The Minutiae of Discrimination: The Need for Support

From Outsiders on the Inside
Women & Organizations
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Prentice Hall, 1981 pp 155-170.

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Micro-inequities are woven into all the threads of our work life and of American culture. What are micro-inequities? In the aggregate, I define discriminatory micro-inequities as destructive, but generally non-actionable, aspects of an environment which adversely affect the situations of minorities and women. They are the instances which reasonable people would agree are unjust toward *individuals,* by virtue of an individual's being irrationally treated in a certain way only because of sex, race, religion, age, or country of origin. Mico-inequities are of a fiendish efficiency in maintaining unequal opportunity, because they are the air we breathe, the books we read, and because we cannot change the personal characteristic which leads to the inequity. Micro-inequities are omni--present in our work and educational lives.

MICRO-INEQUITIES

Micro-inequities can be categorized in many different ways: ambiguous and non-ambiguous; spoken, written and non-verbal; repeated micro-inequities or single incidents; problems with strangers, acquaintances, friends; problems with supervisors and other more powerful people, or those from peers and others; in-

equities met by people in traditional situations or those met by people who are doing something unconventional.

The incidents discussed in this chapter are mainly those faced by minorities and women in paid employment and in training. In the last four years I have, as part of my job as assistant to the president of a major university, heard from 2,500 people a year; over half of these people have described problems of a discriminatory nature. Many are micro-inequities. My own concern is primarily how to deal with these micro-inequities within large oranizations. I have therefore classified incidents according to a judgment of the understanding and motivations of the perpetrators of inequities. One may deal differently with unconscious slights, and "invisibility" problems, than with more conscious putdowns, exploitation and poor service. These latter problems in turn shade into more pathological inequities, many of which are sexist and racist manifestations of emotional illness. I think, therefore, of micro-inequities existing along a continuum characterized by degrees of sensitivity of those responsible.

Women and minorities may become aware of their invisibility only slowly, because it happens only now and then and it is so difficult to identify. We may come to believe we are invisible when our names are left off a list. Only one person is not invited to the supervisor's party—the only black. One person's vacation does not appear on the vacation list—that of the only woman in the office. One person's lunch hour is "forgotten" in a busy office—the woman's. It happens to people in all kinds of jobs. From three universities I know of, over the last few years come at least twenty stories of blacks and women whose names were left off faculty lists and who, therefore, were not invited to various faculty functions last year or who were not given credit in major announcements.

There is a distinguished visitor for whom a last minute special lunch is given; only the black research associate is not invited. There is another lunch; everyone is introduced around in the circle; only the woman, out of a list of distinguished guests, is not introduced. This year many female Boston students have come to see

me. They say, "all the men in my department have been suggested for certain jobs" or fellowships, or post-docs . . . only the solo woman was not counselled, approached or put up for jobs. Two of these women have said they inquired and complained. "We thought you'd be going with your fiancé so we didn't put your name up for jobs until we knew where he was going," they were told.

Invisibility affects success at work and salary equity very directly. A woman staff person says, "It's harder for me to keep up; mine is the only office to which the book salesman does not come." Major, meticulous, staff-classification studies (which look at job responsibility) regularly find that most of those deserving salary adjustments are female, and this will occur even when all salaries were previously carefully reviewed by men of good will. We find the invisibility phenomenon in speech. We use the phrase "blacks or women" ("We hope we will find a black or a woman for this job"), without thinking that this leaves out black women. We find the same phenomenon often, in the way things are designed. Convention name tags are supposed to hang from a man's pocket; buildings are planned without locker rooms for women.

Unconscious slights are many. Women are frequently addressed by their first names by men who don't know them, or gently or roughly "herded" or patted by men who put an arm paternalistically around them; we are called "dearie" and "sweetheart." Here again, unconscious slights may affect salaries, promotion, job choice. We are hearing many cases like that of an able, female assistant professor, who asked for an average raise. She was told, "You don't need it; you're married. There's a budget crunch and we have to save money for people who need it. You do understand?"

Then there was the *ad hoc* committee at a New England university, which solicited letters in support of tenure for Jane Doe, a famous archeologist. Jane Doe came to see me, having received from one of her referees, a copy of his reference. It read, in part, "Dr. Jane Doe is probably the outstanding woman archeologist in the world." Jane Doe was deeply offended. I advised her to call the

referee. He read her a sentence from the letter of solicitation, which said "Would you tell us how this woman ranks among woman archeologists?" It turned out that the standard solicitation letter had been sent out, simply changing the word "man" to "woman."

CONSCIOUS SLIGHTS, HARASSMENT, POOR SERVICE, AND EXPLOITATION

Recently I met a woman student whose husband lived elsewhere while she finished her degree. She was very discouraged about some of the gossip: "Is she doing badly in that course because her husband is not with her? She ought to be home doing what women do best!"

Another woman was asked to leave a class on the first day "because she cramped the professor's style." In many arenas there is a problem of over-visibility whereby minorities and women feel they cannot be just average, or have an off-day without inviting hostile teasing. Some of us are afraid of putdowns for being dumb in school or training courses, so we don't ask questions and don't learn enough. A union apprentice came recently to ask me what she should do; every time she asked a question the men present would guffaw, in a deliberate attempt to humiliate her.

As I think of harassment, I remember a professor's lengthy shouting at a clerical worker. He was making the bland assumption that a minority secretary wasn't telling the truth about how some data got lost, when in fact the woman had been on vacation that week. Women bring in a variety of incidents of temper displays and shouting. We hear stories of the belongings of a black graduate student being moved without permission, of supervisors going through a woman's desk or a union woman's locker without permission, of bosses interrupting secretaries on the telephone. There are several instances where minorities and women feel they may have been deliberately put down by colleagues in a position to influence federal contracts.

Many slights are explicitly oriented toward sex. There was the

matron at a school who was told her yeast infection was "a venereal disease—whom had she been sleeping with?", another woman who was angrily warned not to "ask to get raped" by being out at night at a better job, and a third who was asked whether she was going to get pregnant soon, when she discussed her plans to go to medical school. This last woman was also told she was a "bitch with no right to quit, who could have a great career as a technician if she 'really' was tired of typing for the lab."

Some incidents are hard to identify from the point of view of the "consciousness" of the aggressors. A woman in a training course worked on a technical problem for a long time and finally went for help and learned how to deal with the problem. Later she met two men from her course, struggling with the same dilemma. She offered to help, with the method she had been taught. They ignored her for a deeply frustrating hour while she watched, baffled and angry. Finally a fourth trainee appeared—a man. He also offered help, with the same method as the woman. His help was gratefully accepted; the woman was still ignored. I am not clear just how much the men understood what was going on. I have heard, in fact, many incidents which seem very obvious but where the men do not seem to hear what they have said. There was the vice-president of a large firm whom I asked about the appointment of an able woman to be an operations manager. "I couldn't do that; she's a black and a woman, she's not even pretty," he said off-handedly but seriously. I heard another man congratulate a distinguished day-care expert on her forthcoming trip, "You must be enjoying the honor of going with Messrs. X, Y and Z," he said, naming her peers and co-workers.

Sometimes tradition means that female students and employees get poor service in one way or another. Women may be so few in a given company that they cannot find enough contact with other women to make up for the casual scientific or technical chit-chat they are left out of, when it occurs in white male social groups. This can be very serious, as studies regularly show that informal teaching is very important, for instance in telephone company crafts jobs, or in teaching situations like the "scrubbing" be-

fore and after an operation, where women medical students may scrub with the nurses, and miss out on the informal teaching of a male surgeon. Poor service in recruitment frequently occurs; for example, there have been several recent incidents reported of women answering assistant professor ads who were then offered lecturer and research assistant jobs with no explanation. Others have gone to give colloquia where no senior faculty appeared. These are just a few of the instances of exploitation which I hear about daily.

EMOTIONAL DIFFICULTIES WITH SEXIST MANIFESTATIONS

I remember the black female graduate student who came back from a lab in tears. She had been told by her teaching assistant when she came in with a bad cold, "Chick, what you need is a hot, deep, protein infusion!" In that same large lab have been several women who will not take evening jobs for fear of rape.

Then there was the scientist who wrote me from a nearby university, "Despite the fact that women may be even more qualified, I believe we should curtail the admissions of women [to the department]; they will deter men from doing their best creative work." There was a black student who was "hilariously" called by the last name of her advisor for whom she was working; thus, Susie Smith was "jokingly" called Susie Jenkins, because she worked for Professor Jenkins and "therefore belonged to him." She repeatedly asked the harasser to stop this but he persisted in thinking the situation was "funny," and continued. I remember the written reference given for a woman scientist, which I found in the files, "You can hire this woman for your lab if you want to, but I'd rather have her body than her mind." Casting couch stories abound still, in firms all over Boston, and appear to be if anything more frequent, as job insecurity grows. Many women recall very explicit threats ("Well, you know, I set your salary") and many more, innuendos ("If you'll come on the trip with me, we'll see about promoting you to further responsibility").

Then there have been the occasional serious allegations of unequal rating and grading of women in jobs and schools. There are the stories of men who go into deep withdrawals or rages, when faced with the need to communicate with female secretaries and students. There are the occasional men who expose themselves, who won't take no from a woman they want to date, who need to seduce women they see as competitive, who pick on handicapped women, who will deliberately and repeatedly lie to women, who intentionally try to arouse a woman's guilt or worry about her family or femininity, who will smilingly say to a woman student, "I believe the only interesting thing about you is between your legs."

WHERE DO MICRO-INEQUITIES COME FROM?

I have presented random incidents from many hundreds of stories a year. One wonders, where does this behavior come from? Why does it persist? I think of micro-inequities as a complex phenomenon which helps to maintain a pecking order, with respect to whatever group is being put down. I believe micro-inequities are at their worst when people are functioning in what is for them an unusual or non-traditional environment, since "unusual" people are easy to pick out for the purposes of maintaining a given pecking order. If this is true, a good deal can be done to ameliorate micro-inequities by making "non-traditional" persons seem less unusual in traditional environments. However, before we plan amelioration, it is important to analyze what is the process of damage in the first place.

WHAT DAMAGE IS DONE BY THE MINUTIAE OF DISCRIMINATION?

I know of no systematic study of micro-inequities, but one can suggest many hypotheses as to why such behavior does damage. Obviously, from my own point of view, I believe these inequities *do* cause serious damage or I would not label them a major barrier to equal opportunity. I will therefore set forth my hypotheses:

Micro-inequities cause damage in part because they often lead to yet worse behavior. Thus, overlooking or "seeing through" blacks and/or women is a habit which may lead to overlooking one who might be the best qualified person for promotion, It may also lead to underpaying minorities and women.

Micro-inequities cause damage in part because they are a kind of pain which cannot be predicted very well in any functional sense. That is, by and large, they occur in the *context* of merit, and of striving for excellence, but do not have anything predictably to *do* with excellence or merit. That is, of course, by definition what makes them "inequities." As an intermittent, unpredictable reinforcement, however, they have peculiar power as a negative learning tool (unpredictable, intermittent reinforcement being among the more powerful types of reinforcement). Moreover, because the provocation for negative reinforcement—one's race or gender—cannot be changed, one inevitably feels some helplessness.

Micro-inequities cause damage in part because they take up time. Sorting out what is happening to one, and dealing with one's pain and anger takes time. Extra time is demanded also from many women to help deal with the pain caused by micro-inequities suffered by other women.

Some micro-inequities cause damage in addition to the pain inflicted, because as they occur they prevent better behavior from occurring. If a secretary or graduate student is unreasonably overloaded with routine or personal work for a supervisor, the overloaded person may not only suffer a loss of self-esteem but also may be prevented from doing the kind of excellent work that prepares one for promotion.

Micro-inequities cause damage in part because they contribute to barriers between men and women, minorities and non-minorities, which means that each group fails to understand the other. The forms of racism and sexism are so specific that each group is isolated from the other's experience. Cross-group communications are always slower and more difficult; cross-group judgments are harder to make well. Thus women and men may make errors about each other ranging from paranoia to an in-

ability to hear any criticism against individuals of a different sex.

Micro-inequities are often difficult to detect or ascertain. This means for one thing that these inequities are hard for a victim to turn off. It also means that frequent victims, such as blacks and women, may constantly have to range through emotions from legitimate anger (which may or may not have, or appear to have, a constructive outlet) to paranoia. The experience of being uncertain about whether one is insulted or put down, inevitably leads to some displaced and misplaced anger which in turn may anger innocent (or guilty) bystanders. It also leads to ignoring real insults in such a way that they persist.

Micro-inequities are often not *intentional* in any conscious way even when objective observers would agree that an injury really took place. This is another reason why it is hard for a victim to respond to them. We are all socialized to believe that *intent* to injure is an important part of injury, and it is certainly critical when dealing with injuries at the hands of others. Faced with a micro-aggression, the victim may not be certain of the motives of the aggressor and may be unwilling to start a fight where no slight was intended. Under conditions of uncertainty about motives most victims are again in the position of sometimes not getting angry when they should (which perpetuates the injuries and may weaken the victim's self-image), or protesting sometimes when no injury was *consciously* intended even though it actually occurred. The latter situation can, actually, be salutary for all concerned, especially if the aggressor reacts by acknowledging an unconscious intent to injure. But sometimes the aggressor is totally unaware of aggressing, even though observers would agree that injury took place. The aggressor may then respond with anger, feelings of betrayal, bewilderment or worse.

Micro-aggressions seem petty in a world where redress by the less powerful may often seem heavy-handed or clumsy. Unionization, going to court, appeal to the President's office, may seem heavy weapons which themselves have high costs. The perceived lack of *appropriate* types of redress helps perpetuate micro-aggressions.

Micro-aggressions and inequities grow in mad and infinite variety. It is hard to stay ahead of the proliferation of types, let alone the number of petty injuries. Thus most victims find themselves occasionally fighting the last war rather than the present one—that is to say, fighting inappropriately against some new variety of harassment.

Micro-inequities of some types may have a negative Pygmalion quality. That is, the expectation of poor performance, or the lack of expectation of good performance, may by itself do damage because students and employees have a strong tendency to do what is expected of them. In many ways, the persecutor, consiously or not, creates the victim.

DO MICRO-INEQUITIES DO MORE HARM TO WOMEN THAN TO MEN?

The question is frequently raised whether micro-inequities do not just "happen to everyone." Have we not just been describing the general inhumanities of large organizations? Quite frequently I talk with a powerful white male who openly says, "I harass everybody, Mary, I don't discriminate." Let me raise here hypotheses as to why micro-inequities might be worse for women than for the average white male. Some of the hypotheses as to why micro-inequities may do more damage to women are analogous to the hypotheses as to why they do damage at all.

The "general" harassment often takes specifically sexist form when applied to women. Instead of saying to some average white male, "Your work on this experiment has been inexcusably sloppy, you'll never make it that way!" the remark may come out, "My God, you think no better than my wife, go home and have babies!" The harassment of women piles up in allusions to sex roles and sex, instead of being randomly applied, or appropriately focused on work. Like the dripping of water, random drops do little damage; endless drops in one place can have profound effects.

Many women are socialized to respond disproportionately to disapproval. Their parents have carefully taught them to cooperate rather than to compete, especially when they are with white males, and to be very sensitive to anger and criticism from white males. Conversely, one can find many white males who were explicitly socialized to expect hard knocks, to compete ferociously and openly even when injured, and to have a very high pain threshhold in the first place. It would be hard to prove that either kind of socialization is "right" or "wrong" in absolute terms, but it is easy to see how these two cultural paths run afoul of each other. If a white male supervisor shouts angrily for five minutes at a young woman, she may not wholly "recover" from the attack for weeks or months or years. Later, in a discussion with the supervisor, however, one may hear that he's forgotten his "random grouchiness" or thought it was trivial. Thus, behavior that might be trivial or survivable to the modal white male may be quite destructive to others, in a manner that has nothing directly to do with the work at hand.

Micro-inequities often originate with more powerful people against less powerful people. No one yet knows whether they originate more in this direction than in the reverse. Perhaps power is corrupting, perhaps aggressive underdogs are always eliminated over time, or perhaps more powerful people ignore or are not injured by inequities from below. Perhaps the generally higher pay of the more powerful gives adequate recompense. In any case it is generally the less powerful who report inequities the most. Since less powerful people by definition have less influence and since more of them are female, it is not hard to see why it is difficult to get rid of micro-aggressors in *general*, let alone specific individuals who happen to be the victim's own supervisor or advisor.

Traditionally white male environments may even support and reinforce certain kinds of discriminatory behavior like the aggressive and humiliating telling of dirty jokes in a lab.

In a traditionally white male atmosphere it may also be harder for bystanders to stop certain kinds of micro-inequities,

because the slights are so commonplace that they simply are not noticed. Many white males are acutely uncomfortable around ~~Orientals~~ Asians or blacks or working women and they ignore them or fail to look at and address them; yet they do not notice this behavior and neither do bystanders notice it. Traditional pornography on walls, traditionally sexist jokes, and the use of sex in ads and announcements is so ubiquitous that probably most men do not notice them. Thus while some general forms of harassment may be stopped by bystanders, some aggressive behavior may be overlooked because it is so "normal."

There is a more acute role-modeling problem for women in non-traditional studies and jobs, with respect to their witnessing micro-inequities against others like themselves. That is, disproportionately more women see people "like them" put down or ignored or ill-served by their superiors and elders. This point may be clearer when one remembers that in most work environments, the principal (if unintended), same-sex role models for females are clerical and hourly workers, and that these are the groups most frequently reporting micro-inequities. This inadvertent role-modeling is the stronger because nearly all women are continuously being taken to be in jobs traditionally held by women. Thus the identity problem for women in non-traditional jobs is exacerbated by unconscious stereotyping. "I am constantly being taken to be a file clerk," says a black woman engineer, "I constantly feel a struggle to develop my own self-image, but it is not affirmed by most of the world around me, as it is for my male colleagues."

It may be harder for women to find mentors to help them deal with micro-inequities. There are so few senior women in most organizations that junior members of the community cannot, on the average, find the same amount of high-status, same-sex mentors. It is, however, almost inevitable that the burden of dealing with micro-inequities falls on victims who are already somewhat disproportionately drained of energy by caring for others.

There is also sometimes a peculiar difficulty in finding an *appropriate* mentor when one has been the victim of a micro-inequity. If one goes to a white male, he may or may not understand. If one goes to a friend of the same sex, she may be just wonderful in helping one to deal with the problem, or she may not be helpful at all. That is, listeners of the same sex may be so discouraged and angry, or so full of denial, that they are worse than useless. I believe, therefore, that it may often be more difficult for women to find adequate help in dealing with sexism, than for average members of the community to deal with "general inhumanities."

I believe many women and minority students and employees have a disproportionate need for supportive white male mentorships, and are disproportionately injured when an advisor or teacher or supervisor assigned to them is just generally inhuman. Let us take as an example, Susie Hernandez, who is a student. She has a need for support if only because she will inevitably live through many micro-inequities. She needs someone to advise her about getting ahead in our white male environment simply because it is foreign to her. She may not be getting much support from Spanish-speaking women at home because she is living a non-traditional life. (She is, in other words, less well-supported by the general society and may be less well-supported by her family than if she were a white male.) If her assigned advisor turns out to be generally inattentive, grouchy and cold, she has been deprived of a needed, positive mentor in circumstances where she needed a mentor probably more than the modal white student. The situation will be compounded if she is afraid to ask for a new advisor or does not know how to find substitute help.

I believe, therefore, that there are many reasons why the problem of micro-inequities for women goes beyond the *general* inhumanities of large organizations. The point may be clearer if you will imagine being a solo, young, white, male, child-care worker in a large, conservative, inner-city day-care system. The "general harassment" might include sincere questions and snide comments on your sexuality. Other white males might find you odd. Women

might distrust your skills. You might *be*, in fact, inept in some way your first year. You might be very sensitive to run-of-the-mill ange from your cross-sex (and perhaps cross-race) supervisor. You migh find the constant assumption that women are better to be very op pressive—the ads, the jokes, the pictures on the walls, the father deprived of custody. You might have no one like yourself to turn to. You might get to hate always being asked to fix things and be ing asked by visitors why you are there.

In summary, I believe that discriminatory behavior itself causes pain, and also may constitute for women a situation they cannot control, evade, or ameliorate (or, as we have said, they may see it that way). Continued experience of destructive situations which cannot be improved can start unhappy cycles of behavior ranging from declining self-esteem (which makes one feel still less efficacious in changing the environment), to withdrawal, resignation, poor work, fantasies of violence, and so on. At the very least it either takes a lot of energy to deal with an environment perceived as hostile, or it takes lots of energy to maintain one's level of denial of difficulties, to not acknowledge that one has, indeed, been injured.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

At the organizational level there seem to be three major resources for change: leadership by top management, the formation of grass roots groups, and an innovative grievance process.

The top administration needs to be the major source of male-to-male consciousness raising and setting goals for affirmative action. I recall an occasion when the all-white, male executive group of a large corporation was leaving a meeting. A sudden silence fell when an unfortunate sexist comment was widely overheard. A vice-president, himself only recently sensitized to sexism, drew himself to his full height and said: "Gentlemen, I believe that is the kind of belittling language we need never hear in this firm again." There is no substitute for this kind of sturdy, consistent leadership, at the top and disseminated vigorously downward.

The other major contribution from top management is aggressive recruitment of minorities and women for the higher levels of professional work and administration. The best way for these newcomers not to appear "unusual" (as easy targets for the pecking order) is for them not to *be* unusual. I believe much of the racism and sexism will disappear when minorities and women are randomly distributed throughout organizations of all kinds.

Grass roots groups of minorities and women can be very effective means of support for each other. Many top managers are hesitant about these new employee groups; others have found them very effective. If managers can countenance the formation of many different groups, they may find a healthy diversity and communication springing up. Fanatics tend to get "cooled out," and responsible minorities and women are given leverage, in the many such groups I have seen. I have repeatedly noticed a drop in the abuse level in various work areas, upon formation of a responsible group.

These informal groups speak to others of the concerns raised above, in addition to communications and consciousness-raising. Groups may foster a gentle rise in assertiveness. They tend to expand the effectiveness of healthy role models whom many minorities and women might otherwise not meet. They provide support, counsel and a sense of reality to weary senior women and minorities and help them to become the mentors so sorely needed. They further provide a structure to support improvement on "macro" problems, such as recruitment. Probably most important, they are a leaven for change to improve work and educational processes for everybody, male and female, minority and non-minority, within the organization.

Innovative grievance procedures also help with micro-inequities. My own suggestions are several. I believe in mildly redundant procedures so each person has a greater chance for sympathetic help. I believe grievance procedures should handle "inquiries" as well as complaints. I believe all but the worst grievances can be dealt with by mediation (seeking for common ground) rather than arbitration. Informal, open communications at

every level including the top, can often handle problems at the seedling stage. Many inquiries may be dealt with informally, may be seen in their total context, and resolved confidentially and sensitively.

I think it helps to have a universal grievance process which deals with every pay classification and all levels of students and trainees. Macro- and micro-inequities are often very complex, involving many different people and/or needed resources. It is helpful to see problems in the real-life web in which they actually occur. And one universal process is much more easily understood and communicated.

Finally, how can we work with individuals to help them avoid becoming victims? There can be little universal advice; women and minorities vary so much in person and circumstance that it is difficult to find general rules for change. But two rules of thumb are perhaps in order. One person is hardly ever a critical mass; one must seek advice and support. Moreover, it is rarely effective just to complain to oneself; one must act responsibly for change. By speaking out, we may help to foster equal opportunity and more humane environments for everyone.