. We coin the term “hierarchical microaggression” to represent the everyday slights found in higher education that communicate systemic valuing (or devaluing) of a person because of the institutional role held by that person in the institution. We explore hierarchical microaggressions through examining qualitative data from multiple cultural competence trainings devoted to learning about microaggressions on college campuses. Findings indicate 4 main types of hierarchical microaggressions: valuing/devaluing based on role/credential, changing accepted behavior based on role, actions (ignoring/excluding/surprise/interrupting) related to role, and terminology related to work position. The findings add a new dimension of interpretation to the current research on microaggressions, one that relates directly to hierarchical status of workplace identities. Hierarchical microaggressions exist in all workplaces, but are of a unique type in a university because of the rhetoric related to equality and upward mobility associated with college going. Our findings indicate that these forms of microaggressions are more than insensitive comments; they impact people because people take on an identity associated with their status at the university, an identity related to the amount of higher education they attain. This study adds to the literature on microaggressions and provides university stakeholders with the language and the tools to reduce microaggressions from their respective environments leading to the improvement of overall campus climate.

*Keywords:* campus climate, cultural competence, diversity, higher education, microaggression

Microaggressions on university campuses have received attention in the literature and in popular media recently (Vega, 2014). The term microaggression is used to describe, “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derog-

atory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). This microaggression definition has been broadened to include not just racial slights, but slights against other identity markers like gender, disability, and sexual orientation (Alleyne, 2004; Evans & Broido, 2002; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001; Sue, 2010; Tatum, 2000). The literature posits that reducing microaggressions will lead to improvements in campus climate which in turn may lead to improved social and academic outcomes for students (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999), and to an increased sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997) to the campus community.

Some of this literature examines the effects of “differentials in power and privilege” (Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, & Cuellar, 2008, p. 217) between students from dominant racial backgrounds and those historically underrepresented at universities, yet there is limited examination

---

This article was published Online First December 8, 2014.

Kathryn Young and Myron Anderson, Department of Secondary, K-12, and Educational Technology, Metropolitan State University of Denver; Saran Stewart, Department of Humanities and Education, University of the West Indies, Mona Campus, Jamaica.

We thank Julie Sharer-Price for her invaluable feedback throughout the research, writing, and feedback process.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kathryn Young, Department of Secondary, K-12, and Educational Technology, Campus Box 21, P.O. Box 173362, Denver, CO 80217. E-mail: [kyoung42@msudenver.edu](mailto:kyoung42@msudenver.edu)

of how employees, who spend even more time on university campuses than students, experience microaggressions. Employees, much like students, experience varying degrees of power and privilege on college campuses, privileges related to their professional role on the campus. This study uses a qualitative approach to explore the types of microaggressions experienced by university employees' on a college campus. We use the term "hierarchical microaggression" to represent the everyday slights found in higher education that communicate systemic valuing (or devaluing) of a person because of the institutional role held by that person. We explore hierarchical microaggressions through examining evidence from multiple cultural competence trainings devoted to learning about microaggressions on college campuses.

### Literature Review and Theoretical Framing

Researchers who turn to the term "microaggression" are all trying to explain a covert, unconscious, subtly destructive phenomenon related to individualized experiences with racism (or other forms of social oppression) in our society (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Wills, 1977; Solórzano, 1998). Research examining racial microaggressions in the workplace argues that managers and employees consciously support equal treatment for all, while unconsciously harboring negative feelings toward people of color (Hunter, 2011; Sue, 2010). This insidious form of workplace racism "may erode people's mental health, job performance, and the quality of social experience" (DeAngelis, 2009, p. 42). It creates workplace tensions where managers and coworkers interpret differently an employee's attitude, performance, potential for growth, and suitability for advancement (Alleyne, 2004; Bielby, 2000; Constantine & Sue, 2007; Rowe, 1990). As these issues are hard to prove and often one party experiences them while the other has no idea the microaggression has happened (Sue, 2010), layered together with the complicated and uncomfortable history of racial dialogue in the United States, addressing racial microaggressions in the workplace becomes a near impossibility (Alleyne, 2004; Bielby, 2000; Constantine & Sue, 2007; Rowe, 1990). This leads to the rationalization or denial of microaggressions and sustains racist behavior in the workplace (Hunter, 2011).

Workplace racism has been found in the experiences of faculty of color in universities. Griffin, Pifer, Humphrey, and Hazelwood (2011) demonstrate how Black professors at two universities have experienced both individual and institutional racism and use multiple strategies to deal with hostile workplace environments. Similarly, Jackson (2008) examined race segregation across the academic workforce looking specifically at employment predictors for African American males in the academic workforce. The results indicated that whereas human capital and merit-based performance measures were good employment predictors for White men, that "hiring processes in higher education [may] disadvantage African American men in the academic workforce" (p. 1023).

The expression of racism emerges subtly through words and actions, invisibly aggressing against, and marginalizing minorities (Alleyne, 2004; Constantine, Smith, Redington, & Owens, 2008; Sue, 2010). Similar forces are at work with regard to sexism (Sandler, 1986; Swim et al., 2001), heterosexism (Evans & Broido, 2002; Renn, 2010), and ableism (Tatum, 2000). Regardless of the type of microaggression at work, the message is the same; some people are more valued and valuable than others.

All organizations delineate the different roles needed to make an organization function (Fuller, 2003). Within many organizations, some roles are thought of as more or less desirable, with higher or lower value to them (Ingram, 2006). In many ways the value of the role impacts the value of the person who holds that role. For example, a CEO has more "worth" than a middle manager, the manager has more worth than a clerk, and a clerk has more worth than a custodian. This worth is not only monetary; it also translates into a value judgment on the person who holds that role, with people in lower-valued roles treated as lesser-valued people (Fuller, 2003). Fuller (2003) calls the maltreatment of employees with less power or lower status rankism. Through role valuing, those in "higher" positions (the somebodies—Fuller's terminology) commit microaggressions against those in "lower" (the nobodies) positions. Fuller's work helps situate the problem of workplace maltreatment in the traditional business model at the individual level.

The ranking system(s) within higher education is more complex than the traditional business model and directly relates to campus climate. "Role" often becomes the defining identity of employees at a university because employees at universities are organized by two main groups: faculty and staff. Sights in the university context provide a new lens to understand microaggressions experienced by employees in that context. These microaggressions are important because they impact employees emotionally and physically, but they also reflect the goals and values that are evidenced in campus climate (Hurtado, 2005).

The theoretical framing of the study relies heavily on Sue et al.'s work (2007). Sue et al. have researched at length about microaggressions in everyday life and created a comprehensive typology of microaggressions. They broke microaggressions down into three types: microinsult, microinvalidation, and microassault. Microinsults are behaviors, actions, or verbal remarks that convey rudeness, insensitivity, or demean a person's group or social identity or heritage (Sue et al., 2007). Microinvalidations are actions that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of people who represent different groups (Sue et al., 2007). Microassaults are explicit put downs meant to hurt the victim. Sue et al. explain that microassaults are similar to "old fashioned racism" (p. 274). The researchers categorize the actions, comments and nonverbal behaviors by themes that relate to the meanings behind the microaggression, for example, the theme of pathologizing cultural values relates to the implicit message that the values of people of color are abnormal. Other scholars have turned to the analysis of actions, comments, and non-verbal behaviors to gender, disability, and sexuality microaggressions as well (Alleyne, 2004; Evans & Broido, 2002; Swim et al., 2001; Tatum, 2000).

This research highlights the importance of examining role hierarchy in higher education-based microaggressions because of the salience of the roles people hold at universities to their day-to-day workplace interactions and to the overall climate of the university. This study asks what types of microaggressions employees experience in higher education. It provides data relevant to the frequency and type of microaggression that occur in higher education as a

workplace. The data also provides examples of subtle forms of microaggressions in higher education related to hierarchy.

## Background

Great Western University is an urban university whose student demographics reflect that of the state. This university enrolls a diverse student body and employs a diverse faculty. The university has a workforce that consists of approximately 1,900 faculty and staff. This number includes approximately 400 supervisors (anyone who has direct control over the workplace actions of anyone else at the university). The demographics of Great Western University's full-time faculty population is comprised of 76% Caucasian, 10% Hispanic or Latino, 5% African American, 5% Asian, 2% Bi- or Multiracial, 1% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 0% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 1% Other (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems (IPEDS) Human Resources Survey, 2012). The demographics of Great Western University's administrative staff population is comprised of 66% Caucasian, 20% Hispanic or Latino, 5% African American, 5% Asian, 2% Bi- or Multiracial, 1% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 0% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 1% Other (IPEDS Human Resources Survey, 2012). Great Western University has approximately 25,000 students with similar demographics to that of the administrative staff.

To maintain a high-quality education for students and positive working climate for those who work at the university, Great Western University implemented a Campus Climate Survey in 2010, to establish a baseline appraisal of the campus climate. The survey solicited opinions related to attitudes toward diversity, satisfaction with the institution, feeling of comfort and belonging, treatment by various groups, and inclusiveness of the workforce with regard to multiple identity groups (age, race, gender, ethnicity, national origin, disability, sexual orientation, religion, and intellectual differences).

The results from the 2010 Campus Climate Survey, along with research conducted from gathering information from Great Western University's campus diversity committees, pushed the institution to further educate the leadership of Great Western University's workforce in the

area of cultural competence. The Chief Diversity Officer at Great Western University partnered with me (the first author), a multicultural education specialist in the Teacher Education department, to develop a 90-min interactive workshop on cultural competence. This workshop became an integral part to a mandatory supervisor-training program (identified as a need from results of the Campus Climate Survey) for anyone who supervised anyone else at the university—including administrative staff who supervise work-study students, department chairs who supervise faculty, vice presidents who supervise unit leaders and the president of the university who supervises everybody. The supervisor-training program addressed institutional rules around recruiting, leadership development, customer service, team development, communication and interpersonal skills, and cross-cultural communication.

The cultural competence workshops were designed to provide the attendees with a fundamental understanding of microaggressions. First, at the beginning of the workshop a list of race, gender, age, disability, and sexual orientation microaggressions was displayed. Second, we defined microaggressions and presented three short video clips of scenarios depicting microaggressions. These scenarios focused on race, gender, and language status. Finally, we included two personal examples of microaggressions that we had experienced in the workplace: an African American faculty member had to continuously validate his academic credentials to faculty, staff, and students in the workplace and a female faculty member had to reiterate her plan to work again after maternity leave. These personal examples were meant to provide a model for supervisors in the group activity. The participants were divided into groups of four to six and asked to identify three microaggressions that they have experienced (witnessed, perpetrated or received) at work. Position held at the university was not explicitly highlighted during this exercise nor were groups asked to identify from which position they experienced the microaggression as the goal was to learn about microaggressions, not to self-disclose a role in the microaggression. These groups were randomly selected and included a mixture of supervisors of different levels, from President to Director. Each group

was asked to write down their microaggression examples on butcher paper and post the papers around the room. The groups then shared their examples with the rest of the session participants. The training ended with strategies to combat microaggressions.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative approach to understand the types of microaggressions experienced by employees in higher education. The data collected represent the written artifacts from the group exercises of the cultural competence trainings explained above. The researchers gathered the butcher paper used at the Cultural Competence Workshops at the end of each training session. There were four to eight groups per training session. Sixty groups of supervisors posted three to six examples each for a total of 191 examples of microaggressions shared in training sessions. No identifying information appeared on the butcher paper.

## Data Analysis Procedures

The raw data were inserted into an Excel spreadsheet for coding purposes. Initially, we used thematic coding against Sue et al.'s (2007) taxonomy of microaggressions to derive findings to answer the overarching research questions: What types of microaggressions are experienced by employees in higher education? Each microaggression was examined in regards to the criteria established by Sue et al. (2007) as well as in relation to the social group that was being highlighted. Sue's criteria include "type" of microaggression: microinsults, microinvalidations and microassaults. We added "electronic" as a mode of delivery after several examples in the data pointed to electronic communications that sent microaggressive messages and removed microassaults as we did not have enough detail in the data to know intent. On the next pass, we examined the microaggressions for racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, language bias, religious bias, and an "other" category so that we could understand which identifiable groups, based on the literature, were apparent in our data. We then added several "isms" that had not been previously addressed in the literature but were evident in

our data like culture, geography, income, and most notably “role.” We use the term “ism” to indicate prejudice or discrimination against a recognized social group. On our third pass through the data we examined the microaggressions against themes found in Sue et al.’s work. We were left with many instances of everyday slights that were not directly related to identity categories defined by Sue et al. but were related to the role people hold at an institution of higher learning. These microaggressive themes did not clearly fall in a category established by past researchers, so we conducted another level of analysis and added a new category—hierarchy—with several themes related to role hierarchy. These include actions related to role, change accepted behavior, terminology related to work position, and valuing/devaluing opinion (see Figure 1).

### Interrater Reliability

The first two authors used the same coding scheme on 24% of the comments selected at random. Cohen’s kappa was calculated separately for type of microaggression, ism enacted, and theme. The two raters agreed on 34 of the 46 coding units for “type of microaggression” (74%), resulting in a Cohen’s kappa of 0.53, which suggests moderate intercoder reliability (Weber, 1990). Disagreement between the two raters involved the two raters having trouble seven times deciding if something was a microinvalidation or a microinsult. The two raters agreed on 43 of the 46 coding units for “ism” enacted (93.5%), resulting in a Cohen’s kappa of 0.92, which suggests high intercoder reliability (Weber, 1990). The two raters agreed on 36 of the 46 coding units for “theme” (78.3%),

This document is copyrighted by the American Psychological Association or one of its allied publishers. This article is intended solely for the personal use of the individual user and is not to be disseminated broadly.

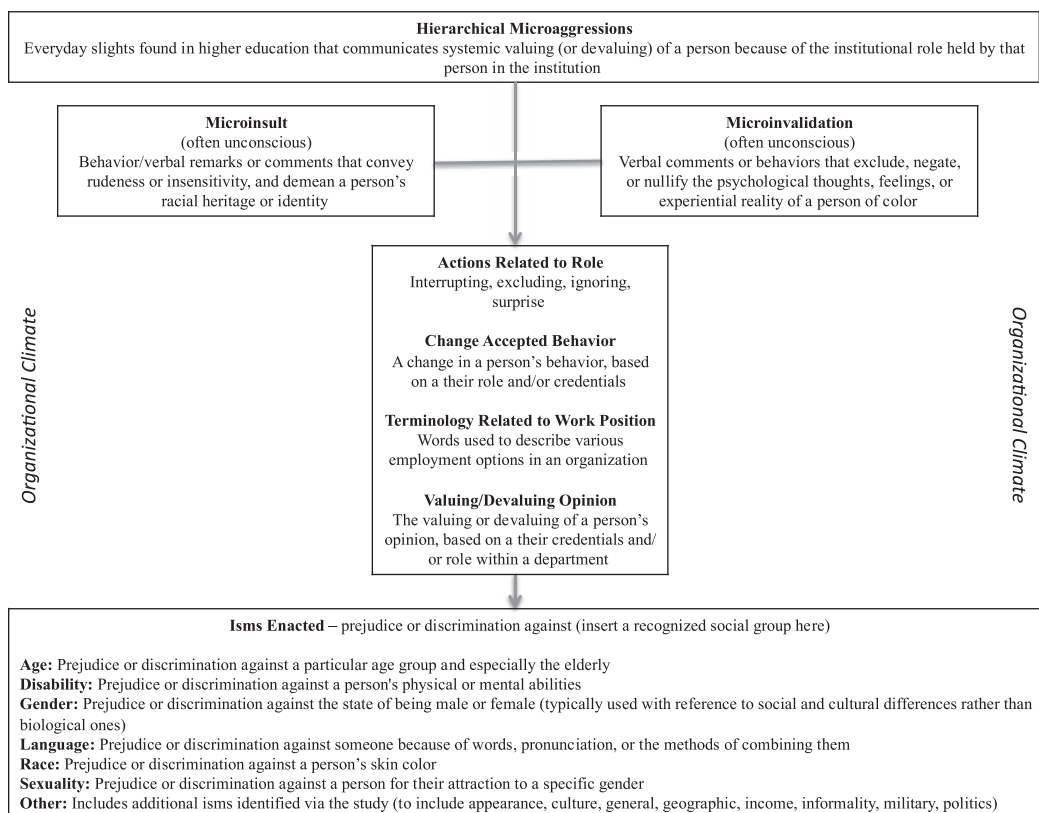


Figure 1. Categories and relationships among hierarchical microaggressions in higher education.

resulting in a Cohen's kappa of 0.48, which suggests moderate intercoder reliability (Weber, 1990). Although this might seem slightly low, it is in an acceptable value range given the 18 different possible coding categories within "theme." Disagreement between the two raters primarily involved the first rater's broader use of Sue et al.'s (2007) taxonomy. When disagreements arose, the raters used a debate and deference strategy whereby each explained his or her stance, and then if agreement still had not been reached, rater one deferred to rater two because rater two was more deeply immersed in the literature on a day-to-day basis.

### Limitations

The lack of triangulation of data sources in collecting single points of data on butcher paper is a limitation. We did not collect demographic data, specific roles held at the university, or role of the participant in the microaggressive experience (witness, perpetrator or receiver); all data that would have led us to complete more fine-grained analysis on this data set. It also would have helped us know whether there were any hierarchical issues within groups that participants did not feel free to reveal in the exercise. In many cases, we could not infer deeper intersectional analysis on race and role or disability and role based on the butcher paper alone. There was no member-check of the analysis as the analysis was compiled after the completion of all Supervisor-Training Workshops. Further research through in-depth qualitative interviews would add deeply to this literature.

## Results

### Themes Found in the Data

This study initially compared the list of microaggressions compiled across cultural competence trainings to Sue et al.'s (2007) taxonomy of racial, gender, and sexual orientation microaggressions. Although we gave examples related to race, gender, and language in the training, only 40% of the comments on butcher paper related to these types of microaggressions; 42% of themes surfaced were directly related to hierarchy, and 18% of comments did not have enough information to be used in the analysis. The findings in this article focus on

themes found within role hierarchy in the data set. This article does not have the scope to address other microaggressions like the pervasiveness of gender microaggressions that still permeate institutional interactions, the intersections between various types of microaggressions or intersections between and interactions of different types of microaggressions in the workplace.

### Hierarchical Microaggressions

As mentioned, this study uses the term "hierarchical microaggression" to represent the everyday slights found in higher education that communicate systemic valuing (or devaluing) of a person because of the institutional role held by that person. The themes presented below explain the types of role hierarchy microaggressions found in this study.

**Valuing/devaluing based on role/credential.** Although the microaggression literature addresses the microinsult of being treated like a second-class citizen (Sue, 2010), devaluing an employee because of the status of his or her role is an unexamined way to interpret devaluing someone in a workplace. Valuing or devaluing based on role accounted for 52% of the hierarchical microaggressions. Most microaggressions in the literature are related to identity characteristics that cannot change and how those parts of identity are privileged or oppressed in society. However, valuing or devaluing a person because of the role they were hired into works in much the same way, with privileges ascribed to certain roles and oppressive structures placed on others. Much in the same way as microaggressions hurt when someone is harmed because of identity characteristics that they cannot change like race or gender, microaggressions also cause harm when someone takes a job expecting to be valued for what s/he brings to the job, only to learn once employed, that s/he is devalued because of the position itself.

Some comments written on the butcher paper related to valuing/devaluing based on role made by supervisors in the trainings include: Educational bias (left out of meetings, etc.), Unequal treatment of a work-study student, Tenured versus nontenured—tenured faculty feel they have niched their place by doing the time, Faculty versus staff—faculty more educated, staff less

worth, Hierarchy—someone with power makes others aware of the chain, Devalues people's views and expertise, Treating those with differing educational status differently (classroom stereotyping), Staff are made to feel unimportant, Contributions of those at an academic level less than faculty are less valuable, and Recommendations ignored, but in same meeting, same recommendations made by another person received positively. These comments build a message to employees that some people in some roles in a university are valued over others solely based on their position in the hierarchy. Sometimes this position is related to academic rank, other times just to being "higher up" at the university. Here we share a few reconstructed examples from the comments in order to provide more context to comments like the ones above. For example:

**Classified staff versus faculty.** A classified staff person felt excluded from departmental meetings because even though staff work in the building all day, every day, the meetings are all about the decisions that faculty are asked to make for everyone in the department. Staff are not consulted on policy for the institution, making departmental rules, planning of activities, nothing. In this department, classified staff do not speak in meetings; they are required to attend meetings and are implicitly required not to speak at these meetings. As a result, they feel devalued in departmental meetings where the only people "allowed" to speak are faculty.

Another example occurs when decisions are made by a supervisor that directly affects the working conditions of the supervisee. Paternalistic decision-making reinforces that some people are more "able" to make certain decisions than others.

**Decision maker.** A supervisor makes decisions that would increase the workload for staff and does not consult with the department staff prior to making the decision. Department staff feels they have no voice and are undervalued.

These two examples highlight one facet of hierarchical microaggressions, devaluing someone based on their role or (lack of) credential. The message sent to the devalued employee is that s/he is less capable, less important, less valued.

**Changing accepted behavior based on role.** Changing accepted behavior based on role accounted for 10% of the hierarchical microaggressions. Some comments related to changing accepted behavior made by supervisors in the

training include the following: People change attitude when they find out student status, Boss making jokes about error/mistake, and Will only ask questions of male supervisors. When a person changes how s/he acts depending on the role (or in one case here, the role and gender) of the person they are interacting with, this shows how institutional hierarchy matters in these interactions. Here we share a few reconstructed examples from the comments in order to provide more context for this theme. For example:

**Shouting or joking.** A senior faculty member comes into the front office of a department and shouts at the front desk staff for forgetting to note down the change in meeting location. The front desk staff gently tells the senior faculty member that the chair of the department is the one who changed the meeting at the last minute, thus the staff had no role to play in noting down the change in venue. A few minutes later the same staff person hears the senior faculty member joking about the change in venue with the chair, acting like the lack of notification was no big deal. The staff notices that the senior faculty member feels free to treat a subordinate without respect, but because of the higher status of the chair, will not treat her in a similar manner.

This example shows how people in a position of privilege at the university interact differently with people in the same role versus people in lesser roles. The staff member must not only take the verbal barrage, but also must be gentle in the correction, and then listen to the same person act very differently when confronted with someone in a higher position. This does not just happen within the staff/ faculty divide but also in the pretenure/ posttenure divide. For example:

**Tenure matters.** Junior faculty feel they cannot express themselves, speak up at meetings, or challenge tenured faculty in formal or in informal settings because they need the tenured faculty to approve their progression through the tenure process. Tenured faculty do not notice that the junior faculty do not talk or offer their opinions. After the meeting junior faculty get together and commiserate about how they cannot talk openly in the department.

As Sue (2010) mentions, those in a position of privilege do not know or acknowledge (if they do know) their role in perpetrating the microaggression. These two examples demonstrate differences in acceptable behavior depending on the interaction dyad. "Equals" interact differently than those who are not considered equal. At a university that seeks to improve campus climate and an outward image of valuing differences, these examples send

a contradictory message to employees, that of not equally valuing those in different institutional roles.

**Actions related to role—ignoring/excluding/surprise/interrupting.** The third theme related directly to hierarchical microaggression is that of actions people experience from others that are related to roles held at the university. These actions include ignoring, excluding, surprise, and interrupting. Actions related to role accounted for 36% of the hierarchical microaggressions. Some comments related to actions related to roles made by supervisors in the training include: Interruptions—shutting people down, Ignore (when entering room), “Actually good” – said with surprise, Person of power who doesn’t acknowledge/greet employees, Finishes sentences, As an admin, not being included or allowed to contribute to the discussion, Exclusion in environments like meetings, work, and Purposefully ignored by Sr. Leadership team member. Here we share a few reconstructed examples from the comments in order to provide more context for this theme. Three examples of these microaggressions follow:

**Ignored in the hallway.** Faculty greet each other in the hall. When the same faculty member walks by classified staff s/he ignores the staff completely. This happens daily to the staff. The staff have started to feel like they are invisible or not worth the faculty’s time or interest.

Being ignored because of one’s position devalues the position and the person in that position.

**Excluded from lunch.** Faculty and staff share an office suite. At lunch time every day the same three faculty go around asking other faculty in the suite if they would like to go to lunch. They do not ask the two staff members, do not ask whether the staff would like something brought back for them. The staff members are tired of being excluded from invitations to these lunches.

This repetitive exclusion grates on the staff members because it actively creates in-group and out-group status. And the third example:

**Surprise at smartness.** There is a new staff member who is responsible for keeping track of faculty appointments. One faculty member comes in and asks about his appointments for the day. The staff member rattles off the list of appointments without looking at the online schedule. The faculty asks, “Are you sure?” The staff member says, “Yes, I have a good memory.” The faculty then says, “I didn’t know staff could learn things so quickly!” and walks away. The staff member

is extremely frustrated by the faculty member’s assumption of his lack of memory.

Each microaggressive action sends a new message to the employees—you do not belong, you are not like us, and staff are not smart people. In an environment based on belonging and smartness, these messages impact employees professionally and personally.

**Terminology related to work position.** The last theme within hierarchical microaggressions is that of terminology related to work position, the words chosen to talk about someone’s role at the university indicate their relative power within the institution. Terminology related to role accounted for 2% of the hierarchical microaggressions. Here we share a few reconstructed examples from the comments in order to provide more context for this theme:

Classified staff employee stated that there is a perception that Classified Staff are less valued, not as important to the institution as other administrators. They feel the label “Classified Staff” translates to a perception that they are less capable than other staff just because of terminology.

And:

A student who helps at the front desk in a university office hears weekly, “oh, you’re a work-study.” She feels that it devalues the work she does and indicates to others her lack of finances, which embarrasses her. She would prefer to be called a part-time worker, which she is, and does not have to endure the connotation of being an underskilled “charity case.”

In both examples, the people who held the role have been turned into objects of the university. You are a classified, you are a work-study. Much like in the critiques raised in identity-based literature related to the question “what are you” where respondents do not want to be a “what” but a “who” (e.g., Gee, 2000–2001), a person at a university wants to hold a position, not become one.

## Discussion

The findings add a new layer of interpretation to the current research on microaggressions, one that relates directly to hierarchical status of workplace identities. Hierarchical microaggressions exist in all workplaces, but are of a unique type in a university because of the rhetoric related to equality and upward mobility associated with college going. Our findings indicate that these forms of microaggressions are more than insensitive com-



ments; they impact people because people take on an identity associated with their status at the university, an identity related to the amount of higher education they attain. The microaggressions are reinforced because of the privilege conferred on those with a doctoral degree in this setting, and the lack of privilege associated with those with lesser or no degrees.

Although this study examines hierarchical microaggressions, we know from existing literature that women administrators of color describe “feelings of isolation, lower satisfaction with their professional lives, and negative treatment by majority White colleagues” (Stanley, 2006, p. 706) and many faculty of color respond to institutional microaggressions through “psychological departure and acts of critical agency” (Griffin et al., 2011, p. 495). Just imagine then the experiences of those lower on the academic hierarchy and the multiple and intersectional forms of microaggressions they experience daily on a university campus. Given our findings, there is a need for future research to be conducted on the intersection of hierarchical and identity-based microaggressions. The confluence of race (and/or gender, sexuality, and disability status) within hierarchical roles and positions in an institution would make a considerable contribution to the literature as well as develop constructive working environments in which employees and supervisors can learn to be cultural interpreters, be open to critique, and/or develop self-awareness.

Hierarchical microaggressions impact campus climate for those who work at the university and for those who attend it. These microaggressions are made more problematic because the comments or actions might not be acknowledged as microaggressions by the perpetrator or might be thought of as “innocent and harmless slight(s)” (Sue, 2010, p. 19). This lack of recognition makes it difficult for the person receiving the aggression to report it (Ashburn-Nardo, Morris, & Goodwin, 2008), places the receiver in a strange position of questioning his or her own belief that a microaggression has occurred (Sue, 2010), and makes it difficult for supervisors to create an action plan to address microaggressions in the workplace.

Supervisors possess varying degrees of responsibilities in a university setting. In addition to their formal work expectations, they often become the broker between employee disputes. Many of these disputes arise from microaggressions related to race, gender, and other social identities. Supervi-

sors can approach this part of their work by first bridging differences openly and building understanding across staff to become a cultural interpreter for others (Wilson & Brekke, 1994). They can help people come together by understanding each other’s behaviors. Second, supervisors can help coworkers be more comfortable with themselves by modeling how to become knowledgeable about the backgrounds of others and spreading this knowledge of other people’s backgrounds, beliefs, and cultures. Third, supervisors can discuss possible cultural influences behind behaviors that are different from prior experiences. Fourth, supervisors can help employees be flexible and open to new perspectives through finding opportunities to build understanding of people from other backgrounds and cultures. Supervisors can enter into a dialogue with employees if a disparaging comment is made about a colleague or student. Fifth, supervisors can welcome people’s questions and concerns about cultural competence, diversity, and inclusive excellence. Sixth, being open to critique when employees bring up perceived microaggressions or unfair treatment by supervisors is important for reflexive learning. Lastly, supervisors can develop self-awareness about their own possible role in microaggressing on others and taking responsibility for their own actions (Bartlett, 2009).

When a supervisor is confronted with hierarchical microaggressions, the implications are similar to the ones above, but the suggestions take on a different tone as these microaggressions are directly related to the status of the role held at the university. In this case supervisors must be prepared to deal with mistrust of the aggressee toward those in a position of authority, by enlisting the help of an impartial Ombuds Office; listen actively to the aggressee because the person is looking for someone to give meaning to their experiences, not to downplay the experience; call attention to departmental talk that denigrates certain roles and people in those roles; and create new narratives within the department and in the university that tell a story of valuing employees at various levels so that the dominant narrative is not one of privilege for some and lack of status for the majority of others (Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Diller & Moule, 2004; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2005).

Institutionally, campuses can formally evaluate the level of campus microaggressions. As part of the larger institutional goals of improving campus

climate and broadening the goals of inclusive excellence, campuses can use an “Inclusive Excellence Toolkit” to take stock of progress toward increasing broad diversity goals and develop plans to further improve climate (Treviño, Walker, & Leyba, 2009). Inclusive excellence focuses on the transformation of the institution, with goals of achieving desired outcomes at equitable rates from and between systemic levels of an institution. Inclusive excellence involves infusing the practices and philosophies that encourage diversity into every aspect of an organization, like increasing the numbers and success of historically underrepresented students, faculty, and staff, increasing diverse content across academic programs and in social dimensions of campus, increasing a supportive environment for all students, faculty, and staff to continue to develop, and increasing student, faculty, and staff acquisition of knowledge about, and interactions with, diverse groups (Williams, Berger, & McClendon, 2005).

It is with hope that these implications for the work of supervisors, for individuals on campus, and for campuses in general provide ideas for other institutions committed to reducing microaggressions in the workplace. This study adds to the knowledge base on microaggressions by introducing a new dimension of interpretation, a new category entitled hierarchical microaggressions. It provides university stakeholders with the language and the tools to reduce microaggressions from their respective environments, thus leading to the improvement of overall campus climate and the well being of the most important capital that any university has, human capital.

## References

- Alleyne, A. (2004). Black identity and workplace oppression. *Counselling & Psychotherapy Research, 4*, 4–8. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14733140412331384008>
- Ashburn-Nardo, L., Morris, K. A., & Goodwin, S. A. (2008). The confronting prejudiced responses (CPR) model: Applying CPR in organizations. *Academy of Management Learning & Education, 7*, 332–342. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5465/AMLE.2008.34251671>
- Bartlett, K. T. (2009). Making good on good intentions: The critical role of motivation in reducing implicit workplace discrimination. *Virginia Law Review, 95*, 1893–1972.
- Bielby, W. T. (2000). Minimizing workplace gender and racial bias. *Contemporary Sociology, 29*, 120–129. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2654937>
- Constantine, M. G., Smith, L., Redington, R. B., & Owens, D. (2008). Racial microaggressions against black counseling and counseling psychology faculty: A central challenge in the multicultural counseling movement. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 86*, 348–355. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2008.tb00519.x>
- Constantine, M. G., & Sue, D. W. (2007). Perceptions of racial microaggression among Black supervisees in cross-racial dyads. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 54*, 142–153. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.54.2.142>
- Dasgupta, N., & Greenwald, A. G. (2001). On the malleability of automatic attitudes: Combating automatic prejudice with images of admired and disliked individuals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 81*, 800–814. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.81.5.800>
- DeAngelis, T. (2009). Unmasking ‘racial micro aggressions.’ *Monitor on Psychology, 40*. Retrieved from [http://nysais.ccscct.com/uploaded/Admissions/Unmasking\\_racial\\_micro\\_aggressions\\_copy\\_2.pdf](http://nysais.ccscct.com/uploaded/Admissions/Unmasking_racial_micro_aggressions_copy_2.pdf)
- Diller, J. V., & Moule, J. (2004). *Cultural competence: A primer for educators*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Dovidio, J. F., & Gaertner, S. L. (2005). Color blind or just plain blind. *Nonprofit Quarterly, 5*.
- Evans, N. J., & Broido, E. M. (2002). The experiences of lesbian and bisexual women in college residence halls: Implications for addressing homophobia and heterosexism. In E. P. Cramer (Ed.), *Addressing homophobia and heterosexism on college campuses* (pp. 29–42). Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press.
- Fuller, R. W. (2003). *Somebodies and nobodies: Overcoming the abuse of rank*. British Columbia, Canada: New Society Publishers.
- Gee, J. P. (2000–2001). Identity as an analytic lens for research in education. *Review of Research in Education, 25*, 99–125.
- Griffin, K. A., Pifer, M. J., Humphrey, J. R., & Hazelwood, A. M. (2011). (Re)Defining departure: Exploring black professors’ experiences with and responses to racism and racial climate. *American Journal of Education, 117*, 495–526. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/660756>
- Hunter, R. L. (2011). *An examination of workplace racial microaggressions and their effect on employee performance*. Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest UMI Dissertation Publishing.
- Hurtado, S. (2005). The next generation of diversity and intergroup relations research. *Journal of Social Issues, 61*, 595–610. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00422.x>

- Hurtado, S., Griffin, K. A., Arellano, L., & Cuellar, M. (2008). Assessing the value of climate assessments: Progress and future directions. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 1*, 204–221. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0014009>
- Hurtado, S., & Carter, D. F. (1997). Effects of college transition and perceptions of the campus racial climate on Latino students' sense of belonging. *Sociology of Education, 70*, 324–345. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2673270>
- Hurtado, S., Milem, J. F., Clayton-Pedersen, A. R., & Allen, W. R. (1999). *Enacting diverse learning environments: Improving the climate for racial/ethnic diversity in higher education*. Washington, DC: The George Washington University.
- Ingram, P. D. (2006). Commentary: The ups and downs of the workplace. *Journal of Extension, 44*. Retrieved from <http://www.joe.org/joe/2006june/comml1.php>
- Integrated Postsecondary Education Data Systems (IPEDS). (2012). *Human Resources Survey, 2012*. Retrieved from <https://surveys.nces.ed.gov/ipeds/>
- Jackson, J. (2008). Race segregation across the academic workforce: Exploring factors that may contribute to the disparate representation of African American men. *American Behavioral Scientist, 51*, 1004–1029. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0002764207312003>
- Pierce, C. M., Carew, J. V., Pierce-Gonzalez, D., & Wills, D. (1977). An experiment in racism: TV commercials. *Education and Urban Society, 10*, 61–87. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/001312457701000105>
- Renn, K. A. (2010). LGBT and queer research in higher education: The state and status of the field. *Educational Researcher, 39*, 132–141. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/0013189X10362579>
- Rowe, M. P. (1990). Barriers to equality: The power of subtle discrimination to maintain unequal opportunity. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal, 3*, 153–163. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF01388340>
- Sandler, B. R. (1986). *The campus climate revisited: Chilly for women faculty, administrators, and graduate students* (final report). Washington, DC: Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education.
- Solórzano, D. G. (1998). Critical race theory, race and gender microaggressions, and the experiences of Chicana and Chicano scholars. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 11*, 121–136. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/095183998236926>
- Stanley, C. A. (2006). Coloring the academic landscape: Faculty of color breaking the silence in predominantly white colleges and universities. *American Educational Research Journal, 43*, 701–736. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/00028312043004701>
- Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist, 62*, 271–286. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.4.271>
- Swim, J. K., Hyers, L. L., Cohen, L. L., & Ferguson, M. J. (2001). Everyday sexism: Evidence for its incidence, nature, and psychological impact from three daily diary studies. *Journal of Social Issues, 57*, 31–53. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00200>
- Tatum, B. (2000). Who am I? The complexity of identity. In M. Adams, W. J. Blumenfeld, R. Castaneda, H. Hackman, M. Peters, & X. Zuñiga (Eds.), *Readings for diversity and social justice: An anthology on racism, antisemitism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and classism* (pp. 39–44). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Treviño, J., Walker, T., & Leyba, J. (2009). Inclusive Excellence Toolkit. Retrieved March 26, 2014, from [www.du.edu/cme/about/inclusiveexcellence.html](http://www.du.edu/cme/about/inclusiveexcellence.html)
- Vega, T. (2014, March 21). Students see many slights as racial 'microaggressions.' *New York Times*. Retrieved from [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/22/us/as-diversity-increases-slights-get-subtler-but-still-sting.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/22/us/as-diversity-increases-slights-get-subtler-but-still-sting.html?_r=0)
- Weber, R. P. (1990). *Basic content analysis* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Williams, D. A., Berger, J. B., & McClendon, S. A. (2005). *Toward a model of inclusive excellence and change in postsecondary institutions*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Wilson, T. D., & Brekke, N. (1994). Mental contamination and mental correction: Unwanted influences on judgments and evaluations. *Psychological Bulletin, 116*, 117–142.

Received October 4, 2013

Revision received October 21, 2014

Accepted October 23, 2014 ■