

“You’re Very Smart for a Black Woman”: A Case of Microaggressive Communication

Eletra Gilchrist-Petty

The University of Alabama in Huntsville, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study explores an instance of microaggressive communication occurring at an organizational professional meeting. The case examines how “You’re very smart for a Black woman” functions as a microinsult. Though intended as a compliment, this chapter illustrates the negative impact of this racially biased and stereotypical communicative act. This case study adds further credence to the everyday slights and indignities experienced by Black women academics, who represent an understudied population within organizational communication.

INTRODUCTION

Professors at research intensive universities generally must excel in teaching, research, and service in order to navigate and tenure and promotion ranks and establish themselves as bona fide scholars. Research not only consists of publishing, but presenting at academic and professional conferences. These research opportunities provide novice and seasoned scholars alike the opportunity to polish their presentation skills, gain feedback on research in progress, and collaborate as a cohort academics. The American Psychological Association adds, “Perhaps one of the important

benefits from conference presentations is the ability to advocate for your science” (Dunn, 2007, para. 4). In other words, professional conferences allow academics to inform each other about innovative research generated in particular subfields of inquiry, which increases the visibility and legitimacy of various topics of importance.

Research on the experiences of minorities has historically been regarded as lower status and underappreciated by reviewers in the research world (Gregory, 1995; Thomas & Hollenshead, 2001; Yancey-Bragg, 2021). Research has even determined that proposals submitted by Black applicants were significantly less likely to be funded by the National Institutes of Health because the research topics that Black applicants commonly propose deal with disenfranchised groups, which are perceived as less favored by reviewers (Mervis, 2019). A cohort of Stanford researchers found compelling evidence that women and racial minorities introduce novel research findings at higher rates than White men across all disciplines, but are less likely to reap the career benefits because their work is regularly devalued and discounted (Hofstra et al., 2020). Because the research of minorities is often perceived as subpar, academics who publish within this realm of research have historically had a more difficult time navigating the tenure and promotion processes in academia (Collins, 2000; Gilchrist, 2011; Herbert, 2012; White, 2012). More specifically, the academy has traditionally been labeled a “space of racialized and gendered oppression and domination” (Davis, 1999, p. 370).

Black women professors at Predominately White Institutions (PWIs) have historically been repressed by racialized and gendered hegemonic forces. Thomas and Hollenshead (2001), stated that for Black women and other women of color in the academy, their “research is frequently viewed as insignificant” and “these women often receive little or no support for their intellectual pursuits, especially when their work centers on racial, ethnic, or gender issues” (p. 166-167). Subsequently, White (2012) noted that Black female faculty do not experience the institution in the same way as their counterparts who identify differently. Hence, in order for Black women professors at PWIs to successfully navigate the tenure and promotion processes, they must negotiate the “intersections of race and gender while acting as agents of change within the confines of hegemonic structures” (Herbert, 2012, p. 101). Through the lens of microaggressions, this case study further illuminates the experiences of Black women professors at PWIs, as an understudied population in organizational communication.

Microaggressions

Microaggressions represent a contemporary form of discrimination and emphasize the individual experiences of daily racist and discriminatory practices (Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2007). As a working definition, microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily

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