Hierarchical Microaggressions: Anyone Can Be a Victim, Perpetrator, or Bystander

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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CITATION


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Introduction

Colleges and universities are institutions of higher learning in which individuals aspire to achieve their educational or career goals by increasing their knowledge and engaging with instructors and peers. To meet individuals’ learning needs, colleges and universities hire experts in particular areas, most of whom hold PhDs or other terminal degrees. Such highly educated experts are assumed widely to be ethical and professional and to strive to cultivate a learning environment that encompasses diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), which is among colleges and universities’ major missions (Misawa, 2015b, Aranda, 2018). Accordingly, little attention has been given to the challenges in cultivating DEI in colleges and universities’ hierarchical structures by comparison to other types of organizations (Cassell, 2011). However, Hollis (2015) documented that approximately 62% of higher education employees have experienced or witnessed particular types of microaggression in the hierarchical relationships among various stakeholders, a percentage that is nearly twice as high as the 37% found in other types of organizations.

The cultivation of DEI has been a pillar of higher education institutions since 1971, when the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) introduced various initiatives pertaining to it (AAC&U, 2017). Many studies in the DEI framework have explored a wide range of issues and problems pertaining to microaggression in higher education settings, most of which have addressed individuals’ demographic characteristics, such as gender and racial/ethnic backgrounds. However, the question about the way this phenomenon is associated with hierarchical relationships between more powerful/higher-ranked and less
powerful/lower-ranked individuals has received less attention. This phenomenon is referred to as “hierarchical microaggression,” a term that Young, Anderson, and Stewart (2015) coined. This paper explores a microaggression dynamic model in “hierarchical” relationships among various stakeholders in higher education settings.

Literature Search

Using the key words related to the concept of microaggression including “marginalization,” “microassault,” “microinsult,” and “microinvalidation” (Sue et al., 2007; Young et al., 2015), I found a total of 122 scholarly works (i.e., 83 peer-reviewed articles, 29 dissertations, and 10 books) that addressed forms of microaggression in American colleges and universities. Based on a content analysis, I found that 57 (approximately 47% of them, which included 38 peer-reviewed articles, 14 dissertations, and 5 books) did illustrate the hierarchical microaggression phenomenon in higher education settings but overlooked the aspect of hierarchical relationships among stakeholders within the microaggression phenomenon. Furthermore, most studies have not used the term “hierarchical microaggression,” and therefore I used the term “bullying” to identify more work related to hierarchical microaggression. I used this term because the bullying phenomenon shares in common Young and colleagues’ (2015) concept of hierarchical microaggression, in that the literature has documented that marginalized, less powerful, or lower-ranked individuals are subjected to bullying in higher education (Cassell, 2011; Hollis, 2015). Using that term, I found a total of 61 publications (i.e., 41 peer-reviewed journal articles, 18 dissertations, and 2 books). Among these, 30 addressed hierarchical microaggression (approximately 50%, which included 22 journal articles and 8 dissertations). Thus, in the remainder of this paper, the two terms, hierarchical microaggression and bullying, are used interchangeably. As shown in Figure 1, a total of 87 scholarly works was finally included to analyze hierarchical microaggression phenomenon in higher education settings.

Theoretical Framework for Research Questions

To identify factors that shape hierarchical microaggression, I adopted the lens of Bolman and Deal’s (2013) four organizational frames—structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. The structural frame includes each stakeholder’s diverse roles and responsibilities in higher education settings, whereas the human resource
Figure 1: Literature Search Logic

United States, America, USA, or U.S.

&

Higher Education, College, University, Post Secondary, or Postsecondary

&

Student, Faculty, Administrator, or Staff

Microaggression

Keywords: microaggression, marginalization, microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation

- $N_1 = 122$ scholarly works (i.e., 83 peer-reviewed journal articles, 29 dissertations, and 10 books)
  - 47% of $N_1$

Hierarchical Microaggression

$N_2 = 61$ scholarly works (i.e., 41 peer-reviewed journal articles, 18 dissertations, and 2 books)

- 50% of $N_2$

Hierarchical Microaggression

$N_3 = 57$ scholarly works (i.e., 38 peer-reviewed journal articles, 14 dissertations, and 5 books)

$N_{final} = 87$ scholarly works (i.e., 60 peer-reviewed journal articles, 22 dissertations, and 5 books)
Hierarchical Microaggressions

frame examines the degree of support for individuals’ growth and self-actualization. Political factors can be contextualized as resource availability and positional power, whereas factors framed in the symbolic frame may include a specific type of postsecondary institution’s traditions and values. Bolman and Deal noted further that all four frames are interrelated. The following research questions guided the study.

1. What are the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic factors that shape hierarchical microaggression in higher education settings? Are these factors associated with individuals’ demographic characteristics, such as gender and racial/ethnic backgrounds?
2. What are the effects of hierarchical microaggressions that occur in higher education settings?

Findings

Figure 2 presents the comprehensive model of hierarchical microaggression in higher education settings that answered the research questions 1 and 2, while Table 1 shows the themes identified through the systematic review of previous studies. Consistent with Bolman and Deal’s (2013) findings, all four factors—structural, human resource, political, and symbolic—are intertwined. Furthermore, many studies show that victims’ demographic characteristics serve as intervening factors in the interrelation among the four factors, although anyone can be subjected to hierarchical microaggression regardless of their demographic background or current position in higher education settings.

The structural factors included stakeholder’s status and institutional policies. In accordance with the theoretical assumption of hierarchical microaggression, most studies documented that victims typically are stakeholders who hold an inferior position, while the perpetrators are their supervisors. For example, as Table 1 shows, supervisees, such as front-line staff, pre-tenured junior faculty, non-tenure track or adjunct faculty, and (graduate) students are subjected to certain types of microaggression or bullying, while the victims’ supervisors, such as tenured faculty, department chairs, and program directors, act as perpetrators. However, it is important to note that supervisors or mentors from a traditionally underserved background, such as women, people of color, people with disabilities, and sexual minorities, often experience bullying or microaggression from their supervisees or mentees. Notably, faculty of color often are assumed to be incompetent, and their students disrespect them (Johnson-Bailey, 2015; Lester, 2009). Such a reverse situation is referred to as “counter-positional bullying” (Misawa, 2015b). As this study
Figure 2: A Comprehensive Conceptual Model of Hierarchical Microaggressions in Higher Education Settings
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Any demographic characteristics</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Intersections of Race, Gender or Other Factors</th>
<th>Disability</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supervisor (Perpetrators) - Supervisee (Victim) Relationship</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Upper-Level Administrators/Tenured Faculty - Pre-tenured Faculty</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fail to share extra or challenging work</td>
<td>4 Studies (e.g., Patrick, 2016; Wright &amp; Hill, 2015)</td>
<td>6 Studies (e.g., Frazier, 2011; Lester, 2009)</td>
<td>Henning et al., 2017</td>
<td>5 Studies (e.g., Carroll, 2017; Chambers, 2012)</td>
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<td>Devalue (research) ideas or work</td>
<td>5 Studies (e.g., Beckmann et al., 2013; Zemanek, 2016)</td>
<td>Knight, 2010; Lester, 2009</td>
<td>3 Studies (e.g., Chambers, 2012; Muhs et al., 2012)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Take credits for others' work</td>
<td>7 Studies (e.g., Clawson, 2015; Melzer et al., 2015)</td>
<td>Miller et al., 2019; Twale &amp; DeLuca, 2008</td>
<td>4 Studies (e.g., Patrick, 2016; Wright &amp; Hill, 2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control, Interrupt, and Micromanage</td>
<td>6 Studies (e.g., Frazier, 2011; Lester, 2009)</td>
<td>Yamanaka, 2018</td>
<td>7 Studies (e.g., Clawson, 2015; Metzger et al., 2015)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Develop policies or governance structure favoring perpetrators' positional/political power/dominant sentiments in a region</td>
<td>4 Studies (e.g., Mayshark, 2017; Lukes &amp; Bangs, 2011)</td>
<td>3 Studies (e.g., Chambers, 2012; Misawa, 2015)</td>
<td>Cramer &amp; Ford, 2011; Sedyiv-Benton et al., 2014</td>
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<td>Ignore/Insult/Exclude</td>
<td>3 Studies (e.g., Beckmann et al., 2013; Patrick, 2016)</td>
<td>3 Studies (e.g., Jones et al., 2015; Louis et al., 2017)</td>
<td>Sedyiv-Benton et al., 2014</td>
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<td><strong>Upper-Level Administrators/Faculty - Staff</strong></td>
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<td>Treat differently based on position</td>
<td>Young et al., 2015</td>
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<td>Alabi, 2015; Harris, 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ignore/exclude/surprise at smartness/interrupt</td>
<td>4 Studies (e.g., Longaker, 2017; King &amp; Piotrowski, 2015)</td>
<td>King &amp; Piotrowski, 2015; Moore, 2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>Insult</td>
<td>Alabi, 2015</td>
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<td>Moore, 2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase workload</td>
<td>King &amp; Piotrowski, 2015; Young et al., 2015</td>
<td></td>
<td>Henning et al., 2017</td>
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<td><strong>Upper-Level Administrators - (Tenured) Faculty</strong></td>
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<td>Intimidate (based on research productivity)</td>
<td>Faria et al., 2012; King &amp; Piotrowski, 2015</td>
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<td>Devalue</td>
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<td>3 Studies (e.g., Lukes &amp; Bangs, 2014; Schmaling, 2007)</td>
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<td><strong>Figure Authority - Students</strong></td>
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<td>Bellitement</td>
<td>7 Studies (e.g., Comeaux, 2012; Gentry &amp; Whitley, 2014)</td>
<td>18 Studies (e.g., Ballinas, 2017; Bordoloi, 2014)</td>
<td>Cain, 2015; Diver-Stamnes &amp; LoMascolo, 2001</td>
<td>Green, 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Punishment/Violence</td>
<td>3 Studies (e.g., Goodboy et al., 2015; Marraccini et al., 2015)</td>
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<td>Hinchberger, 2009</td>
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<tr>
<td>Managerial Misconduct</td>
<td>Goodboy et al., 2015; Gentry &amp; Whitley, 2014; Marraccini et al., 2015</td>
<td>8 Studies (e.g., Ballinas, 2017; Bhattacharya, 2016)</td>
<td>3 Studies (e.g., Lewis &amp; Erickson, 2016; Cain, 2015)</td>
<td>Green, 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Steal students' work</td>
<td>Mullen, 2009</td>
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<td><strong>Department Chair/Director/Tenured Faculty - Adjunct or Non-Tenure track Faculty</strong></td>
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<td>Treat &quot;Profit Maker&quot; through satisfying customers (students)</td>
<td>Hollis, 2012; Roberts &amp; Donahue, 2000; Twale &amp; De Luca, 2008</td>
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<td>Ignore/Devalue</td>
<td>Roberts &amp; Donahue, 2000; Twale &amp; De Luca, 2008; Zemanek, 2016</td>
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<td><strong>Customer (Students) - Service Provider (Employees) Relationship</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Student -(Front-Line) Staff</strong></td>
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<td>Devalue/Disrespected</td>
<td>Young et al., 2015</td>
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<td><strong>Student - Faculty/Teaching Staff (Contra-Hierarchical Microaggression)</strong></td>
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<td>Harrass/Ingnore/Assume to be Incompetent</td>
<td>10 Studies (e.g., DeSouza, 2011; Epps, 2016)</td>
<td>12 Studies (e.g., Knep, 2012; Lampman, 2012)</td>
<td>10 Studies (e.g., Lampman et al., 2016; May &amp; Tenzek, 2018)</td>
<td>14 Studies (e.g., Auguste et al., 2018; Moragne-Patterson &amp; Barnett, 2017)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Devalue/Disrespect</td>
<td>5 Studies (e.g., May &amp; Tenzek, 2016; Williamson, 2011)</td>
<td>6 Studies (e.g., Kim &amp; Kim, 2010; Louis et al., 2017)</td>
<td>6 Studies (e.g., Kim &amp; Kim, 2010; Louis et al., 2017)</td>
<td>Lukes &amp; Banks, 2014; Yamanaka, 2018</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Upper-Level Administrators (e.g., Dean, Chair, etc) - Faculty or other supervisees (Contra-Hierarchical Microaggression)</strong></td>
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<td>Disrespect/Assume to be incompetent</td>
<td>Alabi, 2015; Richardson Fraser, 2017</td>
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<td>Yeh, 2018</td>
<td>Turner, 2003</td>
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Note. *sexual orientation; # international or foreign-born immigrant status; + non-traditional backgrounds (at least 24 years old, a parent, or a veteran); DisAgility
attempted to develop a model of hierarchical microaggression, I will refer to counter-positional bullying phenomenon as contra-hierarchical microaggression.

Evidence has shown that higher-ranked perpetrators develop policies that favor their self-interests and allow them to control, micromanage, and interrupt their subordinates or supervisees’ work (Sedivy-Benton, Strohschen, Cavazos, & Boden-McGill, 2014). Policy itself is deemed a structural factor, although it can be concurrently viewed as a political factor, because perpetrators abuse certain policies using their positional power. Moreover, in the name of “mentoring” or “tutoring,” which reflects the human resource frame, supervisors, such as tenured faculty or department chairs, direct various forms of microaggression against their supervisees, such as non-tenure track or adjunct faculty, pre-tenured junior faculty, and graduate students. For example, these supervisors are unnecessarily involved in, or steal, supervisees’ work to justify their positions and ultimately survive in the academic world, which is ever more fiercely competitive.

Postsecondary institutions are grappling with a continuous decrease in revenue sources. Specifically, public research universities face the continuous decline of state appropriations (National Science Board, 2012), and tuition-driven colleges or universities, such as small-liberal arts colleges, have had significant drops in enrollment (Marcus, 2017). Thus, colleges and universities are increasingly adopting a business model, which leads to greater demands for faculty’s teaching, research, and grant productivity to earn revenue as well as fewer tenured/tenure-track faculty to save expenses (De Welde, 2017). Furthermore, the skyrocketing costs of college drive consumer mindsets among students and implicitly allow students to treat their instructors as service providers disrespectfully rather than as humans (May & Tenzek, 2018).

Therefore, in tuition-driven colleges or universities, which have a tradition that emphasizes teaching, when students complain about teaching quality, instructors tend to be reprimanded without considering the possibility that students are more likely to bully their instructors because of their dissatisfaction of a grade or their implicit and explicit biases about faculty’s demographic backgrounds, ranks, or titles (Twale & De Luca, 2008). Similarly, in research-intensive universities, perpetrators tend to prevent victims from being successful by placing hurdles such as giving extra or challenging work or stealing or devaluing victims’ research ideas intentionally or unintentionally (Mullen, 2009; Sedivy-Benton et al., 2014; Wright &
For example, faculty of color often are assigned to serve as advisors or mentors for historically underrepresented students, who need more guidance or care and thus require extra work (Frazier, 2011; Louis, Thompson, Smith, Williams, & Watson, 2016). As another example, in a mentor-mentee relationship, perpetrating supervisors may provide their supervisees with unclear or differential guidelines of tenure and promotion processes (Frazier, 2011).

In the above examples, the tradition of colleges and universities to emphasize teaching or research is deemed a symbolic factor, whereas the situation of reprimanding instructors for their teaching quality or giving extra work is rooted in limited resources, which is considered a political factor. However, the demand to improve teaching quality in tuition-driven colleges and increase in research activities in research-intensive universities can be justified in the name of colleges or universities’ traditions, although unspoken realities about hierarchical microaggression may exist behind the tradition they emphasize most strongly.

Hierarchical microaggressions lead to various negative organizational outcomes, such as leaving the institution, increased stress, mental and physical health problems, low job satisfaction, burnout, decreased productivity regardless of position, and declines in prospective employees’ applications (Cassell, 2011; Dentih, Wright, & Coryell, 2015; Hollis, 2012; Keashly & Neuman, 2010). Such negative outcomes cause huge losses in assets (Faria, Mixon, & Salter, 2012; Hollis, 2015; Lester, 2009), which implies that ignoring DEI because of perpetrators' self-interests in the fiercely competitive academic world, or colleges and universities’ short-term gains under the constraints of limited resources, will damage their reputations and lead to financial losses in the long-term.
Recommendations

This study suggests several recommendations for ways to eliminate hierarchical microaggression and cultivate DEI in colleges and universities.

1. Colleges and universities’ leadership must monitor whether powerless stakeholders are suffering from their supervisors’ microaggressions using regular anonymous environmental climate surveys. Even if climate surveys’ results show only a small percentage of hierarchical microaggression in their institutions, leadership needs to investigate such allegations and adopt zero-tolerance policies designed to stop hierarchical microaggression.

2. After investigating such allegations, the leadership needs to supervise suspected perpetrators, and if necessary, perpetrators’ interactions with victims must be terminated through appropriate action that considers the nature of the formal relationship between them.

3. Training programs to prevent any form of microaggression should be mandatory for all employees because the study shows that anyone, regardless of his or her current position types or demographic characteristics, can be a victim, perpetrator, or bystander. Specifically, the training programs should address the reality that individuals from marginalized backgrounds are more likely to experience contra-hierarchical microaggressions regardless of their position, as evidenced by several studies.

4. Consistent with the DEI mission of American colleges and universities, every discipline must require diversity courses for graduation at both undergraduate and graduate levels. The diversity courses should be designed to ensure that all students learn about how to effectively communicate and collaborate with diverse people, which is a twenty-first century skill necessary for all students (National Education Association, n.d.).

5. Various higher education organizations, such as the AAC&U and American Council on Education, are encouraged to collect data pertaining to claims of microaggression by including an anonymous online survey on their websites, because some victims may have no way to report their experiences of hierarchical microaggression in their institutions.
Research should be conducted to explore antecedent risk factors and underlying mechanisms that drive hierarchical microaggression from psychological and sociological perspectives. Evidence has shown that individuals who are bullied tend to become bullies themselves, and socially marginalized individuals are vulnerable to bullying or hierarchical microaggression (Dulmus, Sowers, & Theriot, 2006; Twale & De Luca, 2008).

Given that higher education today is increasingly concerned about financial costs, it would be worthwhile to investigate the effects of hierarchical microaggression on financial outcomes. For example, the costs of disengagement and employment turnover rate caused by victims’ increased stress, mental/physical health problems, and burnout must be taken into account. Furthermore, because colleges and universities that ignore allegations of microaggression or bullying experience a decline in employees’ application (Cassell, 2011; Wright & Hill, 2015), it would be necessary to measure the cost of potential loss of highly qualified or talented employees. Moreover, through various informal or formal communication channels, prospective and current students learn of allegations of microaggression, which may be detrimental to enrollment and retention rates (Cardin, 2013). A decline of enrollment and retention negatively affects revenue sources in all higher education settings so it should be considered when investigating financial loss associated with hierarchical microaggressions.

As a closing note, individuals may tend to remember experiences of being victimized without remembering their behaviors as a perpetrator or a bystander in certain situations. As such, all stakeholders must revisit their perceptions about relationships with various stakeholders to eliminate or at least minimize the effects of hierarchical microaggressions.
References


