Minimizing and Managing Microaggressions in the Philosophy Classroom

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Abstract: Dealing with challenging topics like race and gender in the classroom can be a daunting task. Even when we mean well and try hard, we can easily make mistakes that can have serious consequences for our students, especially those in targeted or oppressed groups. Whether or not we explicitly discuss race and gender in our classes, well-meaning professors and students who believe in equality and social justice often commit racist and sexist microaggressions, which are words and actions that, generally unintentionally, convey racist and sexist messages. These microaggressions have a negative impact on students, and impede their learning process. In this paper, I will explain what microaggressions are and why they happen, in order to help prevent them from occurring. I will also examine ways of effectively managing them when they do occur.

“‘Maria makes a good point’—another classmate in a discussion where I was the only Latina. My name is NOT Maria”—www.microaggressions.com, posted November 3, 2011

“‘I’m sure you can speak to this.’—said by the teacher, referring to me in a class discussing how race influences therapy. I’m the only Black person in the room”—www.microaggressions.com, posted January 14, 2012

I. Introduction

All too often well-intentioned professors make mistakes in the classroom when dealing with highly charged topics like racism and sexism. Whether or not a class covers material that directly addresses race or gender, these subjects often do arise, frequently in the form of racist or sexist remarks being made by students, like the first example above. Oftentimes, professors will panic and not know how to handle such moments. Additionally, well-meaning professors can themselves
commit racist and sexist acts without realizing it, as in the second example above. These subtle forms of discriminatory behaviors are often referred to as microaggressions, a term first used by Chester Pierce to characterize instances of racist comments and behaviors that African-Americans experience on a regular basis (Sue 2010: 5). In general, microaggressions are words and behaviors that happen in everyday interactions that “send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership” (Sue 2010: 24). Microaggressions reinforce cultural stereotypes about disadvantaged groups, so can only be experienced by people who are members of oppressed groups in our society. Members of dominant groups may experience insults based on their group membership (being white or male, for example), but such incidents are not defined as microaggressions, as they occur rarely and lack much force. People with dominant identities are not subject to ongoing, long-term, pervasive negative stereotyping, as members of oppressed groups are, and microaggressions gain their significance from the way that they act to reinforce this power structure in our society; insults against members of dominant groups do not function in this way. My primary focus will be on racism and sexism, as much research is available on microaggressions in these areas, and they are pervasive problems in philosophy.

Microaggressions are representative of the way that discrimination has changed form over the years. While racism and sexism still do occur in direct, consciously chosen forms—the use of slurs, telling racist or sexist jokes, whites actively avoiding people of color—the frequency of these overt displays has decreased (Dovidio 2001: 834). Expressions of racism and sexism have undergone changes, moving from these open displays to more subtle expressions “that hide . . . in our cultural assumptions/beliefs/values, in our institutional policies and practices, and in the deeper psychological recesses of our individual psyches” (Sue 2010: 8; see also Sue 2010: 166 and Dovidio 2001: 834). For example, while many people consciously maintain non-racist beliefs, it is quite common for people to also have “negative racial feelings and beliefs (which develop through normal socialization)” (Dovidio 2001: 835). Gender stereotypes also continue to be present in our society, despite many people’s outward disavowal of them (Sue 2010: 166). People’s conscious beliefs in social justice may lead them to have trouble believing that they could possibly still harbor racist or sexist feelings or be capable of committing a microaggression. But, in fact, people who believe themselves to be non-racist and non-sexist quite commonly engage in behaviors that are racist or sexist without realizing it (Dovidio 2001: 839), a phenomenon that will be discussed in greater detail in part II.
Research has shown that experiencing microaggressions can cause a multitude of deleterious short- and long-term effects. In the short term, when people perceive microaggressions, emotionally, they may understandably feel frustrated by the experience, as well as angry and hurt. This emotional upset can contribute to cognitive disruption, which, in the context of the classroom, can cause the student’s attention to be directed to the incident, rather than the content of the material being covered. When a microaggression is committed by a professor, the student may feel deeply betrayed and hurt, especially if that professor was held in high regard before the incident. The negative impact of having a respected professor say something discriminatory is much more severe than having a less respected person do it (Sue 2010: 23). As microaggressions are experienced by members of oppressed groups on a regular basis, negative long term effects can also occur, such as lower self-esteem, depression, anxiety, and physical health problems (Sue 2010: 6, 149).

As professors, our goal is to facilitate learning, and committing microaggressions and mishandling those committed by students prevents us from succeeding at that task; in particular, it reduces our effectiveness with students from oppressed groups. While many factors may contribute to educational disparities between dominant and oppressed groups in our society, prejudice and discrimination, often expressed in the form of microaggressions, can be a factor (Feldman 1985). Philosophy as a discipline has done a poor job of attracting white women and people of color. The persistence of microaggressions can be part of the problem, as they “present a hostile and invalidating learning climate” (Sue 2010: 235). After providing further explanation of how implicit beliefs can affect our actions, I will discuss microaggressions in more detail and explain the impact they have on our students’ learning. Finally, I will explore some strategies for minimizing the likelihood of committing microaggressions and offer some suggestions for handling them when they inevitably occur.

II. The Role of Implicit Beliefs

Much work has been done to illustrate and understand how people may exhibit “dual attitudes,” that is, possess consciously non-racist and non-sexist views, while still maintaining implicit racist and sexist beliefs (Dovidio 2001, Berlak 2008, Banaji and Greenwald 2013). The existence of such beliefs is not really surprising, as they are formed as a result of living in a racist and sexist society which constantly bombards us with racist and sexist images and ideas. These implicit beliefs are formed throughout our lifetimes, as we are exposed to cultural (mis)information through our families, the media, and our schools.
With regard to race, “these cultural forces reinforce and naturalize white supremacy and blindness to the hegemony of whiteness” (Berlak 2008: 52). For example, approximately 75 percent of people who have completed the Implicit Association Test (https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit), which measures people’s implicit biases, have positive associations with whiteness and negative associations with blackness (Banaji and Greenwald 2013: 47). Approximately 75 percent of men and 80 percent of women who take the test for implicit gender bias (which tests how closely one associates men with careers and women with family) show at least a slight preference for associating males with career and females with family (Banaji and Greenwald 2013: 115). The pervasiveness of such stereotypical beliefs is also shown by the fact that about 50 percent of black people who take the IAT also show a preference for whiteness (Berlak 2008: 60). Showing preference for whiteness has been determined to correlate with engaging in discriminatory behaviors, regardless of people’s conscious non-racist beliefs (Banaji and Greenwald 2013: 47). In the classroom, this could translate into giving more benefit of the doubt to white students, undervaluing the participation and abilities of students of color, or calling on males more frequently than females.

The presence of implicit biases has remained constant over the years, despite the fact that overt racism and sexism has decreased (Dovidio 2001: 834 and 839; Sue 2010: 166). Given how deeply ingrained such beliefs can be, it is not surprising that even when people consciously choose to reject racist and sexist beliefs, the old beliefs do not simply disappear. Rather, the memory of the old belief remains, and it will continue to function as an implicit belief despite the new, contradictory conscious belief (Dovidio 2001: 839). Implicit beliefs can affect our actions, and are more likely to influence our behavior in ambiguous situations, or “when more spontaneous responses are called for and/or when careful cognitive deliberation is not possible” (Sue 2010: 143). Our behavior in the classroom, then, is particularly vulnerable since we often have little time to reflect before speaking. Our actions are most likely to align with our conscious beliefs in situations in which we have ample time to make a decision about what to do or say, and in situations in which we feel that we might be judged (Sue 2010: 143). For example, in one study, if a white person thought s/he was the only person available to help a black person, the white person helped 95 percent of the time (Dovidio 2001: 836). In this unambiguous situation, not helping would clearly be perceived as racist. In the same study, if there were other people available in the situation to help, whites helped the black person 38 percent of the time, but helped the white person 75 percent of the time. The white subjects claimed they did not help the black person because others were available to help, and that
it had nothing to do with race, but if the subject (who was consciously unbiased, but held implicit biases) was not affected by race, those percentages would be the same. Because the person could explain the choice to others and themselves by referring to the presence of other people, they were able to act on their implicit prejudice.

Implicit attitudes may also affect behaviors “that are more difficult to monitor and control (e.g., some nonverbal behaviors)” (Dovidio 2001: 839). Most people are not very aware of their own body language, but we do read and respond to the body language of others. In a study of interracial conversations, non-racist whites’ conversations with black people had positive content (Dovidio 2001: 842). However, those who also had negative implicit racial beliefs displayed negative nonverbal behaviors, such as lack of eye contact and excessive blinking, which corresponds to “higher levels of negative arousal and tension” (Dovidio 2001: 841). The participants were asked to judge the friendliness of their partner, and the black participants gave implicitly biased whites lower scores for friendliness even when the conscious content of what they said was positive. The presence of negative body language, then, can be more meaningful than what a person says, and the study showed that black participants were well attuned to reading this body language. In the context of the classroom, professors who avoid eye contact, turn their bodies away, fidget, or engage in other nervous behaviors when speaking with students from targeted groups may be judged negatively by their students, even if they espouse egalitarian views (Feldman 1985).

Other studies have also illustrated the way that members of targeted groups are alert to signs of bias from members of dominant groups (see, for example, Vorauer and Kumhyr 2001; also see Hanna, Talley, and Guindon 2000 and Keltner and Robinson 1996 [cited in Sue 2010: 47]; also Dovidio 2001: 842). Members of targeted groups must develop a sharp radar for biased behaviors as a matter of survival, as dominant groups have much more power and control in society. Because of their lack of power, members of oppressed groups will often be inhibited from speaking up about experiences of discrimination with members of dominant groups. This silence can then encourage members of dominant groups to be unaware of oppression. For example, I have had many white students who attended predominantly white schools tell me in all earnestness that racism is no longer a problem, as well as males assuring me that sexism is not an issue anymore. They are able to believe that because they have not experienced it themselves, seen it occur to others, or heard about it through the media they consume. The lived experience of dominant group members does not require them to understand the lives of people in marginalized groups, and this lack of awareness can cause them to “impose . . . [their] worldview upon
marginalized groups by denying another group’s experiential reality” (Sue 2010: 46).

Understanding both the way that the lives of people in dominant groups are constructed to create and maintain a lack of awareness of oppressed groups, and the way that implicit biases can be reflected in our behaviors are important to help well-meaning people understand how they may engage in behaviors that are racist or sexist without realizing it. Oftentimes, people think that it is only their conscious beliefs that matter, but we can see that our conscious beliefs can be distorted, and that implicit biases can be expressed in our actions. Ridding ourselves of misinformation and overcoming implicit biases are crucial steps, as they are potential causes of microaggressions. While changing implicit beliefs is difficult “because they are rooted in overlearning and habitual reactions” (Dovidio 2001: 839), it is not impossible. Recognizing that one has implicit biases, understanding how they operate, and reflecting on one’s actions and feelings in situations that trigger implicit biases can help people overcome them. Being exposed to positive images of people from oppressed groups, and having positive interactions with such people can also help people eliminate their implicit biases (Berlak 2008: 60) and avoid committing microaggressions (Berlak 2008: 60, Banaji and Greenwald 2013: 163–67). Changing one’s body language is also possible. One can learn to monitor such behaviors as: how much space one leaves between oneself and another during a conversation, whether or not one maintains eye contact, the positioning of one’s body (keeping it open and facing one’s interlocutor), and controlling nervous behaviors like fidgeting, and monitoring tone of voice (Feldman 1985: 48). Ultimately, however, addressing the underlying biases is necessary for such changes to occur (Feldman 1985: 48).

III. Types of Microaggressions

Microaggressions can take many different forms, which Derald Wing Sue has classified under two main headings: microinsults and microinvalidations. Microinsults occur when a person, usually unknowingly, acts or speaks in a way that invokes stereotypes of targeted groups, “convey[ing] rudeness and insensitivity and demean[ing] a person’s” identity (Sue 2010: 29). Referring to a person of color as being “a credit to her race” or telling a student she is good at logic “for a woman,” for example, may be intended as compliments, but ultimately they are based on the idea that women and people of color are not as intelligent as whites and males (Sue 2010: 35). Microinsults may also take the form of behaviors, such as lack of eye contact in a conversation with a person of color, a man leering at a woman, a restaurant hostess ignoring a Latino family, a white woman pulling her purse in closer when
a black man passes by, or a man whistling at a woman walking past. Microinsults also can occur when the ways of the dominant group are treated as being better than those of other groups. In the classroom, for example, if we tell students that it is wrong to get emotional during a discussion, we are privileging white masculine communication styles (unemotional, "objective") over the more emotionally engaged styles that other groups may favor (Sue 2010: 35).

The other type of microaggressions that Sue describes are microinvalidations, which are kinds of "communications . . . that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality" of people in oppressed groups (Sue 2010: 37). For example, a professor who attempts to praise a Chinese American student by stating "your English is very good" assumes that the student is not "really" American, though he may have been born and raised in the United States. This comment also contains a microinsult, as it invokes a stereotype that Chinese people generally do not speak English well. Microinvalidations might be the most damaging kind of microaggression because of the way that they represent a denial of the person’s reality. The student in the example knows himself to be an American, yet he may frequently hear comments like this one that deny his existence as a "real" American.

One common microinvalidation is the use of sexist language in texts and classes. Using masculine terms like "men" and "he" to refer to all people has the effect of rendering women invisible (Sue 2010: 171). While some students may claim that this language does not bother them, studies have shown that sexist language does have a negative effect on perceptions of women, and that women can internalize these negative ideas, leading to "lower feelings of self-worth and competency" (Sue 2010: 171). Another common microinvalidation is the assertion of colorblindness ("I don’t see color"). Students who make this claim typically mean well, and do not realize that by denying the existence of race and ethnicity, they are denying an important aspect of the lived reality of people of color. As Sue states, "denial of color is really a denial of differences. The denial of differences is really a denial of power and privilege" (Sue 2010: 38). Colorblindness, then, often reflects ignorance of or denial of the reality of racism in our society. Ultimately, it can be used as a way for whites to avoid taking responsibility for racist oppression in society (Sue 2010: 38). Other claims, like "I’m not a racist," "nowadays it is men who are being discriminated against," and "everyone can succeed if they work hard enough" (Sue 2010: 39, 168) also are microinsults, both again reflecting a lack of understanding of the pervasiveness of racism and sexism in individuals and in our society. Implicit in the third comment is the idea that people who have had trouble succeeding in our society
(members of oppressed groups) must not be good enough, and if they were smart and hard-working like members of dominant groups, they would succeed. This view ignores the reality that racism and sexism act as real barriers to success, and that dominant group identities provide members with unearned privileges.

There are many reasons why people in dominant groups commit microaggressions, including the existence of implicit biases, as described above. Another source of microaggressions can be the ignorance members of dominant groups frequently have about oppression and oppressed groups. The ways of the dominant group are presented as the norm in a culture, and as such are difficult to notice, and “represent a default standard by which all other group norms and behaviors are consciously and unconsciously compared, contrasted, and made visible” (Sue 2010: 114). Because the norms of a culture are presented as being the right and best ways of doing things, they are seen as superior to other ways, and members of dominant groups can unknowingly apply these standards in ways that devalue members of oppressed groups. Academic discourse, for example, is supposed to be performed in a rational and unemotional style, and emotional expressions are unwelcome. The fact that this preference for so-called rational and objective thought reflects the ways of dominant white male culture is often lost. A black student one semester reported to me that she frequently had the experience of being told that she was angry by some white students during discussions in one of her classes. She would repeatedly explain that she was not in fact angry, but simply expressing her views with passion, but some of the white students seemed unable to believe her. Here, the stereotype of the “angry black woman” was in play, as was the white students’ notion that emotional intensity was problematic. Discomfort with handling emotional discourse is not seen as the problem from the perspective of the dominant group; expressing emotion in discourse is. In this way, members of dominant groups often are unaware that the standards they hold are cultural and that others may operate from different standards which have their validity.

The adversarial nature of philosophical discourse is another such taken-for-granted standard that may serve to alienate people. As Jan-ice Moulton has explained, the way that aggression is valued in such discourse may act as a barrier for many women, as it contradicts the strong social idea that femininity entails being unaggressive and non-confrontational6 (Moulton 2007). Another example of the way that dominant groups determine norms is the well-known example Peggy McIntosh uses of adhesive bandages and stockings being labeled “flesh tone” when their color matches that of white people. The implication is that normative flesh is white, and people of color, then, do not have flesh (McIntosh 2005: 111). Another example is found on the sports
page of newspapers, which commonly use the labels “Basketball” and “Women’s Basketball,” which conveys that basketball proper is played by men; when it is played by women it needs a special designation. These kinds of assumptions are often unseen by members of dominant groups, and their use is not necessarily intended as a putdown. Despite the intention, though, there is an implicit insult in this type of assumption.

Members of dominant groups often focus more heavily on their intention, rather than on the outcome of their behavior. They commonly appeal to the fact that they did not mean any offense as an excuse for having committed one, without recognizing that this move privileges their experience over that of the other person. One way of thinking of it is that if we are dancing and I hit you in the nose with my elbow, whether or not it is an accident, your nose is going to hurt. If it were an accident, you might feel better about me than you would if I had done it on purpose, but you still would likely want to avoid me on the dance floor. The pain caused by a microaggression is real, whether it was intended or not. Good intentions and good conscious beliefs are not enough to prevent microaggressions or eradicate the bad effects of them. Learning more about how oppression and privilege operate in our society, as well as becoming more educated about one’s own identities as well as those of oppressed groups, and learning more about implicit biases, can help people avoid accidentally committing microaggressions, as well as help one deal with it more effectively when it does happen.

IV. Effects of Microaggressions

Though these more subtle expressions of racism may be called microaggressions, their effect is still significant, and can be “as pernicious as [the effects] of the traditional, overt form of discrimination” (Dovidio 2001: 834; Dovidio et al. 2002). When faced with a microaggression, a person may feel “frustration, defensiveness . . . irritability . . . shock, anger, disappointment, resentment, anxiety . . . disbelief, helplessness, hopelessness, and fear” (Smith, Hung, and Franklin 2011: 68). Physically, the experience of microaggressions can cause headaches, stomachaches and other gastrointestinal problems, high blood pressure, and sleep disruptions (Smith, Hung, and Franklin 2011: 68). Numerous studies chronicle the ways that the persistent experience of racism can be associated with “depression, lowered life satisfaction, low self-esteem, and intense feelings of racial rage, anxiety, paranoia, and helplessness” (Sue 2010: 149). Sexism also has the same kinds of impact, contributing to psychological and physical health problems (Sue 2010: 178–80). The constant experience of microaggressions has
been compared to receiving multiple paper cuts. While one paper cut
is not a big deal, if you are continually being cut in the same place, it
can become quite painful. Given that racism and sexism are so deeply
embedded in our society, microaggressions happen quite frequently,
whether in everyday interactions with people, or in the consumption
of media.

As a result of these constant attacks, people of color may experi-
ence race-related trauma and/or race-related fatigue. Although trauma
is often thought to refer to the experience of one major event, the con-
stant repetition of smaller negative experiences like microaggressions
can also leave people with symptoms of trauma, such as “heightened
autonomic arousal, emotional fluctuations, nightmares, or intrusive
thoughts” (Sue 2010: 150). Protecting oneself psychologically “in the
face of chronic and never-ending White supremacy . . . [is] truly ex-
hausting” (Sue 2010: 150), and can also lead to fatigue. People of color
may feel hopelessness about the possibility of achieving equality, as
“the time and energy drain spent navigating hostile environments and
dealing with racial microaggressions is a major cost to maintaining a
hopeful disposition toward racial relations and social justice” (Smith,
Hung, and Franklin 2011: 67).

Fatigue also results from the need to fight against internalized
racism, which occurs when members of oppressed groups internalize
negative stereotypes about their own groups and “begin to view and
judge themselves and other members of the racial group through this
distorted lens” (Sheared et al. 2010: 219). As a result, people of color
may have lowered expectations for themselves, and/or “an overall feel-
ing of ‚not being good enough.‘” (Sheared et al. 2010: 219) Women
also face the threat of internalizing sexism (Benaji and Greenwald
2013: 111–22). Fighting internalized oppression and maintaining a
positive self-image requires a good deal of psychological energy. The
energy that is constantly being directed to defending oneself (whether
externally from the words and deeds of others, or internally, against
internalizing/absorbing these stereotypes) is energy that is then unavail-
able for other activities, including coursework (Sue 2010: 150; see also
students experience microaggressions from classmates and professors
on a regular basis, the fatigue and trauma that occur can cause them to
become disillusioned about the value of education, and feel “despondent
. . . [and] that they could not perform well academically” (Solórzano,
Ceja, and Yosso 2000: 69). Students can lose confidence in their own
abilities, and may choose to drop certain classes, change majors, or
even change schools due to the persistent experience of microaggress-
sions (Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000: 66).
Since microaggressive attacks can come from anyone, anytime, people can feel very vulnerable, and perhaps experience a constant need for vigilance to protect themselves from potential assaults. This wariness, which Sandra Bartky (in discussing the development of feminist identity) characterizes as “anticipation of the possibility of an attack, of affront or insult, of disparagement, ridicule, or the hurting blindness of others” (Bartky 1995: 402), also contributes to fatigue. It can also seem problematic to people with dominant identities, as in some cases, dominant group members might claim that wariness is the cause of the problem, and that if, for example, white women and people of color would not be so wary, then race and gender relations would be better. However, this interpretation fails to see that wariness does not cause sexism or racism; it can be a logical response to the pervasiveness of discrimination, and can be necessary in order to protect one’s sense of self in the face of constant hostility.

V. Responding to Microaggressions: Critical Humility and Self-Knowledge

Understanding the persistent and long-term nature of microaggressions is important for developing the ability to respond well when one occurs. All too frequently, students who try to report microaggressions are told that they are overreacting, the incident is minor, and they should just let it go. This kind of dismissive response is itself a microaggression, as it reflects an insensitivity to the reality of oppressed groups and the effects of enduring institutionalized racism and sexism. When we become aware of the ongoing, persistent nature of oppression in our society, we can better understand that this incident is just one of many that the student has experienced, and respond with greater sympathy and insight. We should not rely on students calling our attention to such issues, however. Students often do not feel empowered to do so, nor should they have to. With a greater comprehension of how microaggressions work, we can do a better job of responding when a problem arises, as well as improve our ability to prevent ourselves from committing microaggressions.

Successful handling of such situations is helped by our first being open to the reality that microaggressions do occur regularly, as well as the possibility that we may commit microaggressions ourselves. Being told that we may have said something racist or sexist can be very difficult to hear, causing an increase in heart rate and a panicked feeling. When we respond from this stressed position, we are more likely to react in a knee-jerk fashion, defending ourselves and denying it (“I’m not a racist!” “How could I be a sexist?!”). Simply taking a deep breath and trying to relax as we deal with the situation can help
prevent our stress reaction from interfering with our ability to respond sensibly. Being aware of our bodily reactions and our body language is important; as we have seen, people do read our body language, and so when we are hearing criticism, we should avoid the tendency to close our arms and legs, or turn away from the speaker. Maintaining open body language helps us listen better, and shows our interlocutors that we are in fact open to hearing what they have to say.

Hearing that we have made a mistake can be particularly difficult when we are working very hard to overcome our biases, and our image of ourselves as being good people can also make it hard to accept that we may have done something bad (Schulz 2010: 194–95). As we have seen above, though, people who are consciously non-racist and non-sexist can and do commit microaggressions, whether due to implicit biases or ignorance of race and gender issues. Responding well when our mistakes are brought to our attention can be facilitated by maintaining an attitude of critical humility, which reflects an awareness that, however much we may know about social justice, we also must remain “aware that our knowledge is partial and evolving” (Sheared et al. 2010: 147). It is an attitude reflective of Socratic ignorance; that is, recognizing that knowledge requires awareness of what one does not know, and it can help us be conscious of the fact that there may be much that we do not know about experiences we do not have. Listening to others’ perspectives with an open mind is an important part of developing a deeper understanding of oppression and privilege, but it does not mean that the other person is always correct, or that we must defer to what the other person says. However, “to engage another with criticality, we need to find a place of genuine care and compassion for that other person and ourselves, remembering we have something to learn” (Sheared et al. 2010: 155). Achieving this mindset of critical humility can help us do better at navigating conversations about microaggressions and handling them when they occur in classes.

Developing critical humility may entail learning more about both our own social identities as well as those of other people. Cultural standards are set by people with privilege, and “other groups are relegated as ‘subcultures’” (Goodman 2011: 16). Members of dominant groups often remain unaware of so-called subcultures and their ongoing experiences of oppression, since dominant group members do not experience it themselves, and since the mainstream media may not report it meaningfully. Dominant identities are constructed in such a way that they are meant to remain hidden, so, for example, as Catherine MacKinnon points out, white men may not realize that their “physiology defines most sports, their health needs largely define insurance coverage, their socially designed biographies define workplace expectations and successful career patterns, their perspectives and concerns define quality
in scholarship, their experiences and obsessions define merit . . . their presence defines family . . . and their genitals define sex” (Goodman 2011: 13). Many such cultural assumptions that we carry with us go unnoticed, as dominant beliefs generally do not appear as beliefs; they recede into the background as truths, and act as the standard against which we compare other views.

As a result, members of dominant groups often focus on individualistic understandings of themselves, and lack an understanding of their social identities and how they might affect interactions in social settings like the classroom. Whites, for example, rarely identify themselves as white or think of whiteness as being an important aspect of their sense of self, as whites rarely experience stereotyping since they “can be described by the default attributes” of our society (Banaji and Greenwald 2013: 92). People of color more often see their racial/ethnic identity as central to who they are. Whites may not realize how their whiteness has actually played an important part in their lives, as it has provided them with privileges which often remain invisible to whites because they take the form of things that whites do not experience. Peggy McIntosh’s famous article on white privilege lists numerous examples, including not being followed in stores, being welcomed or treated neutrally by neighbors, and not being treated with suspicion when writing a check for a purchase (McIntosh 2005: 110). Similarly, males may not be aware of the multitude of privileges that they experience on the basis of their gender. Ultimately, whites and males experience a default setting of respect and belonging which can be very hard for them to see. When we understand the social forces at play that contribute to keeping us unaware of privilege and oppression, our ignorance about them becomes understandable, and so we can have compassion for ourselves as we strive to learn more. This knowledge also contributes to an attitude of critical humility; that is, for example, when I acknowledge that my whiteness has shaped my worldview, I can more easily recognize that my perspective has its limits, and that others’ worldviews may be quite different from mine, and be true.

Developing one’s knowledge in this area can be aided by forming a cohort of colleagues who are interested in and knowledgeable about these issues. Having a reading group that focuses on a particular topic or identity can be useful, so people can work on these issues through dialogue and discussion. If there are no philosophers who are comfortable leading such a group, a colleague from another department, like sociology or psychology, could be asked to step in. One must take care, though, not to expect people in oppressed groups to take on the burden of teaching people in dominant groups. Dominant group members must take responsibility for educating themselves about their own identities as well as those of others. This type of knowledge is necessary for
“educators [who] are trying to move beyond mere conversation and into action” (Lund 2010: 22); good will and good intentions are not enough.

Having a sense of critical humility can help one handle the inevitable mistakes that will occur during this educational process, reminding us that we are all limited in our knowledge and capable of making mistakes. Maintaining this attitude is aided by knowing how the construction of dominant identities makes them difficult to see and also makes it difficult to see those in targeted groups. By understanding these factors, we can have compassion towards ourselves when we make mistakes, and keep an open mind and listen with sensitivity when we hear another’s perspective. Developing awareness of our physical reactions and body language can also help us communicate more effectively. Paradoxically, when we begin to pay attention to our body language we may feel very uncomfortable and stiff, but learning open body postures and checking ourselves to be sure we are using them can easily become second nature and the initial stiffness will disappear. Bringing this knowledge to bear on what we do in the classroom can help us create a safe learning environment for all students, and help prevent us from committing microaggressions.

VI. In the Classroom: Background

One point to consider in establishing a safe environment is the need to represent diverse perspectives in our course materials. Having diversity represented throughout the curriculum is considered an important part of creating a positive racial climate on university campuses (Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000: 62). Since others have argued eloquently for both the need to do so in philosophy classes (see, for example, Waithe 1989), and how to do so (see, for example, Stueber-Bishop 1985), I will not repeat their arguments here. Assuming that our course materials are representing diverse voices, we should be attentive to the timing and placement of our materials. When professors begin to incorporate the work of white women and philosophers of color in their classes, they sometimes place this material at the end of the semester. Students are generally savvy enough to understand that material at the end of the semester is often dropped due to time constraints, and is therefore generally considered less important. Integrating course materials more thoroughly throughout the semester is important to avoid marginalizing materials.

Since the syllabus is the students’ first introduction to who we are and what to expect in the class, it is important to be sure that the diversity of course materials is evident in it. A syllabus that does not reflect a diversity of authors and topics can be received as a microaggression, and cause the student to write off the class and professor on
the first day ("here we go with the dead white guys again"). I realized in one of my classes that my syllabus listed the two books students were required to buy (one by Plato, one by Descartes), and then I stated “Other required readings will be available on electronic reserve.” Students were unable to see that we would be reading articles from feminist and African-American philosophers. Ultimately, I changed the syllabus to list the reserve readings by name and author, so students could see all of the content on the first day.

Another challenge in philosophy is dealing with the sexist and racist content that is found in the works of many authors. In some cases, philosophers may directly and explicitly make racist or sexist statements, but in others, the problem is the absence of mention of issues of race or gender. Sometimes we may try to write off the racism and sexism of past thinkers on the basis of the time period, claiming, “well, back then people thought that way and now we don’t” and then act as if that racism or sexism does not matter. This type of excuse is inadequate, however, as not everyone “back then” was racist and sexist, and simply glossing over the issue gives the sense that it is unimportant or insignificant. It is more honest to simply acknowledge the racism or sexism of the author, whether it be an explicit comment about women’s shortcomings or a less obvious way in which the thinker did not take into consideration the realities of women or people of color. After acknowledging the sexism in the text, for example, we can explain that while the author might have used “man”—and meant it to refer only to white men—that now we will use “people” in order to be inclusive. We can also address the complexity of some situations, such as Kant’s belief that women were too emotional to be moral, which he held while corresponding with a number of women who showed a solid understanding of his work. Rather than try to hide such contradictions, which can alienate students, addressing them head on shows students that professors take these issues seriously and can encourage students to engage in understanding how prejudices operate.

Teaching students about implicit biases can also be helpful, especially since the stigma of being racist or sexist is so strong in our society. Students can react very negatively to any suggestion that they are biased, as they may equate it with being a horrible person. Helping students understand that it is nearly unavoidable to be racist or sexist in our society and that all people are subject to having implicit biases can help them be more open to acknowledging their own biases. Having students take the IAT is one exercise that can be effective. The website informs people about the prevalence of implicit biases, which can reassure students who may be upset by their results. Banaji and Greenwald’s new book, _Blindspot_, has a chapter that addresses the relationship between implicit bias and racism, which could be used to
aid students in processing the meaning of their results. While I have had students take the IAT both in and outside of class, I found that having students take the exam together during class was very effective, as it guaranteed that everyone actually did it, and we could discuss both before and after the test the fact that most people do show some level of prejudice and what this might mean.

VII. Handling a Microaggression in Class

When a microaggression is committed in the classroom, whether by a student or a professor, students can have a variety of reactions. Emotionally, microaggressions can be upsetting, making students feel angry and hurt, and leading them to feel like second-class citizens whose perspective is not valued. Students can also expend a great deal of energy in processing what was said (“Did I hear that correctly? How did s/he mean that? Does s/he understand the implications of what was just said?”). Students also have to decide whether or not to respond, and making this decision can be difficult, as there are many potential consequences to consider. Responding can be dangerous, as it can open one up to judgment, ridicule, and the possibility of receiving more microaggressions. Not responding has its costs as well, as it can leave a student feeling hurt, weak, and vulnerable. All of these reactions can distract students from engaging in the content of the class at that time. Experiencing microaggressions can disrupt students’ learning at the time that they occur, and if the professor committed the microaggression or failed to handle a student’s microaggression well, the student may also become concerned about whether the professor is prejudiced. If problems in the classroom are persistent, students might feel a great deal of discomfort and be concerned about whether they will be graded fairly. Ultimately, students might become disengaged from the class or drop out of it altogether. Thus it is important to learn how to avoid committing microaggressions, and how to handle them when they occur.

When a Student Commits a Microaggression

If a student says something during class that you recognize to be a microaggression, first of all, don’t panic. Take a deep breath, and take your time before responding. The daughter of a friend once said (loudly and in public, of course) that she would never marry a Spanish boy. Before overreacting, my friend simply asked her why. Her daughter said “because I don’t speak Spanish!” So rather than impose our interpretation on what is said, it is often helpful to simply ask the student for further explanation. Two excellent questions to keep in mind are “What do you mean?” and “How do you know?” (Goodman 2011: 79–81). Often, in the process of trying to explain themselves, students
will recognize the problems with what they have just stated and correct themselves. Or, if the student was deliberately trying to cause trouble by saying something provocative, forcing a further clarification of the statement and holding the student accountable for what was said can shut that type of behavior down in a non-oppressive way. We can tell our students that they are welcome to say whatever they like in class, but that they will be held responsible for it.11

Often, when a student makes an awkward comment in class, our tendency is to want to protect that student so they are not embarrassed and do not end up feeling uncomfortable participating in the future. So, for example, if a student states something that seems off-topic, we may gently try to connect what was said to the topic to lessen the student’s discomfort. When a student makes a microaggressive comment, we may also experience this feeling of wanting to protect the speaker from embarrassment. However, we must also be sure to protect the recipients of the comment. Unlike an off-topic comment, which does no harm to anyone but the speaker, who may look foolish, a microaggression hurts students in the class who are members of targeted groups and regularly experience such harm. It is crucial, then, that we prioritize protecting the recipients of the harmful comment. Thus, if a student commits a microaggression, we cannot just ignore it or only focus on the speaker. While we can take care in the way we handle the offender, we must be sure to look out for the safety and well-being of the recipients by addressing the issue, whether by asking for further explanation from the offender or explaining ourselves that the view was problematic.

Allowing other students to respond to another student’s microaggression can also be helpful, but we should not leave all responsibility for handling such situations on the students. When we do not address microaggressions, we give tacit approval to them in our students’ eyes, so we should always be sure to join in at some point to address the situation. In the same way, if a student states a stereotype as if it were true, we need to be sure that we do not leave it out there unchallenged. So for example, if a student states that the reason we have segregated neighborhoods is that black people prefer to live with other black people, we might let other students chime in with their opinions and viewpoints. But if no one offers facts about Federal Housing Authority redlining practices, and how that created segregated neighborhoods, then we need to be sure to explain that. To allow a stereotype to be stated and left like it is a fact would be inappropriate and misleading.

When We Commit a Microaggression

If we commit a microaggression in a class, we may hope that if we do not acknowledge it, that no one will notice, or we may worry that if we continue speaking we may make the situation worse. When we
commit a microaggression, however, we have an excellent opportunity to model responsible behavior to our students. If we ignore the fact that we have committed a microaggression, students will think that we are unaware that we have done so, and judge us to be ignorant, whereas openly taking ownership of a mistake, even if no one has mentioned it, demonstrates responsibility and capability to our students. Because we may have a strong physical reaction when we realize we have made a mistake, it can help to slow down and take a moment to collect ourselves before speaking, which can also help prevent us from aggravating the problem. Being aware of our body language is important, too, as students do notice and respond to it. Maintaining an open and relaxed body posture helps convey the message that we are comfortable with the fact that we have erred. Learning to monitor our body language can be helped by video recording classes and observing others’ teaching. While maintaining relaxed body language, apologizing and clarifying what we intended to say can show our students that making mistakes is a part of the learning process, and that they can be handled gracefully. We also demonstrate respect by recognizing that we may have said something offensive (whether or not a member of that group is in the room), and apologizing for it. In my experience, students respond well to this kind of evidence of sensitivity and consideration, and it can help them feel more comfortable about expressing themselves in the classroom, especially since students are often very much afraid of making mistakes.

Determining what kind of response is required after a microaggression is committed calls upon us to use our skills in reading the classroom. We generally do pay attention to the energy in the room, checking to see if students are interested and engaged, or bored and distracted as we teach. We can also make a conscious effort to monitor students’ comfort level when topics like racism and sexism arise, or when questionable statements are made by students or professors. Being attentive to our students’ body language can help us gauge when a microaggression has been experienced, and how our response to it is received. Students might expression tension and discomfort by shutting down (leaning back in the seat, eyes down, doodling), leaving the room, or becoming tense (sitting at attention, leaning forward). After addressing a microaggression, we can pay attention to see if students seem relaxed and comfortable (and so then move on) or if there seems to be tension remaining, we might elaborate further, ask for other people’s thoughts (whether verbally or in writing), or simply ask if the explanation or apology was acceptable or made sense. If the microaggression was racial, it is important to avoid simply asking students of color how they feel or staring at them to gauge their reactions. Such responses have the effect of singling the student out (particularly when s/he may
be the only person of color in the room) and treating the student as if s/he were the spokesperson for the group, when of course, no one person can speak for all people or be the arbiter of appropriateness. Ultimately, we have to gain confidence in our own abilities to determine how we are doing, using input from and observation of all students. This confidence can only develop over time, as we practice these skills.

VIII. Conclusion

Learning how to manage microaggressions in the classroom involves developing teaching and communication skills, and there are many resources available to aid in the process, and many benefits to be gained by developing abilities in this area. Overall, having greater comfort and confidence in the classroom, particularly when dealing with challenging topics like race and gender, is beneficial and leads to more effective teaching. Students will notice their professors’ comfort level both through verbal and non-verbal behaviors, and they will feel more at ease if they see their professors are comfortable. Students will also develop a greater level of trust for the professor, often leading to a greater willingness to participate and share their ideas and experiences in discussion and in writing. In this way, we are able to learn more about our students’ lives which can enrich our understanding of the ways power and privilege play out in their world. We can then have better, deeper relationships with students, which can increase their satisfaction with our classes and even foster a greater interest in the subject matter. Combining improved teaching and communication skills with diverse materials could help increase the numbers of white women and people of color in philosophy.

As we have seen, being a good and well-meaning person is not enough to prevent us from committing microaggressions. The pervasive-ness of racism and sexism in our society results in those beliefs often being deeply ingrained in our minds and bodies, where they function as implicit beliefs. Unlearning them requires us to engage in an on-going process of expanding our knowledge of our own identities, the identities of others, and the dynamics of power and oppression in our society. Starting from the mindset of critical humility and accepting that we may be ignorant of many aspects of power and privilege can help us approach these challenging subjects with an open mind, and accepting the inevitability of making mistakes along the way can also help us better handle it when they occur. Developing our knowledge on these subjects is a journey, and having an openness to the possibility of making a mistake can help us receive criticism more effectively along the way.
The benefits of taking this journey are well worth the challenges. From the perspective of justice, not furthering the oppression of others is the right thing to do. Truly good, caring people who are opposed to social justice should be willing to learn more to ensure that their behaviors are not unintentionally fostering the oppression of others. By addressing the ways in which we may unintentionally contribute to oppression, we can learn to bring our behaviors in line with our beliefs more consistently. Exploring our dominant identities also has the effect of giving us a deepened self-understanding. Being successful professors also requires us to communicate well and effectively with all of our students. By avoiding committing microaggressions and handling those that occur well, we can improve our effectiveness as educators and potentially help foster diversity in the field.

Notes

1. Sue also describes environmental microaggressions which can result from “numerous demeaning and threatening social, educational, political, or economic cues that are communicated individually, institutionally, or societally to marginalized groups” (Sue 2010: 25). For example, portraits of all male past university presidents sends the message that women are not viewed as good leaders, and Native American mascots show a lack of respect for native cultures (Sue 2010: 26).

2. My analysis will focus on the United States, so oppressed (or targeted) groups will refer to people whose social identities include being black/Latin@/Asian, female, transgender, non-Christian, disabled, homosexual/bisexual, working class/poor, while dominant groups will refer to those whose social identities include being white, male, cisgender, Christian, able-bodied, heterosexual, and middle/upper class (Goodman 2011: 7).

3. It is important to note that black women do not experience “racism plus sexism.” Rather, racial and gender identities intersect and interact with each other and there are important differences in the way that racism works against black men and black women, and how sexism affects black women and white women.


5. Sue refers to more conscious and direct forms of racism, like use of racial epithets, as microassaults (Sue 2010: 29).

6. Men and women with other targeted identities may also experience discomfort with the adversarial method as well (Belenky et al., 1997).

7. See www.nea.org/tools/52227.htm for a description of open body language.

8. Since our identities are multiple and interactive, the way male privilege plays out, for example, will be different for black males and white males. Other identities like class, for example, may also change the way that one’s racial privilege operates.

9. The website http://www2.gsu.edu/~phltso/women-intro-texts.html offers suggested readings by female authors that would be appropriate for philosophy classes.
10. See the first chapter of Charles Mills’s *Blackness Visible* (Mills 1998) for more on this.

11. Thanks to Gil Cook for this description of his policy.

**Bibliography**


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