MICROAGGRESSIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: PEACE-BUILDING, SAFE SPACE AND HOSPITALITY

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Abstract

Based on 20 semi-structured interviews with faculty members from a mid-size university in Western Canada, this presentation offers an examination of research participants' experiences, perceptions of, and responses to micro-aggressions with special attention to minority identity markers and hospitable educational practices. Specifically, I focus on the complexities surrounding free speech and safe space, showing that when research participants detect instances of microaggressions expressed as resentment around race and/or gender, they struggle to find a balance between taking up the teaching moment and maintaining safe space. Specifically, I question the extent to which instructors rely on intent and innocence to allow, and to an extent justify, expressions of race-based or gender-based resentment. I then turn to the concept of hospitality, specifically the host-guest metaphor, to discuss pedagogical implications when considering the tension and potential conflicts between equity seeking individuals who cannot take safe space for granted and dominant culture individuals who can rely on safe space as an unearned privilege. I argue that hospitable education spaces ought to go consider a relational process of peacebuilding that integrates agency and empowerment. Equitable responsibilities involving host-guest relations and relationships between guests themselves ought to be conceived as asymmetrical (Levinas) by shifting the emphasis from intent and potential candor to vulnerability and harm. Implications for practice include the need to consider that: (1) Safe space is an unearned privilege for some, while it means fighting against oppression for others; (2) An (over)reliance on intellectual candor can further dismiss and silence harm; (3) As there may be competing and conflicting quests for safe space, there is a need to create anchors of hospitality for equity-seeking individuals; (4) Hospitality involves asymmetrical responsibilities (greater responsibilities for some than for others) to address power and inequity; it also involves horizontal relationships when micro-spaces of belonging are developed.

Keywords: Microaggressions, safe space, hospitality, resentment, power.