



# **The SAGE Encyclopedia of Psychology and Gender**

## **Gender Microinequities**

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Despite laws, regulations, and policies promoting gender equity, and some progress in education and employment settings, gender discrimination continues. Much gender bias is subtle, covert, and usually not legally actionable, despite being very common. This entry examines seemingly small, unfair, demeaning, and discriminatory behaviors and events—microinequities and microaggressions—and their impact on women and men.

### What Are Microinequities?

Microinequities, by definition, are *unfair* to those whom they affect. Mary Rowe has further described these as small events that may be ephemeral and hard to prove; that may be covert, often unintentional, and frequently unrecognized by the perpetrator; that occur wherever people are perceived to be different; and that can cause serious harm, especially in the aggregate. Microaggressions are hostile exchanges that send denigrating messages. Derald Wing Sue has further described these as commonplace, daily, verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, and sexual orientation and as religious slights and insults to a target person or group.

Microinequities and microaggressions are thought to be most damaging in the aggregate and commonly refer to behavior relating to gender and gender identification, sexual orientation, race, color, nationality, religion, age, disability, appearance, or other social identity that is not easily changed. These small discriminatory acts are widely studied as manifestations of sexism and racism.

The concept of discriminatory micromessages is not new. Ralph Ellison published *Invisible Man* in 1952, referring to Blacks in the United States. In 1965, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote about microdiscrimination against Jews as a cause of continued anti-Semitism. Chester Pierce wrote seminal articles in the 1970s and coined the terms *microaggressions*, referring to racist acts, and *childism*, hostile manifestations of adult superiority over children. In the 21st century, Sue and many other authors have greatly extended Pierce's work on microaggressions.

The term *microinequities* comes from research at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 1973, the president and chancellor of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology recruited Rowe "to help make human beings more visible" at that institution. Rowe had a special charge to help women and began to track concerns about illegal sexism like salary inequities. She dealt with apparently conscious sexism, such as sexual harassment, exploitation, and poor service to women.

She also heard hundreds of poignant concerns about the minutiae of sexism and racism—including what appeared to be prevalent unconscious bias and unintentional discrimination—and the "invisibility" of female and Black achievement and potential. Rowe then extended the scope of Pierce's work on aggression and racism. She collected reports of seemingly small acts of bias—conscious or unconscious—on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, color, nationality, rank and class, age, disability, and appearance. She collected examples occurring in health care, in the media, on the street, in schools, at home, in public life, and at work. She called the universe of these "small" events "microinequities."

Scholars have extended research on microinequities in many domains, including analysis of very large data sets, and in different cultures and countries. Common examples of gender microinequities include the following:

- Presuming without discussion that tasks will be assigned based on gender (e.g., females will do kitchen, caretaking, and cleaning chores, and males will do maintenance work and fix computers)
- Overstepping acceptable physical and spatial boundaries in interactions with girls and women, in ways related to gender
- Making unfounded assumptions about a girl's math skills or a woman's competence and commitment to take a top job
- Making unfounded assumptions about men with respect to child custody or adoption
- Interrupting women and girls more than men and boys
- Evaluating the work of females as worth less than that of males, when the work and performance are the same
- Assigning superior offices, titles, or athletic facilities to men and boys in ways that reinforce male authority and superiority
- Overlooking women and girls when introductions are made, making remarks about their appearance, and using derogatory nicknames

### Where Do Microinequities Come From?

One trigger for a microinequity is a perception of difference. Men and women tend to spend their time differently both at home and at work. This has led researchers to ask, does sex segregation cause or contribute to microinequities? Or do microinequities contribute to the persistence of sex segregation? Or both? Current explanations include cultural and societal factors and discussions about unconscious bias.

### Cultural and Societal Influences

Historically paid and unpaid work were structured differently for men and women—with significant sex segregation at work, in schools, in public life, and in the home. The 1879 U.S. Census reported that women constituted only one in six of the paid workforce. The primary roles of women then were caregivers and homemakers, a largely unpaid labor force. The primary roles for men were in paid employment.

Thereafter, the proportion of women in paid employment increased, partly due to the World Wars. More women stayed in school, took advanced degrees, and appeared in public life. One hundred and fifty years of feminism influenced women's expectations to participate as more equal partners in society. A counterpart "men's movement" examined gender inequities that affected men. Men, on average, now participate more hours in homemaking and caretaking than in the past, and women contribute more to household income.

However, sex segregation is still common in how males and females spend their time—socially and professionally—and by "rank" in each role and occupation. Research shows that women, on average, are compensated less and promoted less often than men doing similar work. Segregation reproduces itself in open and subtle ways. The term *old-boys club*—the informal networks of Caucasian men—still describes much decision making in organizations and institutions.

Unfair assessments of the achievements and potential of females—many of which are unconscious microinequities—perpetuate stereotypical gender roles that, in turn, then perpetuate continued unfair assessment of the achievements of females. The same kind of process may perpetuate unfair, gender specific assessments of males in certain roles.

## Unconscious Bias

Psychology illuminates unconscious biases, the automatic ways in which all individuals use information in the unconscious mind. Unconscious biases influence beliefs and behavior—about objects, people, places, and actions—in everyone. Everyone has unconscious biases. Both women and men exhibit unconscious gender biases that affect both women and men—depending on circumstance.

Subtle changes in job descriptions may change the proportions of women and men who apply for a given job. The female head of a department may be mistaken for an administrative assistant; tenured professors, senior executives, and distinguished scientists—all females—have been mistaken as cleaning or service staff. A physician, searching for the parent of an infant, might look for a female in the waiting room—and not notice a male. Some buildings have too few bathrooms for females and too few infant care facilities for males.

Researchers at the nonprofit organization Project Implicit have investigated implicit associations. Their findings illuminate the complex—sometimes paradoxical—nature of unconscious bias. Although individuals may believe that they are not biased against a certain person or group, associations triggered by their unconscious biases may suggest the opposite.

## Effects of Microinequities

It is not easy to measure the effects of gender microinequities, because effects of unfair behavior may differ by context. Some inequities are not observed, such as those that occur behind closed doors, and each person may define inequities in a different way. Many people experience other microinequities in addition to gender inequities—for example, microinequities on the basis of race, ethnicity, color, nationality, religion, age, class, appearance, sexual orientation, poverty, and disability. Each country is a composite of cultures with different manifestations of discriminatory behavior. Thus, discrimination cannot be attributed solely to microinequities; macroinequities—such as illegal discrimination—may also provide an explanation.

However, some effects of microdiscrimination can be seen. Research on gender microinequities robustly reports undervaluing of both women and men on the basis of gender bias in various roles. For example, due to gender microinequities, the best candidates for various occupations may be overlooked because of their gender (either male or female, depending on the occupation). Responses from qualitative research include the following words when asking about women's experiences of microinequities at work or in education: *excluding, devaluing, ostracizing, undermining, demeaning, negating, exhausting, and invalidating*. Men have used similar words when describing their experience in roles traditionally held by women.

Microinequities, whether or not conscious or intended, may be experienced as humiliation—and social rejection. Research shows that the same regions of the brain may activate whether an individual feels social rejection or physical pain. For example, when being put down in sexist terms during a meeting, a person may experience a feeling similar to when stubbing a toe or having one's breath knocked out—momentarily unable even to think. The issue is not just the experience of pain but also that the pain happens as a result of gender—even though gender is not relevant to the work at hand—and gender at that moment is something the

person cannot change.

Continuous experiences of invalidation, environmental sexualization, and exclusion may create an environment of high anxiety. In addition, microinequities can lead to depression, related health issues, consequent loss of creativity and engagement, and low productivity. In addition, studies indicate that workplace turnover costs and low morale associated with being treated unfairly on the basis of gender are significant.

### **What Can Be Done?**

Microinequities are everywhere. At some point everyone treats others unfairly, although often unintentionally. How can individuals block unconscious bias in themselves? Understanding microinequities and microaggressions is helpful for improving one's own behavior and also for helping each person prevent harm by others. Initiatives to address the intent and effect of microinequities and microaggressions can raise awareness, help those who are affected, and improve institutional structures to prevent discrimination.

Training and reading about unconscious bias and the effects of microinequities can raise awareness. To examine one's own associations with gender and other social identities, and to challenge one's own thinking, one can take the Implicit Association test, which, according to the Project Implicit website, "measures attitudes and beliefs that people may be unwilling or unable to report."

Many schools now teach skills—that once were assigned to one gender—to everyone. Males and females learn cooking, gardening, knitting, sewing, carpentry, computer programming, auto mechanics, and public speaking.

Counseling and coaching can help validate and understand the feelings and emotions experienced by individuals affected by microinequities and microaggressions. One-on-one sessions provide confidentiality—and a chance to develop options to minimize and remedy damage, and to think about changing institutional structures that perpetuate inequities.

Bystander training can help people notice and react responsibly to microinequities and microaggressions. Bystanders can do many things—including involving other bystanders—to prevent, interrupt, and remedy inequities; to assist those affected; to bring attention to recurring harm; and to work for institutional change.

Proactive interventions include the concepts of microaffirmations, microadvantages, and behaviors that are widely perceived to be respectful. Microaffirmations are small acts and events that convey respect, recognition, support, validation, and encouragement. Microadvantages, as described by Stephen Young, are micromessages that motivate and inspire. These brief positive acts may be conscious or unconscious and are seen to be most helpful in the aggregate. Microaffirmations, if practiced consistently, may block and even change one's unconscious bias, may ameliorate or remediate the effects of unconscious bias, and may model behavior that others will follow.

### **Future Directions**

Microinequities and microaggressions occur in many different forms, as men and women possess many social identities (self-appointed or perceived by others). Everyone portrays multiple characteristics at work, at school, and in communities and can experience

microinequities through any of their identities. More research is needed on specific microinequities and microaggressions triggered by race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender and gender identification, economic status, disability, age, and other identities. These in turn provide a basis for yet more research on the effects of multi-identity microdiscrimination.

More research is also needed regarding the effectiveness of microaffirmations to prevent and mitigate unconscious bias, to block or interrupt the impulse toward harm—before discriminatory actions take place—and to provide remedies afterward.

**See also** [Bystanders](#); [Gender Bias in Education](#); [Gender Bias in Hiring Practices](#); [Gender Segregation](#); [Gender Stereotypes](#); [Hostile Sexism](#); [Institutional Sexism](#); [Male Privilege](#); [Microaggressions](#); [Race and Gender](#); [Sexism](#); [Subtle Sexism](#); [Women's Issues: Overview](#); [Workplace Sexual Harassment](#)

- women
- sex work
- sex trafficking
- transsexualism
- sexism
- sexual harassment
- women against violence against women

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#### Further Readings

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