

---

# Gender Microaggressions in Low-context Cultures

A perceptual study in the context of higher education

Dr. Martina Gaisch

HAGENBERG | LINZ | STEYR | WELS



UNIVERSITY  
OF APPLIED SCIENCES  
UPPER AUSTRIA

# Gender Microaggressions

„brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural or environmental indignities“

(Nadal, 2008, p 23)

## Terminological clarification:

- Microinvalidations
- Microinsults
- Microassaults



targeted at marginalised  
groups  
hostile  
dismissive  
stereotypical  
often systematic

# Agents involved

| Perpetrators   | Women with low feminist identity  |
|--|---|
| Unaware of biases & prejudices   | Unable to identify discrimination   |
| Ignore dismissive remarks  | Little awareness of sexism  |
| Take their privileges for granted  | Turn a blind eye, downplay  |
| Conscious/unconscious acts   | Socialised into male system   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overlook female contributions</li> <li>• Sexist behavioural acts</li> <li>• Dismissing accomplishments</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ally with males against feminists</li> <li>• Trivialise interpersonal, systemic and environmental aggressions</li> </ul> |



# Microinvalidations

- Ignore the gendered lives of women
- Unconsciously or consciously negate female reality
- Invalidate or nullify their psychological experiences

## Examples:

„there is no such thing as sexism“

„We are all human beings“

„You are just overreacting, nobody said that“

„A little clap on your bottom, so what“



blurred borders

# Microinsults

- Subtle snub that conveys a hidden insulting message
- Allusion aimed at discriminating the recipient
- Covert & outside the perpetrator's conscious awareness

## Examples:

„Your idea is not valid“

„Who are you to speak up here ?“

„You don't belong to this place“

You are really numerate for a woman



blurred borders

# Microassaults

- Overt & old-fashioned sexism
- Intentionally aimed at women to show their inferiority
- Deliberate & aggressive second-class treatment

## Examples:

„What a bitch!,, - whereas male is referred to as tough and courageous

„Open the door for men and slam it in the face of women

Name-calling such as bimbo...



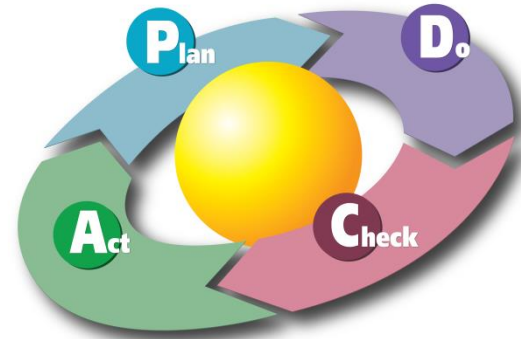
blurred borders

# Study Design

- Qualitative research
- Purposive sampling (9 teachers of 6 Austrian HEI)
- Focus group interview of 140 minutes



- In Finland:
- 7 female teachers discussed about the findings
- Related them to their societal & institutional setting



# Data Analysis

- Thematic analysis due to its pragmatic approach
- Drawing on a moderate social constructivist stance
- Descriptive & interpretive accounts of emerging data

## Four main themes emerged:

- environmental inequalities

- implicit bias

- power relations

- disciplinary pecking order





# Findings I



| Environmental Inequalities AT                                | Environmental Inequalities FIN   |
|--|--|
| Strong perception of societal & institutional inequalities   | Perception of societal equality with occasional institutional inequalities |
| WHAM (white, heterosexual, able-bodied men) phenomenon       | WHAM- only in traditionally male fields (e.g. engineering)                 |
| Strong male homosociality                                    | Mixed group formation appreciated  |
| Women tend to perform twice as much for the same recognition | Recognised expert status of women (yet with seniority)                     |

# Findings II



| Power Relations AT                          | Power Relations FIN   |
|---|---|
| Privilege is invisible to those who have it | Not perceived between gender but positions                    |
| Administrative staff are expected to be.... | Equal opportunities as a trademark                            |
| Strong solidarity with male seniors         | Strong feeling of independence & self-reliance                |
| Look down on those feminists                | Women mid-fifties-have well paid jobs<br>no issue of feminism |

# Findings III



| Biases AT   | Biases FIN   |
|---|--|
| Stereotypical attributions in form of explicit or implicit bias   | Due to traditionally excellent female education possible to hit glass ceiling                        |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Has her third child, won't come back</li><li>• This is certainly not important to me</li><li>• What, yet another woman?</li></ul> | „Finland is a potential paradise for stressed males who hate to make decisions; women run the place“ |
| Men have powerful positions, women care   | Women are financially independent, have powerful positions and take control                          |

# Findings IV



| Disciplinary Pecking Order AT                                   | Disciplinary Pecking Order FIN  |
|---|---|
| Engineering is a top educational goal and professional priority | Engineering is a top educational goal and professional priority                   |
| „Typical female, you always want to help others and stuff“      | Not so much explicitly expressed but more implicit messages (smiles, gestures...) |
| Social pressure to conform                                      | Higher standing despite feminine values   |

# Conclusion

Perception of gender microaggressions is related to

- Degree of contextual encoding
- Level of masculinity
- Power distance
- Disciplinary background and group constellation



# Thank you for your interest

[martina.gaisch@fh-hagenberg.at](mailto:martina.gaisch@fh-hagenberg.at)

