

Disrupting Microaggressions in the Academic Workplace: The Role of Bystanders

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Abstract : Microaggressions are small, everyday verbal and behavioral slights that communicate derogatory messages to individuals on the basis of their group membership. They are often unintentional and not intended to do harm, and yet research has shown that their cumulative effect can be quite detrimental. The current pilot study focuses on the role of bystanders disrupting gender microaggressions and potential barriers of challenging them in the academic workplace at University of Massachusetts Lowell (UML). The participants in this study included 9 male and 20 female from faculty of different disciplines at UML. A Barriers to Intervening Questionnaire asks respondents 1) to rate barriers to intervening in situations described in three short vignettes and 2) to identify more general factors that make it more or less likely that UML faculty will intervene in microaggressions as bystanders through response to an open-ended question. Responses to the questionnaire scales that ask about respondents' own reactions to the vignettes indicated that faculty may hesitate to interrupt gender microaggressions to avoid being perceived as offensive, losing their relationship with their coworkers, and engaging possible arguments. Responses to the open-ended question, which asked more generally about perceived barriers, revealed a few additional barriers; lack of interpersonal and institutional support, repercussion to self, personal orientation/personality, and privilege. Interestingly, participants tended to describe the obstacles presented in the questionnaire as unlikely to prevent them from intervening, yet the same barriers were suggested to be issues for others on the open-ended questions. Limitations and future directions are discussed. The barriers identified in this research can inform efforts to create bystander trainings to interrupt microaggressions in the academic workplaces.

Keywords : academic workplace, bystander behavior, implicit bias, microaggressions

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