Microaggressions in Ministry

Confronting the Hidden Violence
of Everyday Church

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Introduction

1920: Women achieve the right to vote.
1954: The segregation of schools based on race is deemed
    unconstitutional.
2014: Thirty-three states offer legal same-sex marriage.

*M*any people—and many communities of faith—believe we live in a society where racism, sexism, and heterosexism are bigotries of the past. "Racism ended with the end of segregation," some claim. "Sexism is over because women can vote," others purport. "Gay people have all the same rights as straight people," still others believe. If you have picked up this book, we imagine that you likely do not cling to such beliefs. Many progressive Christians understand fully that racism, sexism, and heterosexism are alive and well. Even worse, such discrimination continues to thrive in churches, seminaries, and denominational bodies.

On the whole, most Christian communities are quick to condemn blatant discrimination based on race, gender, or sexuality. If a preacher were to utter a racial slur, claim that women have smaller brains than men, or say the "F-word" in reference to a gay person, most caring, thoughtful congregants would be quick to condemn such bigoted behavior. Open-minded, progressive persons of faith do not tolerate such outright discrimination. It's backward. It's close-minded. It's not politically correct. And it's not what Jesus would do.

Why is it, then, that countless women, persons of color, and LGBTQs face discriminatory treatment from the very faith communities that claim to nurture and affirm their souls? While blatant discrimination is often condemned, underhanded slights that assault the souls of oppressed groups still rage from the pulpit, the pew, the Sunday school class, the hymnal, the seminary curriculum, the ordination process, and in pastoral counseling. These everyday slights, insults, and invalidations are called microaggressions, and they

accost the spirits of women, persons of color, and LGBTQs on a regular basis in our churches, seminaries, and denominations. Because no one deserves to feel alienated by their faith community, assaulted by their seminary, or marginalized by their denomination; because discrimination is systemic; because oppression and marginalization are antithetical to the gospel; and because microaggressions are a theological issue, we have chosen to write this book. The hidden violence of everyday church can be captured in one word, and it is time that this word came into the conversations of faith communities. This word is *microaggressions*.

Cody's Reasons for Researching Microaggressions

I coauthored this book because I love the church. I've loved the church since I was a small child, first lured to the Christian tradition by the beauty of its music. The majestic sounds of the pipe organ and choirs communicated to me the deep significance of faith long before the words of sermons and Sunday school lessons made any sense. I loved it so much that I played church in my backyard in a small chapel my father and paternal grandfather built for me. Wearing a robe and stole my grandmother sewed for me, I officiated services alongside my maternal grandfather, whom I recruited to preach while I led the music. As a six-year-old, it seemed obvious to me that my love for the church would set the trajectory for my vocation. And the good people at the Southern Baptist church of my upbringing nurtured that sense of call with warm dedication.

Like musicians who move our hearts through delicate strains of music, like artists who use seemingly ordinary colors and brushstrokes to help us see the world in otherworldly light, like poets with a bent for stimulating our imaginations beyond mere words into ethereal spaces of imagination and insight, so too, churches are entrusted with a gift of elegant profundity. Our tradition, our ritual, our music, our sacred texts are comprised of words and images, narratives and embodied movements, sounds and senses that move us to dream new dreams when life has become a nightmare, to see new visions of the way things *ought* to be when the status quo threatens to undo us, to propel us beyond the constraints of the possible to undertake the impossible.

This is a dangerous gift. As a queer person, I've come to know this danger intimately. The beautiful profundity of the Christian tradition that shapes our imaginations, animates our embodied activity in the world, and directs the trajectory of our lives can have equally profound power to perform great harm. We need only look to the history of the Christian church to understand

the power of our theological tradition to fuel violence on a grand scale and to legitimate unjust and oppressive social conditions such as slavery and the subjugation of women. As a queer person, I know the power of this profound theological tradition to perpetuate violence against the deepest sense of my own beingness—my soul—marginalizing my lived human experience.

This first-person knowledge of the power of theological language and ritual and communal space compels me to write about the potential of my own theological tradition to enact harm in the lives of racial minorities, women, and LGBTQ people through the hidden violence of microaggressions. In part, coauthoring this text gives voice to the ways I wish to hold accountable my own Christian tradition and the communities that formed me for the continued perpetration of this violence. But more compelling than my experiences as the *target* of microaggressions in ministerial contexts is my own *participation* in this hidden violence.

As a man, I am responsible for perpetuating patriarchal microaggressive behavior against women. As a white person (raised in the U.S. South), my consciousness is awash with racial prejudice, and my life is often lived in complicity with racially oppressive arrangements of power—no matter how much I consciously and intentionally attempt to live in accord with the aims of racial justice. As a cisgender man, my bodily, gendered self-understanding often leads me to overlook and invalidate the lived experience of transgender, intersex, and genderqueer people, rendering their experiences publicly invisible. As temporarily able-bodied, I am often complicit with microinvalidating environmental cues that ignore the needs of the disabled, making their lives unnecessarily difficult. In part, I coauthored this text as a way of taking responsibility for the times my many privileged embodiments intersect with my Christian theological commitments in ways that cause harm to others, most often unintentionally and outside of my conscious awareness.

To me, writing about microaggressions in the context of ministry is about helping individuals and churches take another step toward greater responsibility for the beautiful, dangerous gift contained in our theological discourses and ecclesial practices. Writing about microaggressions in ministry is also about providing language and a theoretical framework to the common experiences of racial minorities, women, and LGBTQ people who experience the hidden violence of everyday church in ways that white persons, men, straight, and cisgender people have great difficulty recognizing.

Ultimately, though, I write this book with my colleague Angela because I love the church. I was formed by the beautiful, dangerous gift of elegant profundity alive within the Christian theological tradition—its words, its rituals, and its music. I love the church, and I want to help communities of faith take

greater responsibility for the continued cultivation of the beautiful, danger-ous, elegant, profound gift entrusted to us.

Angela's Reasons for Researching Microaggressions

"We're just worried that our children's program won't grow. I'm concerned parents won't want to bring their child to a church with a lesbian pastor and so many gay people," a deacon stated woefully.

"Isn't she pretty?" he said as he pinched my cheeks and introduced me to a prestigious male academic. "You'd never know she's smart."

Comments like these have been a regular occurrence in the fourteen years I have spent ministering in local churches and seminaries. As a queer woman, I knew that many elements of ministry blatantly excluded me on the assump-tion that my mere presence was a sin, an abomination. So I chose to affiliate myself with progressive, open-minded churches, seminaries, and denomi-national groups. All of these groups boldly proclaim to affirm women in ministry, and most are welcoming and affirming of LGBTQ persons. These organizations pride themselves on their openness. Yet I've found myself con-sistently feeling invalidated, excluded, and marginalized by some of the very people and organizations that claimed to be allies.

What makes dealing with these feelings so difficult is that the individuals who make statements similar to the comments listed above are most often good, thoughtful, moral people who never intend to be sexist, heterosexist, or exclusive. In fact, I would surmise that most would call themselves allies and say that they care about and work toward justice and inclusion for all people. Many even feel that the words they say are compliments.

Though I had experienced and witnessed such microaggressions throughout all of my ministerial tenure, I didn't have the language for grappling with them. I had never heard the term *microaggression*, and I constantly questioned my own feelings and experiences because the people invalidating and excluding me were ones I considered to be allies. My experiences of exclusion culmi-nated when my arrival at a church entailed having *two* out lesbians as head pastors. "Surely this will be a place where all will be welcomed, affirmed, and celebrated," I thought. Yet the microaggressive words and actions intensi-fied as good, thoughtful, progressive people acted out of their own privilege in ways that hurt, excluded, and marginalized an array of queer people, women, persons of color, and persons from different socioeconomic classes. "Did I hear him correctly?" "Am I being too sensitive?" "Surely she didn't mean that." These thoughts and questions constantly swirled through my mind.

As I tried to navigate this dissonance, I realized that other minorities within the congregation were experiencing similar things. I knew something was truly wrong when my physical health suffered and I began to feel depressed and anxious. I am very fortunate to typically be an incredibly healthy, upbeat person with a positive outlook. Yet as a pastor of this progressive congregation, I felt unwelcome, depressed, and anxious; I struggled with sleeping, eating, and low energy, and I couldn't figure out why. When a colleague shared a chapter of Derald Wing Sue's *Microaggressions in Everyday Life,* I felt as though he had read my mind, knew my heart, and named my struggles. I realized I was not alone, that my experiences were not invalid. I read everything I could find about microaggressions, realizing that I was not too sensitive and that many of the people perpetrating these microaggressions did so without malicious intent. If learning about the language, impact, and tools for addressing microaggressions could be such a balm for me, surely it could help other oppressed persons and groups in ministry.

I began talking with friends and colleagues of color, fellow women and queers, listening to their experiences and sharing the good news of microaggressions literature. Person after person—clergy, laity, seminarian, professor, denominational leader—virtually every individual from an underrepresented group had experienced some version of the everyday slights, insults, invalidations, and indignities Sue addresses. What made their stories so profound—and often heartbreaking—is that they didn't merely occur at work, in daily life, or at school. Rather these stories of exclusion, insult, and invalidation occurred within the walls of the church, packing theological weight onto an already painful experience.

In recovering from the ways in which microaggressively sexist and heterosexist behavior assaulted my own soul, I recognized a responsibility I have to help others grapple with these indignities. Moreover, studying microaggressions literature helped me to acknowledge when I have been a perpetrator of indignities, insults, and invalidations without even realizing it. Acting out of my own privilege as a white, educated, able-bodied person, I have been guilty of microaggression against others. Learning about microaggressions not only ushered in healing for my own assaulted soul, but it reminded me that—no matter how many antiracism trainings I attend and no matter how many books I've read about ability and privilege—I still have the capacity of marginalizing those who are not afforded the same privileges as me. Accordingly, the more I learn about microaggressions, the more I can alter my behaviors, attitudes, and words to be a better and more aware ally.

I cannot help but wonder if the churches in which I've served had prepared themselves better for what it might be like to have a lesbian pastor by

learning about microaggressions, would it have been possible for all those insults, indignities, and invalidations to have never occurred? At the very least, we would have had the language and understanding for grappling with them. In partnering with Cody to write this book, it is my hope that we can help individuals suffering from microaggressive behaviors while also aiding churches, clergy, and seminaries in preventing this suffering from happening in the first place.

The church, in all its many forms, should be a place of welcome, affirmation, and inclusion, a place of grace where every person is respected, honored, and celebrated as a beloved child of God. I believe that such a church can exist. It can exist if we are willing to honestly examine our privileges and how our words and actions have the potential to assault the souls of minority persons. Let's create such a church.

Chapter Outline

Microaggressions in Ministry is divided into three sections. The first serves as an introduction to microaggressions. The second elaborates on the targets of microaggressions, highlighting race, gender, and sexual orientation and gender identity in separate chapters. The final section addresses microaggressions in ministerial practice: preaching and education, worship and spirituality, and care and counseling.

Chapter 1 reviews the current literature about microaggressions in the field of psychology. At the end of the chapter, we include definitions of terms from this field. We also include definitions of terms related to race, gender, and sexuality. This chapter is descriptive and historical, providing the language and a foundation for moving forward.

Insomuch as chapter 1 is descriptive, chapter 2 is constructive. Here we view the concept of microaggressions through the lens of religious and theological studies, claiming that the language and context of religion adds theological weight that further assails the souls of victims of microaggressions. We also provide examples of ways that the church excludes and maligns individuals with regard to race, gender, and sexuality without even realizing it.

Part II begins with chapter 3, which addresses microaggressions and race. Beginning with the stories of individuals who have experienced racial microaggressions in church, chapter 3 illustrates the way the church has excluded, invalidated, or maligned persons of color. Unpacking the ways in which the church's supposed colorblindness often upholds discriminatory norms that

are not overtly racist, we provide tools for grappling with the "new racism" that faces churches in the United States.

Similarly, chapter 4 opens with the stories of women who have experienced gender microaggressions in church, illustrating the way the church has excluded, invalidated, or maligned women. Examining church polity and doctrine that intentionally exclude women is a first step. The second step explores the ways that churches claiming to include women in ordained ministry still exclude women's voices in underhanded ways. We provide tools for empowering women and grappling with microaggressive sexist behaviors still lingering within the church.

Concluding part II is chapter 5, which deals with microaggressions related to sexual orientation and gender identity. Beginning with the stories of individuals who have experienced microaggressions directed at sexual orientation or gender identity in church, chapter 5 illustrates the way the church has excluded, invalidated, or maligned the LGBTQ community. Examining church polity and doctrine that intentionally excludes the LGBTQ community is a first step. The second step explores the ways that open and affirming churches still have steps to take to become queer spaces, to subvert the heterosexist ideologies that linger within them. We provide tools for empowering LGBTQs and for grappling with lingering microaggressive heterosexist behaviors.

Part III takes the ways microaggressions impact women, persons of color, and sexual minorities and applies it to ministerial practice. Since many microaggressions are verbal, chapter 6 addresses the two areas of church ministry that deal most with the spoken and written word: preaching and education. First, we share stories of how preaching and religious education have excluded, invalidated, or maligned persons because of race, gender, or sexuality. Utilizing the constructive approach detailed in chapter 2, we provide tools for preachers and religious educators to use their words in ways that are affirming and liberating.

After addressing the explicit nature of spoken microaggressions in chapter 6, we address in chapter 7 the implicit theologies embedded in worship and spirituality. How are our architecture, art, music, and spiritual practices microaggressive? First, we share stories of how worship and spirituality have excluded, invalidated, or maligned persons because of race, gender, or sexuality. As in chapter 6, we provide tools that can be used in worship and spiritual practices so that all may be included and affirmed.

Drawing mostly upon the psychological field that first developed the concepts of microaggressions, we address in chapter 8 how this concept is employed in pastoral care and counseling. First, we share stories of how

pastoral care and counseling have excluded, invalidated, or maligned persons because of race, gender, or sexuality. As always, we provide tools for pastoral counselors and clergy to use in pastoral care.

In the conclusion, we return to our personal reasons for writing this book. We also examine areas of growth needed in the research of microaggressions in ministry. Whose stories are not being told? Who has been left out of this text, such as persons experiencing microaggressions based on class, age, ability, or body type? How can we be more inclusive? These are questions we begin to address in the conclusion.

Introduction to Microaggressions

Chapter 1

Introducing Microaggressions

Now that you know why we are interested in researching microaggressions and how such behavior is evident in the church, it's important to obtain a deeper knowledge of microaggressions. In order to understand how microaggressions relate to ministry, it is first imperative to grasp the implications of the social psychological research on microaggressions. We introduce it in two primary ways. First, we review the literature addressing microaggressions; this will help you achieve a deeper and more nuanced understanding of microaggressions. Second, we provide definitions for terms related to microaggressions and to terms related to race, gender, sexuality, and gender identity. When learning about a new topic, the jargon related to the field can sometimes feel overwhelming. Providing a list of terms from the outset will help you to better understand the rest of the book. Use these lists as a point of reference along the way.

Microaggressions in the Social Scientific Literature

We believe it is fair to assume that everyone engages in the communication of microaggressions. A great many of us are also the targets of microaggressions from time to time. Even so, for most, microaggression is an unknown concept.

The term *microaggression* was introduced to the scholarly literature by Chester Pierce in 1970.[1] In recent years, this potent concept has been reanimated by Columbia University professor of psychology and education Derald Wing Sue, a leading scholar in multicultural psychology and counseling.[2] While many overt forms of prejudicial and assaultive speech have diminished in recent decades, in a neoliberal society characterized by polite political correctness and a widespread denial that the oppressive dynamics

of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and genderism are still at work, microaggression is a concept whose time has come. Microaggressions scholar Kevin Nadal argues that while "political correctness may seem positive in that it may lead to fewer instances of blatant discrimination (e.g., hate crimes; racial, sexist, and homophobic slurs), it may also result in the lack of awareness of one's unconscious or subconscious biases and unintentional behaviors."[3] The theory of microaggressions helps us to attend to those subconscious biases and unintentional prejudicial behaviors that we all inherit from a process of social conditioning that no amount of political correctness can cover.[4]

For this reason, microaggressions emerged in recent years as an influential theory within multicultural psychology and education. By Gilles Deleuze's account, "A theory is exactly like a box of tools. . . . It must be useful. It must function. . . . If no one uses it . . . then the theory is worthless."[5] Theologian Namsoon Kang furthers this Deleuzian notion, positing, "A discourse as a *tool* can effectively *function* only if it elaborates the *utopian* urge to think, judge, and act *otherwise*."[6] With this book, we attempt to combine discursive toolboxes—placing in conversation the social scientific conceptual tools of microaggressions with the arts of ministry and theological discourse. We do this with the hope of making the theory of microaggressions useful—*functional*—for ministers, congregations, and institutions of theological higher education by urging us all to think, judge, and act in ways that resist the harm perpetrated through these subtle communications of insult, invalidation, and injury based on embodiments of human difference.

What Are Microaggressions?

Sue defines microaggressions as "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership."[7] These exchanges can occur in verbal, behavioral, and environmental form and communicate subtle messages of hostility, degradation, or insult based on the target's race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, class, ability, ethnicity, national heritage, or religion.[8] It is vital to note that microaggressions derive their power to injure largely from their *invisibility* to perpetrators. In fact, perpetrators typically engage in microaggressive communication unintentionally and without conscious awareness.[9]

It is equally important to consider how microaggressions derive their power to harm through the citation of larger racist, sexist, heterosexist, and genderist/transphobic social discourses. Thus, microaggressive speech operates as a linguistic tool of oppressive force reflecting hegemonic "values,

biases, assumptions, and stereotypes that have been strongly culturally incul-cated into our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors."[10] Pedagogical theorist Henry Giroux describes ideological hegemony as "those systems of practices, meanings, and values which provide legitimacy to the dominant society's institutional arrangements and interests."[11] Microaggressions covertly com-municate the legitimacy of these oppressive beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors through the three distinct forms of *insult*, *invalidation*, and *assault* based on a target's race, gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

Microinsults

Microinsults communicate stereotypes, rudeness, and insensitivity toward an embodiment of human difference, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity. Microinsults are subtly demeaning, snubbing the targeted party through a comment or behavioral or environmental cue outside the con-scious awareness of the perpetrator.[12]

A microinsult based on gender identity is experienced when Lisa, an MTF (male-to-female) transgender person, fully presenting at church as female for several years, experiences her Sunday school classmates continually slip-up and address her with masculine pronouns (he/him/his) rather than with her preferred female pronouns (she/her/hers). The classmates know better and fully intend to use the female pronouns reflecting Lisa's gender identity, but they unconsciously and inadvertently fail to do so, communicating insensi-tivity toward the embodiment of her transgender identity.

In another instance, a microinsult based on gender is perpetrated when Deborah, an accountant with eighteen years of experience who is up for elec-tion as church treasurer, has her qualifications for the position questioned, debated, and scrutinized by the congregation far more than any of her male predecessors who were elected with a simple vote. Most of the congregants believe they are just exercising their due diligence, but Deborah and several other women in the congregation note the disparity between this election process and those in the past. This microinsult is based on stereotypes of women's roles as nurturing or caregiving rather than quantitative and busi-ness savvy.

Microinvalidations

In contrast to subtle insults, microinvalidations serve to deny the validity of personal experiences for racial minorities, women, and LGBTQ persons by imposing reality on these marginalized groups.[13] Microinvalidations

invalidate, negate, or exclude thoughts, feelings, and experiential realities of targeted parties. The potential for harm rests in the microinvalidation's ability to subtly define reality outside the conscious awareness or deliberate intention of those in the privileged majority groups in ways that uphold their unquestioned privilege while marginalizing others.

For example, Carlos—a third-generation U.S. citizen from New Jersey whose family emigrated to the United States from Colombia many years before Carlos was born—now attends collage at a small, predominantly white, Christian university in Texas. When he first became involved in campus ministry events, volunteering to pray and read Scripture, his peers often remarked how articulate he was and asked him how long he had been in the United States. While intended as compliments, these comments subtly invalidated his U.S. heritage and placed him in the position of "perpetual foreigner" in the eyes of his peers.[14]

An environmental microinvalidation based on race occurs when First Church—a historically white congregation in a now predominantly black and Latino/a area of the city—teaches its children's Sunday school classes using pictures and videos of Bible stories that portray biblical characters as white people. While the teachers do not notice the problem and certainly do not intend to communicate a racially invalidating message, the black and Latino/a children now calling this church their faith home are inundated for many years with the subtle message that the Bible is a book about white people.

Microassaults

Rather than the unintentionality and lack of perpetrator awareness characteristic of microinsults and microinvalidations, microassaults are most often conscious and deliberate and intend to communicate a demeaning attack or inflict harm based on a target's racial, gender, or sexual group identity.[15] These communications most resemble older forms of racism and sexism in their very deliberate and overt communication of denigration. Sue states that the conditions necessary for the communication of microassaults include the perpetrators either feeling some degree of anonymity, being in the presence of others who share their beliefs and attitudes and who will not hold them accountable for microassaultive communication, or losing emotional control and communicating prejudicial perspectives that they would normally keep to themselves.[16]

In an era of political correctness, when overt expressions of racism and sexism are deemed largely unacceptable in most churches and segments of

society, microassaults in contexts of ministry are probably most common when targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.[17] For example, from any number of pulpits throughout the country, an LGBTQ person might expect to hear LGBTQ persons denigrated as psychologically disordered or sinful because of their experience of sexuality or gender identity, expression of love, or formation of same-sex relationships. There is nothing subtle, unconscious, or unintentional about these communications, yet they do not always rise to the level of outright hate speech and so can be considered microassaults. While commonly experienced by LGBTQ people, microassaults are also common in the current immigration debates in the United States, denigrating the ethnic heritage and racial identities of persons from Central and South America. Additionally, in the wake of the U.S. "war on terror," persons of Middle Eastern descent or of Islamic faith are often targeted by microassaults that denigrate their ethnic heritage and/or promote Islamophobia.

The Experience of Perpetrators

While microaggressions are perpetrated every day by a multitude of people, most of us believe that we are generally good human beings who live moral lives and resist the prejudices that beset the society that surrounds us. It is surprising for many of us to learn that we communicate messages that are insulting, invalidating, and subtly denigrating to others based on their racial, gender, or sexual identities. That is because microaggressions, by definition, are perpetrated outside the conscious awareness of perpetrators, typically quite unintentionally, and often against the conscious self-perception we hold about ourselves as good, moral people. This understandably cultivates various forms of denial as a central experience for perpetrators of microaggressions.

Unawareness: "No, I Never Said That!"

Speech, actions, and environmental cues that target persons based on embodiments of difference such as racial identity, gender, or sexual orientation and gender identity are at times quite overt, but they garner the most power to damage and demean when they are covert and communicated outside the conscious awareness of well-intentioned perpetrators.[18] This is especially the case with the first two subtypes, microinsults and microinvalidations. Sue argues that a lack of perpetrator awareness surrounding their demeaning or

denigrating communication is a central characteristic of both of these sub-types.[19] To a great extent, microaggressions are unconscious and seemingly automatic verbal or physical communications that occur outside of the aware-ness of the perpetrator, understandably leading to denial on confrontation.

This is certainly the case in the vignette with Lisa, the male-to-female transgender person whose Sunday school classmates continue to refer to her with masculine pronouns. Lisa's classmates know and love her and have been very supportive of her gradual process of transition. The continual slip-ups in using masculine pronouns are genuine mistakes that are so automatic that her classmates do not even realize they are communicating insensitivity to their friend. If confronted, some may even deny that they would do such a thing to insult Lisa by using masculine pronouns, and they quite legitimately may not recognize that they have done so! Nevertheless, the experience is painful to Lisa and makes her Sunday school class feel like an unsafe place.

Unintentionality: "Oh, You Know I Didn't Mean It like That!"

In the vast majority of cases, the perpetrator of a microaggression does not intend to be hurtful, demeaning, or insulting in any way. Since the speaker legitimately does not intend to communicate insulting or invalidating mes-sages, when confronted by a targeted party, it is easy for the perpetrator to say, "Oh, you know that's not how I meant it." Sue argues, "Being able to give legitimate-sounding reasons for actions taken protects the individual from realizing their unintentional discrimination; it allows people to maintain the illusion that they acted properly and without bias."[20] Again, we all usually see ourselves as good, moral people who eschew prejudice and oppression in our lives. But it is very difficult to purge ourselves of the prejudicial beliefs and oppressive worldviews inculcated within us by simply being raised in a social atmosphere where racist, sexist, heterosexist, and genderist attitudes circulate so widely.

Thus, the racially microinvalidating message may be quite unintentional in the vignette above in which First Church—a historically white congregation in a now predominantly black and Latino/a area of the city—teaches children Sunday school lessons using pictures and videos of Bible stories portraying biblical characters exclusively as white people. The pastors and lay leaders of the church are, in fact, quite dedicated to their community and have worked hard as a congregation to become a more welcoming space for their black and Latino/a neighbors. They've even lost many white members in recent years who didn't want to see their church "change in that way." Sandra, a new African American Sunday school teacher, decides to gently confront three of

the longtime white teachers about these pictures and videos of all-white Bible characters. One Sunday after class, Sandra humorously says, "You know, if I didn't know any better, seeing these pictures and videos we use would make me think that the Bible was set in Sweden. Everyone's so white and blue-eyed." The white teachers respond by saying, "Sandra, you know they're just pictures. They're not meant to be racist. They're just all we have, and we really can't afford to replace them with new ones."

Self-Image Preservation: "But You Know I'm Not a Prejudiced Person!"

Believing ourselves to be generally good, moral, upstanding citizens who uphold the principles of democracy and live out a Christian ethic of love and justice, we can all be a little defensive when confronted with our own microaggressive communication. That nearly immediate, visceral reaction of defensiveness is perfectly understandable. But once we *know* about microaggressions and their power to harm, we have a responsibility to attend to the ways our unconscious, unintentional, nearly automatic communications can inadvertently perpetuate the racist, sexist, heterosexist, and genderist norms of our society in ways that harm our neighbors.

Defensiveness about our complicity in these microaggressive communications is a concern we must work to resolve within the context of our institutions and faith communities. When confronted, a perpetrator's denial can further the microaggressive experience, invalidating the targeted person's experience of reality by immediately shutting down discussion of the issue or shaming the targeted person for bringing it up in the first place. As Sue argues, "The ultimate denial is a denial that dominant group members profit from the isms of our society and a denial of personal responsibility to take action."[21]

Deborah, the church treasurer-elect from the example above, told her male pastor how hurt she was that it seemed her fellow congregants didn't trust her qualifications to be treasurer. Deborah believed they were reluctant to elect her because she was a woman, despite her many years of experience as a CPA and her dedicated service to the congregation. Her pastor immediately responded, "Now Deborah, I can't believe you would say that! You know women are treated as equals in this church! Folks just wanted to make sure they were electing a qualified person to this important position. The process would have been the same for a male candidate."

In this statement, the pastor perpetuated Deborah's microaggressive experience by denying that her perception of the situation had any validity. Even more invalidating was the pastor's seeming reluctance to recognize that no

matter the intention of the congregation in this specific instance, his church belongs to a denomination that struggles over women's leadership, with very few congregations being led by female pastors. While the pastor's internal defensive reaction is perfectly understandable, with the tools of microaggressions theory, he may become more willing to acknowledge with Deborah that her interpretation of this experience is valid, as there is a long history of sexist leadership norms within the denomination that it struggles to overcome. In an open discussion with Deborah about the difficulties of the congregation and wider denomination in overcoming historic stereotypes about and prejudices against women, the pastor may be more open to learning from Deborah the lessons that will help him cultivate a climate of greater gender equity within the congregation.[22] At the very least, this small change in the pastor's response would carefully guard against perpetuating the hurtful microaggressive experience Deborah has already encountered.

The Experience of Targets

Ambiguity: "Did That Really Just Happen?"

Microaggressions are filled with double meanings—overt messages at odds with hidden ones. Thus, messages intended to be positive, or at the very least innocuous, are attended by a subtly derogatory message entirely unintended by the speaker. These unintended messages derive their power to harm from citations of larger racist, sexist, or LGBTQ-denigrating social and theological discourses.[23] For example, a middle-aged, white, professional-class gay man is told by a parishioner of his congregation, "I'm so glad that you're the example of a gay man this church has. You're just so normal, and that will help people become more accepting of gay people." Intending to be complimentary, the microinsult contained in this message communicates the subtle message that gay people in general are abnormal and generally beyond the realm of what would be acceptable to the congregation.

The subtlety of microaggressions leaves in question the possibility that the experience of the targeted person may simply be a misreading of a situation or evidence of oversensitivity on the part of the recipient. Sue terms this phenomenon *attributional ambiguity* and describes it as one of the most damaging aspects of microaggressive communications. He argues that the attributional ambiguity of microaggressions "depletes psychological energy by diverting attention away from the surrounding environment in an attempt to interpret the motive and meaning of the person's actions." Thus, when

confronted by a microaggression, the targeted person must first discern the truth of the microaggressive experience while protecting oneself from further insults and invalidations.[24]

In the above experience of Carlos, a third-generation U.S. citizen from New Jersey whose family immigrated to the United States from Colombia many years before Carlos was born, he must discern whether or not his campus ministry peers mean to communicate anything about his racial and ethnic heritage with their comments about his "articulate" way of speaking. If he asks them about these statements, he may open himself to accusations of being overly sensitive or paranoid. Nadal describes this as the catch-22 of responding, by which he means that microaggressions are often so ambiguous that targets may question whether or not their experience of the microaggression really occurred or whether they are just being paranoid.[25] After targeted persons have come to some resolution about whether or not their perceptions are accurate, Sue says that they must try to ascertain what actions, if any, should be taken.[26] If they do choose to respond to perpetrators, they may open themselves up to further microaggressions or even overt aggression. If they do not respond, they may feel a deep sense of regret or inauthenticity.[27]

Action: "What Should I Do Now?"

Nadal describes the internal dialogue a targeted person often experiences when deciding whether and how to take action in responding: "What will happen if I confront this person? How will this affect my relationship with her or him? Will my physical or psychological safety be compromised if I say something? If I don't confront the person, how will I feel, and how will it affect me in the future?"[28] While the internal risks/benefits may lead a targeted person to believe that the situation is not safe to make a confrontation, the effects of not allowing one's beliefs and feelings to be known can be psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually harmful, inducing feelings of cowardice, beliefs that one has sold out, and feelings related to a loss of integrity.[29]

Sandra judged the potential of harming the relationship with her fellow Sunday school teachers to be fairly low, as they all get along well and the church has an overall atmosphere of attention to concerns of racial justice. So she decided to defuse the potential tension around the situation by couching her confrontation in a little humor. Though her coteachers denied the problematic nature of the pictures and videos of all-white Bible characters, Sandra felt good about having brought the subject to their attention and believed there to be potential for raising the subject again in the future.

Lisa has depended so much on this Sunday school class for their love and support during her process of gender transition. She leaned on them when her own family rejected her, and she spends so much of her time with members of this class that she judges the risk too great to confront them. She simply sits through each class and social gathering, bracing herself for the inevitable slip-ups of masculine pronoun usage. The experience is now depleting her psychological and emotional energy and distracting her from the spiritual growth she once felt she gained in this class. But because she's afraid of losing these relationships, confronting her classmates just seems too risky.

Impact: "Why Is This Affecting Me So Much?"

Sue argues, "The internal struggle with microaggressions can fester and eat away at the integrity of the person for long periods of time."[30] The recipient may experience feelings of sadness, anger, frustration, discomfort, lack of safety, embarrassment, shame, and a host of other affective responses.[31] Over time, the chronic, continual nature of microaggressions can wear down the targeted individuals, leading to feelings of exhaustion through the persistent experience of a hostile and invalidating climate that demeans one's racial, gender, or sexual identity and subtly demands that one comply with dominant experiences and expression of reality.[32]

While there are a variety of means for coping with and resisting microaggressions (a goal of this book is to increase those means), coping and resisting are not always effective in changing the environment in which microaggressions are occurring. When coping is unsuccessful or ineffective, the targeted person may experience the troubling emotions of depression, guilt, apathy, anxiety, and anger alongside a lowered sense of well-being, increased physiological reactivity, and the biological consequences of stress.[33] In the next chapter, we will address in depth the potential for theological language and symbols to intensify the violence perpetrated by microaggressive communication.

Carlos attempted to endure the microaggressive experiences he encountered from his predominantly white campus ministry peers. When the immigration debates in Texas began to become a lively source of discussion on campus, many of his peers assumed that Carlos could provide them with a firsthand perspective and often asked him at meals or in class to comment on the experience of an immigrant. Carlos, who has never even traveled outside of the United States, tried to explain that all Latinos/as do not share a common experience, but this rarely seemed to get through to them. Moving from a racially and ethnically diverse school, church, and community in

New Jersey to a mostly white Christian university in Texas, Carlos knew his everyday experience would be vastly different. What he didn't expect was that his peers would treat him as a perpetual foreigner in his own country. Carlos eventually decided to stop confronting his peers, as the confrontations rarely seemed effective to bring about change. Carlos began experiencing a persistent mixture of sadness and anger and eventually dropped out of his campus ministry groups without explanation, becoming more withdrawn and feeling isolated on his small college campus.

The Goals of Addressing Microaggressions

Given that microaggressions are communicated in ways that are largely unintentional and outside the conscious awareness of perpetrators with great potential for denial, Sue asks, "How do we make the invisible visible? How do we reach people so that they can become aware of their biases? How do we make people see the harm perpetrated against socially devalued groups in our society?"[34] These are important guiding questions for our exploration of microaggressions in ministry. Our goals in helping ministers, churches, and other religious institutions to address microaggressions are threefold.

First, we aim to increase microaggressions *awareness* by making the invisible visible. If microaggressions education in congregations and faith institutions takes hold, there is potential to increase the awareness of perpetrators and lessen the experience of ambiguity among targets so that microaggressions can be addressed more openly when they occur. We aim to raise readers' awareness of the many subtle and nearly automatic ways our speech and actions are shaped by the racism, sexism, heterosexism, and transphobia/genderism still circulating in wider society. We hope that this will mean fewer slights, insults, and invalidations will slip by our conscious notice and that when they inevitably do, recipients of those microaggressive communications will have the conceptual tools necessary to name the experiences in ways that may bring about change.

Second, we want to provide ministers, congregations, and institutions tools for microaggressions *assessment.* By evaluating the prevalence and potential of microaggressions to cause harm within religious contexts, these environments can become more just, welcoming spaces. Beyond internal assessment, however, we hope that churches and other religious institutions will become spaces where persons are equipped with strategies for coping with and resisting microaggressions *outside* church walls. With these enhanced

tools, they can deal with the insulting, invalidating, and assaultive messages affecting themselves and their friends and neighbors.

Third, we hope to provide tools for *action* in order to bring about substantial change. This begins with the simple task of bringing microaggressions into conscious, intentional conversation. The goal is not to make us too paranoid to speak but to help us become aware that we *will* perpetrate microaggressions and that we need strategies and tools in order to grapple honestly with this reality, to decrease the occurrence of microaggressions, and to ameliorate their potential to harm within our churches and wider communities. As homiletics scholar Christine M. Smith states, "To speak honestly about our individual lives and the conditions of the human family is a powerful act of resistance in a world committed to the denial of truth."[35] By addressing each ministerial context in its specificity—preaching and education, worship and spirituality, pastoral care and counseling—we hope to provide readers with these practical tools for honestly engaging microaggressive experience with the aims of healing and resistance.

A Note Regarding Terms

Recognizing and properly addressing microaggressions is hard. For many readers the very concept of microaggressions is new, even though the reality of them is not. Compounding the difficulty is the fact that microaggressions are not all the same; they are, rather, a complex mix of attitudes, perspectives, and behaviors. To deal with this complexity, those who study microaggressions and the related issues of race, gender, and sexuality have come up with certain specialized terms—for example, the distinction between microaggression and microassault. We will, at times, draw on this vocabulary. If you encounter terms with which you are unfamiliar, please consult the glossaries toward the end of the book.