

## Editorial: Isolation: A Diary of Subtle Discrimination

**Megan A. Conway,  
PhD RDS Managing  
Editor**

Although I am a self-described white lady of excellent education and moderate means, I follow with interest developments in ethnic studies, women's studies and social justice because they so often resonate with my experiences as a person with a disability and a professional in the area of disability studies. A recent article in the New York Times, "Students See Many Slightings as Micro-Aggressions" (March 21, 2014) caught my eye because in discussing how seemingly innocent comments can convey subtle forms of discrimination, the author lead with:

"A tone-deaf inquiry into an Asian-American's ethnic origin. Cringe-inducing praise for how articulate a black student is. An unwanted conversation about a Latino's ability to speak English without an accent."

Tone deaf? I realize this is a common figure of speech, but still. It amazes me that an entire article about the expression of micro-aggression via the use of language in higher education could so blithely ignore this obvious stereotyping of deafness as equated with ignorance.

But language is really just the tip of the iceberg here (no offense to icebergs). Many of us with disabilities in professional roles have been waking up to the fact that just because we have advanced degrees and know a lot about a lot of stuff does not mean that we have shed discrimination like an unwanted Christmas sweater (apologies to Aunt Gladys). In fact, just as with women and ethnic minorities who have banged their heads firmly against the glass ceiling as they climb up the professional ladder, we are experiencing a profound dose of "ouch" (even more painful for those of us who may have more than one "minority" identity).

Mary Rowe, in a still-relevant article published in 1990, "Barriers to Equality: The Power of Subtle Discrimination to Maintain Unequal Opportunity," describes how overt prejudice has been replaced by more subtle forms of discrimination that nurture persistent inequalities in education and the work- place. Even though blatantly telling someone that they have been denied promotion because they are a woman is no longer acceptable in the United States, as happened to my mother-in-law in the 1970's, actual prejudice still persists and results in the same mechanisms of exclusion. Writes Rowe:

"[Micro-inequities as] mechanisms of prejudice against persons of difference are usually small in nature, but not trivial in effect. They are especially powerful taken together. (As one drop of water has little effect, though continuous drops may be destructive, one racist slight may be insignificant but many such slights cause serious damage.) Micro-inequities work both by excluding the person of difference and by making that person less self-confident and less productive."

I have to confess that I am still mulling over (o.k. I am still mad about) a recent experience that brought these issues home to me. At the grand gala of a recent conference focused on disability, I secured my usual table up front near both the stage and my assistive listening device. For those of you who don't know me, I am both legally blind and severely hard of hearing (aka deaf-blind), and I am always worried about missing something, which is fruitless since I miss half of everything no matter what. Anyhow, I kept waiting for someone to join me at my table. I know other people are often shy

about sitting up front. And I know my wheely colleagues likely couldn't even get up front. But I observed as the tables around me filled with people. And no one sat down at my table. Do I have lice? I wondered. Is there food in my teeth? The conversational buzz around me increased as people talked and laughed, and there I sat alone. I peered around, trying to recognize someone that I knew. I knew I knew people there, but I couldn't see where they were sitting and no one approached me. A wave of isolation and loneliness settled in. Then the program started, and the speakers talked about inclusion, and access, and recognizing diversity, and I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I put on my dark glasses, just in case. Finally I had enough. I gathered my things. Then I noticed a sign on the center of the table, "Reserved." Reserved? Reserved for who? For me? Special me? Surely not. Whoever the table was reserved for, they didn't show up.

Whether you call it "micro-aggression," "subtle discrimination" or "micro-inequalities," the impact of being treated with disrespect or even just lack of awareness is damaging to the individual and hard to prove. How do you confront and correct colleagues who talk behind your back about how you are "arrogant" when you speak your mind about social justice issues that are important to you not because they make you look pretty but because to you they are intensely personal? Who do you complain to when you sit alone at a meeting in a room full of people who assume that isolation is your choice, when in actuality you cannot see/hear/move to join them? It is easy for people to make excuses that shift responsibility away from them and onto the person being discriminated against: "You need to learn to tone down your opinions," or, "Oh, that was unintentional." But one after another, these "micro" events build up into one giant iceberg that blocks the path to success.

I took the liberty of substituting "people with disabilities" for "minorities and women" in an article posted by Bowling Green State University, titled, "Subtle Discrimination". The results highlight the striking nature of discrimination, no matter the reason:

#### "Subtle Discrimination"

There are a broad range of subtle behaviors and events that perpetuate inequities for people with disabilities in post-secondary education...

Condescension: the apparent refusal to take people with disabilities seriously, as students and colleagues, which is communicated through posture, gesture, and tone of voice.

Role stereotyping: the expectation of behavior that conforms to the disability role stereotype.

Disablist comments: expressions of derogatory beliefs about people with disabilities such as state-ments of "inferiority," "not intelligent," and "not serious."

Hostility: avoidance, expressions of annoyance, resentment, anger, jokes, and innuendoes.

Exclusion: unintentional and intentional oversights denying people with disabilities access to events.

Denial of status authority: the covert refusal to acknowledge a person with a disability's position or their scope of authority (e.g., bypassing the individual and going to their supervisor).

Invisibility: the failure to recognize the presence or contributions of people with disabilities.

Double standard: differential evaluation of behavior as a function of disability attribution (e.g., regarding an able bodied person's non-academic experience as "enriching" and that of a person with a disability as indicating a "lack of focus.")

Tokenism: the discretionary inclusion of one or few people with disabilities.

Divide and conquer: the use of tactics that maximize the social distance of people with disabilities from each other (e.g., informing the individual that s/he is superior to others of the protected class in ability or achievement).

Backlash: the rejection of men and women who support efforts to improve the status of people with disabilities.

Am I being subtle enough? You be the judge.