

Disability Microaggressions: Increasing Sensitivity to Subtle Forms of Ableism

Richard Keller, Ph.D.
Corinne Galgay, Ed.M.
Danielle Ryan, Ed.M. candidate
Teachers College, Columbia University

1

Historical Context

- There is a well documented history of violence, oppression, and discrimination against people with disabilities
- This history is widely unknown, unrecognized and underestimated
- Ableism is the unique form of discrimination against people with disabilities (PWDs) based on their disability status alone
- Campbell (2001) defines ableism as:
a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability is cast as a diminished state of being human. (p.44)
- Ableism exists in both overt and covert forms

APA, 2009; Snyder & Mitchell, 2006; Olkin & Pledger, 2003; Wallace et al., 2003; Keller, 2004; Keller & King, 2008; Campbell, 2008

2

Has Ableism Evolved?

- The Americans With Disabilities Act was passed in 1990 (ADA, 1990)
- The regulations enforcing the act were published in 1991
- The ADA has recently been amended in order to re-broaden its scope, countering 19 years of narrowing by the courts
- The Americans with Disabilities Amendment Act went into effect January 1, 2009 (ADAA, 2008)
- The elimination of systematically sanctioned ableism i.e. ADA has provided opportunity for ableism, like classic racism, to evolve into a more subtle format

3

Ableism and Microaggressions

- A byproduct of evolved ableism is a disability microaggression
- Microaggressions are:
"subtle, stunning, often automatic, verbal and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs'" (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978, p. 66).

4

Method For Study

- Research on disability has come to embrace qualitative methodology and focus groups (Kroll, Barbour, & Harris, 2007)
- Study was comprised of two focus groups with a total of 12 participants
- Good variation across gender; race/ethnicity; disability type, onset, and visibility
- Poor variation in age and occupation
- A modified CQR format for focus groups was used
- Procedure for study was modeled after microaggression studies for other minority groups (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007; Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2007)

5

Results

1. Denial of Identity – Denying the identity of a person with a disability.
 - a) Denial of Personal Identity
 - b) Denial of Experience
2. Denial of Privacy – Denial of person with a disability's right to individual privacy due to their disability status
3. Helplessness – Assumption by the perpetrator that the person with a disability is helpless, needs help, and/or must be protected.
4. Secondary Gain – Where the perpetrator desires to gain something through their interaction with the person with a disability.
 - a) Intrinsic and extrinsic rewards

6

Results

5. Spread Effect – An interaction where the disability is assumed to impact functioning beyond the appropriate limitation based on the specific disability.
 - a) Ascription of Intelligence
 - b) Ascription of Ability
6. Patronization – The infantilization or false admiration of a person with a disability based on their disability status
7. Second class citizen – Denial of rights and respect of the person with a disability by the perpetrator.
 - a) Burdened
 - b) Avoidance/Invisibility
 - c) Environmental
8. Desexualization – Denial of the person with a disability as a sexual being. Includes all aspects of the sexuality and sexual identity.

7

Discussion

Purpose of the study was to:

- Explore the existence of disability microaggressions and their dynamics
- Caution about generalizing our findings
- Results indicate that disability microaggressions exist and are psychological harmful to targets (PWDs)
- Able to accomplish most of the goals set out at onset of study, however, we were only able to obtain hints of strategies PWDs utilize to effectively deal with these experiences
- Participants universally described these experiences as evidence of the bias associated with the ableist worldview

8

Findings in Comparison to Previous Microaggression Research

Findings that reflect similar research

- Denial of Identity
- Second Class Citizen

Findings that partially reflect similar research

- Spread Effect
 - Similar to Ascription of Intelligence
- Desexualization
 - Diametrically opposed to “exoticization” of Asian American women

9

Findings Unique to Disability Microaggression Research

- Denial of privacy
- Patronization
- Secondary Gain
- Helplessness

10

Implication of Findings

- Research
- Theory
- Practice
- Institutions of Higher Education

11
