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To cite this article: Michelle A. Holling (2018): "*You Intimidate Me*" as a Microaggressive Controlling Image to Discipline Womyn of Color Faculty, Southern Communication Journal, DOI: [10.1080/1041794X.2018.1511748](https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2018.1511748)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2018.1511748>



Published online: 09 Oct 2018.



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“You Intimidate Me” as a Microaggressive Controlling Image to Discipline Womyn of Color Faculty

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ABSTRACT

This essay rectifies limitations in existing microaggression literature by theorizing a particular controlling image as microaggressive. A controlling image operating within the academy is “you’re intimidating,” which carries representational meanings about Others that seeks to discipline womyn of color faculty. The intersectional nature of the controlling image is mired in power and contextual factors that reflect a racial-gendered microaggression. Explicating this argument draws on memorable messages from the author’s experiences. The force of the microaggressive controlling image rests on its expression and representation, which suggests a mutually informing and reinforcing dialectic. This essay advances understanding about controlling images, contributes to published literature on microaggressions via a communication lens simultaneously, and theorizes an intersectional microaggression that extends current literature.

KEYWORDS

Controlling image; faculty of color; intersectionality; microaggression; women of color

Without careful documentation and analysis, these racial and gender microaggressions can easily be ignored or downplayed.

(Solórzano, 1998, p. 132)

During a conversation with a White and middle-aged colleague at an institution, she followed up on a discussion point by revealing that she found me intimidating. She confided, “Even as a full professor, I’m intimidated by you. It’s one of the reasons I looked to serving on [unnamed] committee with you.” Her opening words *even as* imply that she was lamenting the ways in which her status does not, but should, offer protection from being intimidated. As the recipient of her disclosure, her veiled compliment provoked attributional ambiguity¹; that is, “motivational uncertainty in that the motives and meanings of a person’s actions are unclear and hazy” (Sue, 2010a, p. 17). In addition, the “hidden demeaning message[s]” (Sue, 2010a, p. 4) of her disclosure suggested that she perceived me as difficult to work with, that as the intimidator I had not adequately humbled or ingratiated myself, and that institutional power via rank or status is inadequate in shielding one from the effects of a controlling image. Power suffuses the interaction through an (her) ability to name who is the problem and consequently who bears responsibility for rectifying it and based on race (White/womyn of color), which is compounded by the rank difference that is institutionally granted (tenured full/tenured associate professor). Intimated are the dimensions of oppression, namely, the institutional, symbolic, and individual (Hill Collins, 1993), where power is concerned. The power differential in the example create conditions for the colleague to have articulated a perception that highlights (my) difference, which was “marked, unfavorably perceived, or unfairly evaluated” (Lawless & Chen, 2015, p. 42). In other words, the colleague activates a controlling image (Hill Collins, 1990) of “you’re intimidating,” as will be discussed, which is a type of microaggression

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An earlier version of this manuscript was presented at the National Communication Association Convention, Dallas, Texas.

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calling not only for “careful documentation and analysis” (Solórzano, 1998, p. 132) but also theorizing to address the layered nature of microaggressions.

Scholars have documented and analyzed an array of microaggressions since publication of Solórzano’s (1998) essay. In fact, the study of microaggressions continues to proliferate, although primarily external to the field of communication (e.g., Bhattacharya, 2016; Cueva, 2014; Louis et al., 2016; Mena & Vaccaro, 2017; Pittman, 2012; Sue, 2010b). Some scholarship about microaggressions exists within communication (Chen & Lawless, 2016; Lawless & Chen, 2015).² The dearth of communication scholarship is surprising given that communication practices and interactions are at the core of microaggressive statements and behaviors. Combined, the body of literature has made significant strides in revealing microaggressions experienced based on specific identities (e.g., race or class or gender) and the effects on people of color, the importance of which goes toward documenting the realities and the systemic nature of microaggressions and offering taxonomies of microaggressions.

At the same time that extant scholarship is pivotal to illuminating a reality perhaps minimally understood by many, a few shortcomings are apparent. There is a fairly consistent emphasis on studying racial microaggressions from which applications of the concept (or, more broadly, microaggression) are used as a lens to study class or gender microaggressions, for example. As a result, breadth of understanding about microaggressions is enhanced yet depth in theorizing is nearly absent in regard to power or context. Related, scholarship has a documentation, descriptive, and reporting appearance, which limits the headway to advance understandings of microaggressions. More important, there is general neglect of the ways in which individuals are the sum of their identities and may experience microaggressions concomitantly. Even when scholars seek to examine race and gender, their results unintentionally manifest a gender binary of men experiencing racial microaggressions and womyn experiencing gendered microaggressions or fall short of fully unpacking the intersectional nature of microaggressions (see Solórzano [1998] and Cueva [2014], respectively). It is possible that adoption of a “thicker intersectionalities” (Yep, 2010, 2015) approach to examining identity could yield greater insight into the ways in which microaggressions are experienced and responded to. In light of the limitations manifesting in existing literature, this essay seeks to rectify those from a communication perspective. I do so by theorizing a particular controlling image and its relation to microaggressions.

In brief, *controlling images* (Hill Collins, 1990) are stereotypical representations communicated by and through different structures that are a means to subordinate Black women. One such image to begin theorizing is “you’re intimidating” (or its variation “you intimidate me”) that carries representational meanings about Others. Uttered during interpersonal interactions, the remark points to a contemporary controlling image operating within the academy that seeks to discipline womyn of color faculty. The intersectional nature of the controlling image is mired in power differences and contextual factors implicating a “clash of realities” (Sue, 2010a, p. 11) that reflect a racial-gendered microaggression. Developing this argument draws on my experiences as a tenure(d)-track faculty member, over the years of which I have accumulated “memorable messages” (Camara & Orbe, 2010, p. 108; Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981, p. 28). In brief, memorable messages are remembered over an extended period of time and have influential impact on one’s life (Knapp et al., 1981). I draw upon personal examples; however, naming the individuals or institutions is not pertinent given that attention is directed to how the messages function and power manifests. This essay advances understanding about controlling images by theorizing a specific one and contributes to published literature on microaggressions by interjecting a communication lens and simultaneously theorizing an intersectional microaggression. In so doing, this essay participates in scholars’ efforts to document experiences with racism and sexism in the academy and, in so doing, takes up common cause with other womyn of color faculty and allies in hopes that such bare acts may contribute to transformations of collegial interactions.

In what follows I discuss literature on microaggressions unique to faculty of color. Next, I review Hill Collins’ (1990) notion of controlling images before presenting several examples that contribute

to articulating “you’re intimidating” as a controlling image. Though the nuances of it are informed by examples offered in this essay, the controlling image discussed is broad enough to allow for tailoring and application to specific womyn of color faculty’s experiences. Analysis of the examples to be offered will account for power dynamics and context that segue ways to theorizing the named controlling image as a racial-gendered microaggression. Apprehending the intersectional nature of microaggressions is an important contribution in advancing current literature about microaggressions, which I pursue in the discussion section.

Understanding microaggressions

A backdrop to understanding microaggression scholarship is literature produced by scholars of color, primarily womyn, about the challenges they confront in the academy. Noteworthy is racism, sexism, and/or classism; the presence of colonial relations that structure academe consequently complicating how one moves through it; the latent rules or norms encountered during the tenure process; and/or tactics employed to navigate academe (Agathangelou & Ling, 2002; Calafell, 2010, 2012; Córdova, 1998; Delgado, 2009; Flores Niemann, 2012a; 2012b; Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012; Holling, Fu, & Bubar, 2012; Holling & Rodriguez, 2006; Owens Patton, 2004; Padilla & Chávez, 1993; Vö, 2012). Although the scholars named do not categorize their experiences as microaggressions, their essays orient readers to experiences in the academy that are rife with discrimination and microaggressions, racial and/or gendered.

First introduced by Pierce in 1974, racial microaggressions captured the racism enacted by offenders through “put-downs” directed at Blacks consequently affecting Black-White interactions (as cited in Solórzano, 1998, p. 124). Racial microaggressions have received the mainstay of scholarly attention, yet a growing body of literature advances an understanding of microaggression generally (Sue, 2010a), microaggressions based on a primary identity category (Sue, 2010b), and racial or sex discrimination (Camara & Orbe, 2010). For clarity, *microaggressions* “are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (Sue, 2010a, p. 3). Faculty experience microaggressions as common and pervasive, inside and outside of the classroom, and from colleagues, administrators, and/or students (Bhattacharya, 2016; Louis et al., 2016; Mena & Vaccaro, 2017; Solórzano, 1998; Sue et al., 2011).

Microaggressions bear a myriad of impacts for targets. Microinsults and microinvalidations,³ types of microaggressions, are found to “discourage and wear down scholars of color” (Guzman, Trevino, Lubuguin, & Aryan, 2010, p. 149) and to be experienced throughout the stages of doctoral pursuit and attainment (Bhattacharya, 2016; Cueva, 2014). Among African American faculty, their narratives reveal levels of stress that lead to self-isolation and avoidance (Louis et al., 2016) and/or feelings of differential treatment and exclusion (Pittman, 2012) as a result of experiencing microaggressions. Such effects parallel those identified amongst Chican@⁴ scholars,⁵ who feel out of place institutionally due to alienation, lowered expectations from faculty, and racism and sexism (Solórzano, 1998). The effects of microaggressions range from biological-physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral impacts (Sue, 2010a) to environmental and interpersonal invisibility (Mena & Vaccaro, 2017). Cueva (2014) presents *testimonios* of two graduate students of color, illustrating the physical and physiological effects of microaggressions. Those narratives detail numerous effects (e.g., depression, isolation, trauma, or chronic anxiety) resulting from “institutional violence” (p. 218) encountered in pursuit of their doctoral degrees. That one of the graduate students of color is queer in Cueva’s (2014) essay implicates, albeit unexplored, violence that results from the normalization of heteronormativity and its daily and unrelenting imposition ideologically and institutionally on individuals (Yep, 2002, 2003). *Institutional violence*, explains Cueva (2014), is “a type of microaggressions [*sic*] relating to the effects of racism and race-based trauma that produces psychological

and physiological consequences—particularly to women’s bodies, minds, health, and quality of life in the academy” (p. 218).

To augment microaggressive literature, which privileges domestic faculty of color, is research on immigrant female faculty’s experience. Camara and Orbe (2010) encouraged communication scholars to focus on “everyday acts of discrimination” via the study of “cultural microaggressions” (p. 109). They imply a distinction from racial microaggressions; however, there is in effect none because studying cultural microaggressions is about studying microaggressions based on other marginalized positionalities that scholars have completed (consult Sue, 2010b). Heeding Camara and Orbe’s (2010) recommendation, Chen and Lawless (2016) and Lawless and Chen (2015) interviewed immigrant female faculty to reveal meanings that they attribute to academic work (e.g., as a “labor of love”; Chen & Lawless, 2016, p. 103) as impacted by microaggressions and macrolevel structures (e.g., immigration). Many of the immigrant female faculty interviewed experienced “microaggressions in the mundane moments where their differences ... were marked” (Chen & Lawless, 2016, p. 104). In the classroom, students harshly judge immigrant female faculty’s performance; on course evaluations, students assign overall low scores; and in research, microaggressions surface through academic tokenism.⁶ Across both essays, Chen and Lawless’s findings generally echo those found in research about faculty of color who experience microaggressions (Louis et al., 2016; Pittman, 2012; Sue et al., 2011). A difference in Chen and Lawless’s research is their concluding remark: “The experiences of the women in our study are enabled or constrained by microaggressions within academic work ...” (Lawless & Chen, 2015, p. 46), which appears most dependent on microaggressions having “no malicious intent” (Lawless & Chen, 2015, p. 43) or being milder in form. Such a possibility of microaggressions as enabling is striking because by their nature microaggressions are constant assaults regardless of intent (Sue, 2010a).

Finally, in the face of experiencing microaggressions, research indicates that faculty of color respond by creating change through service on committees or building safe spaces for students (Pittman, 2012) or developing resilience and high performance (i.e., “John Henryism”) as coping mechanisms (Louis et al., 2016). Among immigrant female faculty there is strategic value in tokenism in that it “presents opportunities for positive representations” and expression of “unique perspectives and experiences” (Lawless & Chen, 2015, p. 46).

There are a few observations in light of extant scholarship about microaggressions. Documenting faculty of colors’ experience with microaggressions suggest that the academy falls short of being a welcoming environment for scholars of color that undermines institutional efforts toward inclusive excellence and/or diversity (Guzman et al., 2010). Next, published scholarship about microaggressions maintains a singular focus on an identity category (e.g., race or gender) as studied within particular populations (i.e., African Americans or Latin@s). Consequently, the ways in which microaggressions may be felt on multiple levels (e.g., race *and* gender) are largely neglected. Solórzano (1998) and Cueva (2014) pursue racial and gendered microaggressions; however, each falls short in explicating the intersectional nature. For instance, Solórzano (1998) examined Chican@ scholars’ experiences with racial and gendered microaggressions that inadvertently surfaced along a gendered binary. Similarly, Chen and Lawless (2016; Lawless & Chen, 2015) missed an opportunity to unpack the intersection of nation, gender, and race–ethnicity among immigrant female faculty who experience microaggressions. Finally, few scholars directly address the role of power when studying microaggressions; some mention it by way of colonial discourses and relations (Bhattacharya, 2016) and others through primary identity categories as the basis for power differences (Sue, 2010a). Evident is the need for continued analysis of power dynamics in microaggressive interactions.

Even with the growing body of literature that documents microaggressions generally (or microassaults, microinvalidations, or microinsults specifically), scholars encourage continued work on microaggressions as a means to promote understanding, awareness, and/or structural changes within the academy (Pittman, 2012; Solórzano, 1998). On this point, Solórzano (1998), in addition to Capodilupo et al. (2010), urges research that examines intersectional microaggressions

and names them as “problems” in order to produce “analysis, reflection, and action” to combat microaggressions (p. 131). This essay takes up such a challenge from a communication perspective. I offer examples from my personal experience while at different institutions and at different points in my tenure(d)-track career. Though some might characterize the examples as anecdotal, they are best understood as memorable messages. Knapp et al. (1981) initially theorized *memorable messages* as oral commands, communicated by someone in a position of authority, that affect one’s self-concept. Subsequent and more recent scholarship demonstrates the affirming dimension of memorable messages from mentors and parents or family more broadly that affect first-generation students’ retention and success in college (Wang, 2012, 2014). Conversely, Camara and Orbe (2010) conclude their essay by asserting that memorable messages can be a “type of discriminatory act” (p. 108). Taken as such, “dimensions of oppression” (Hill Collins, 1993) become apparent. For example, the beliefs inhering in and communicated through memorable messages implicate the “symbolic dimension of oppression” (p. 32) that is communicated within institutions such as the academy wherein systems of power relations circulate. The interpersonal nature of memorable messages signals the third dimension, oppression (i.e., the individual), that occurs via the internalization of meanings associated with memorable messages that consequently affect interactions. Thus, the study of microaggressions is a way of examining acts of discrimination communicated verbally in the everyday. Memorable messages have three facets when understood as such; that is, they “can be articulated and received from anyone anywhere ... are situational power charged assertions, and occur to limit the goal and freedom of others by locating them in a marginalized position” (Camara & Orbe, 2010, p. 108). In the case of this author, the combination of messages accrued over the years that have remained memorable constitute a controlling image that reflects a racial-gendered microaggression.

“You’re intimidating” as controlling image

In her groundbreaking book, Patricia Hill Collins (1990) theorizes controlling image as a means to oppress Black women. Controlling images such as the mammy, jezebel, matriarch, and welfare mother are historically situated and “negative stereotypical images” within which assumed qualities attach to Black women (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 7). The images operate as mechanisms—to dominate and oppress Black women—that economics, politics, and ideology aid as “system[s] of social control” to maintain Black women’s subordination (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 7). The dominance of controlling images during and since slavery relies upon the ripeness of conditions (e.g., efforts to overhaul public assistance programs) that necessitate an image (e.g., “welfare mother” or “welfare queen”) that persists until particular conditions disappear. Yet, because controlling images infiltrate common sense, they continue to oppress Black women. Finally, institutions controlled by dominant groups transmit controlling images; however, Hill Collins (1990) reminds that in-group members in institutions may also participate in transmitting controlling images.

In what follows, I present several examples⁷ (or memorable messages) that may appear inconsequential or innocuous to others. However, the instances combine to produce the controlling image named here as “you’re intimidating.” As will be revealed, “you’re intimidating” is a controlling image, a perceptual rendering of womyn of color faculty as difficult, hostile, and not performing in normatized stereotypical form, which is enmeshed in power and contextual dynamics. The controlling image functions oppressively by imposition and exclusion; consequently, the intimidator is set up as a threat perceptually, physically, collegially, and intellectually. When the notion of intimidating is applied to bodies of color it assumes different (and coded) meanings. After all, controlling images are “distorted renderings” of actual behaviors that are perceived to “threaten existing power arrangements” (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 107). In the context of the academy, what are the intimidating behaviors that seemingly threaten power arrangements? Are there modes of comportment that appear (non)threatening on some but not all bodies?

“Were you in a gang?”

Walking from one colleague’s office toward mine, I saw a lecturer in my department exiting the mail/copy room. We had not formerly been introduced prior to this chance meeting, but I had a sense that we each knew of one another. As we encountered each other, we introduced ourselves. Our exchange was brief but long enough for him to articulate a racialized stereotype. I noticed that he diverted his eyes toward my left upper arm, made eye contact, then repeated the pattern. He asked, “*So, were you in a gang?*” I desired to say, “What a racist and presumptuous question to ask someone whom you’ve never met!” However, I did not. I thought instead to try to hold him accountable. I wanted him to verbalize his assumption in hopes of recognizing its racist connotations when made by a White male to a woman of color and Chicana identified. I replied, “What makes you ask that?” A somewhat surprised look came over his face as he replied, “Well, I noticed the tattoo on your arm.” Having not much to say, I shook my head. He nervously replied, “I didn’t mean anything. My wife has a tattoo.” Unable to recall how the exchange ended, I walked away leaving him uncertain about whether I had gang affiliation.

“Afraid to meet with you”

In an effort to address a particular matter with a faculty member, I heeded an administrator’s advice, which was to seek a face-to-face meeting rather than continue what had been an ongoing e-mail exchange. I sent my request; time passed with no reply. I then followed up with the same administrator, informing her that the faculty member had not replied to my request. She informed me, “*She’s afraid to meet with you by herself.*” Damning words indeed but ones experienced by other womyn of color in academe (Calafell, 2010, 2012). I was surprised by the remark given that I had maintained a collegial working relationship with the faculty, or so I thought. Again, I contacted the administrator to seek clarification about the reason for the faculty member’s implicit fear of me. She expressed her discomfort in disclosing the reason and preferred to allow the faculty member to divulge her reasons to me. I found myself confronting a conundrum. Without a meeting, how would I know, understand, or be able to respond to the faculty member’s concern?

“Affirmative action hire”

A colleague and I stepped outside of the building in which our offices were located to get some fresh air and chat. We were both newly hired; we were also the first two faculty of color the department had ever hired. Our conversation was casual, likely sharing how we were each acclimating. At some point, he told me, “*You know you’re probably an affirmative action hire.*” His statement seemed to come from the proverbial left field. It was a racialized–gendered comment. Neglected was that affirmative action is a remedy for past discrimination and a means to achieve racial, ethnic, and gender diversity in faculty composition; in addition, affirmative action policies, where implemented at universities, require that faculty hired meet stated qualifications. I retorted, “Really?! And, what makes you so sure that you’re not the affirmative action hire?” In that moment, sarcasm was my defense; my retort, a refusal to be “put in my place” and an effort to turn the table. Either or both of us may have been hired under affirmative action policies of the university, but in the moment that did not matter. He sought to convince me that *I* was the affirmative action hire.

“You know some people ...”

In a follow-up meeting with a department chair, we discussed a curricular matter that ensnarled personnel matters. Early in the conversation she told me, “*You know that some people may find you intimidating, don’t you?*” A tad dumbfounded, I was unsure what provoked her comment or its connection to the content we were discussing. I asked, “Which people?” “Well, people. Some people

may find you intimidating.” I began to realize the gendered, and more subtle racial, undertones of how she characterized me. I replied, “You know that when such a comment is made to a womyn of color it is an effort to silence, negate, or marginalize her.” The chair redirected attention back to her, referencing a way in which others have labeled her after which she again repeats, “Have you ever thought about how some people may find you intimidating?” Apart from an occasional student who will disclose to me that she or he finds me intimidating (a concern worth exploring elsewhere), which I expressed to her, I had not been told by peers—faculty, junior or senior to me—that I was intimidating. Still uncertain who the “people” were and the impetus for the questioning, I continued, commenting, “... Sounds like a personal problem, an issue of self-confidence for the one making the statement.” I had no idea what would follow. She replied, “Well, it’s me. You intimidate me.” I sat surprised, uncertain how to follow up. She shifted the conversation to the reason for our meeting, subsequently opting not to engage me in the “schooling” just received.

Whether by implication or explicit characterization, the four examples, including the one that opened this essay, activate memorable messages (Camara & Orbe, 2010) crystallized in the italicized quoted statements. In tandem, the messages construct a controlling image of “you are intimidating” or “you intimidate me” that frames womyn of color as the Other, their/our bodies coded by others’ perceptions about our demeanor or self-presentation that emphasize (negative) difference. Ideologically, the controlling image situates womyn of color as threatening, angry, and/or difficult, an image or figure echoed in the writings of other scholars of color (Ahmed, 2012; Calafell, 2012; Córdova, 1998). Calafell (2012), for instance, comments, “Women of color are often read as non-normative, threatening, or violent in their communication because they do not confirm [*sic*] to hegemonic standards of White femininity and passive aggressiveness that is so often favored in the academy” (p. 124). Ultimately, the image is a move to subordinate, to silence, and to discipline female faculty of color as well as functions powerfully to remind us that we fail to perform properly as a gendered-raced colleague. In the eyes of others, I failed to emulate prevailing racial-gendered expectations and a stereotype of Chicanas and Latinas. As Flores Niemann (2012a) writes:

[F]aculty, staff, and students may have particularly adverse reactions—conscious and unconscious—toward women of color who are not perceived as adequately nurturing or feminine. ... The motherly Latina [*is*] particularly strong. Women who do not meet stereotypical expectations that they will nurture students arouse anger, distrust. ... Be aware of these different expectations ... *often from faculty colleagues*. (p. 469, emphasis added)

Serving as the antithesis to the “motherly Latina,” “you intimidate me” is a controlling image that operates within a structural context that privileges a “mythical intersectional normativity” (Yep, 2016, p. 238). It refers to White, male, heterosexual, middle-class, and able-bodied and is premised on rationality. The controlling image assumes a particular embodiment deemed out of place.

Also shaping the controlling image are relations of power.⁸ At minimum, others’ attributions of an identity through a characterization (e.g., affirmative action hire, gang member, or as intimidating) indicates an exercise of power. There is also the fact that as the target (i.e., a Chicana and womyn faculty of color), I occupied the rank of assistant or associate professor in the examples. My interactions were with a White male lecturer (example one) and White female associate dean (example 2), whereas the final two examples involve a Latino male associate professor (example 3) and Latina female full professor (example 4). Institutional privilege accompanying rank-role combines with or opposes other identity (dis)advantages such as in example 1. It reflects an effort to equalize a power imbalance due to rank while reasserting dominance based on race and sex/gender or the mythical intersectional norm (Yep, 2016). Remaining examples maintain power imbalances based on institutional roles and rank heightened by race (example 2) and sex/gender (example 4). Across the examples, I remain in a subordinate position due to a confluence of identities that position me outside of the boundaries of racial (e.g., inferior, subservient), gender (e.g., nurturing female), and/or racial-gendered stereotypes (e.g., motherly Latina or maid). My inclusion via the controlling image of “you’re intimidating” perpetuates my exclusion because I violate expectations

for the performance of particular roles, whether institutional or social. Power is superficial in light of the intimidating persona and perceived to be enacted at an interpersonal level because the person is someone to fear.

Relevant to power is the support lent to Hill Collins' (1990) observation that dominant group members (opening plus first two examples) and in-group members (final two examples) serve as transmitters of controlling images, thus perpetuating domination at group levels. A question that surfaces is how to make sense of in-group members' participation in the controlling image. Perhaps complicity in a system of Whiteness? Or participation in the colonial relations of the academy (Córdova, 1998)?

A few contextual elements begin to coalesce that facilitate the appearance of the controlling image "you're intimidating." There is an academic or structural context that privileges a mythical intersectional norm, as mentioned previously. Additional contexts include the economics of higher education wherein pay disparities among tenure-track faculty members and lecturers (and tenure-track faculty members and administrators) exist; a political context, characterized by moves toward corporatization and struggles over academic freedom, that produce conditions in which faculty enact power differently based on rank, status, or role; and a social context in which compositional disparities among White faculty and faculty of color persist in the professoriate. Despite numerical increases in faculty of color earning doctorates and assuming tenure-track positions, the lingering attitudes of Otherness endure, thus facilitating a climate that is unwelcoming of, if not hostile⁹ to, faculty of color. Moreover, the controlling image reflects a racial-gendered microaggression, which I explore next.

Controlling image as racial-gendered microaggression

A first step to theorizing "you're intimidating" as a controlling image is naming it as such based on examples offered in order to begin resisting it; yet, more is at play with the image. To discern the implications of the image hinges upon understanding it as a racial-gendered microaggression that is oppressive. The oppressive dimension is imposed through both the controlling image and microaggression. For instance, when presented as a hedge question (i.e., "Have you ever thought about how some people may find you intimidating?") or as de facto truth (i.e., "She's afraid to meet with you"), the impression is that advice might follow but not before having to concede to a question that already answers in the affirmative, consequently upholding the controlling image. Microaggressions oppress by way of expression (e.g., "Were you in a gang?" or "You know, you were the affirmative action hire") because they "are active manifestations of marginality and/or a reflection of a world-view of inclusion/exclusion ... and desirability/undesirability" (Sue, 2010a, p. 5). "You're intimidating," as a microaggressive controlling image, names what is undesirable (e.g., being threatening or not enacting White femininity) that seeks to exclude. What is the basis of the exclusion?

The idea of *threat*—who is perceived as threatening or behaves in ways perceived as threatening—is a foundation for exclusion. Bodies that threaten historically and representationally are associated with Black men (Hill Collins, 1990, 2005). However, in the context of the academy, threat can be understood as a response to efforts to implement diversity, to diversify the ranks of faculty, or to exemplify inclusive excellence (Ahmed, 2012; Flores Niemann, 2012a). As such, embodiments of threat are needed. Perceptually, physically, collegially, and/or intellectually, threat undergirds the articulated controlling image of "you're intimidating" that commits a microinsult (example 1) or microinvalidation (examples 2, 3, and 4). The perception that one is threatening gains support from several factors coalescing: First, possible gang affiliation that assumes dangerous or violent tendencies based on racialized appearance. Rivera, Forquer, and Rangel (2010) refer to this as the "assumption of criminality" (p. 72) in treatment or intimating messages of illegal activity. Second, a sometimes visible indigenous tattoo (read: too ethnic) that attaches to assumptions of criminality, thus inciting fear in others in not wanting to be left alone with the intimidator due to the possibility that she might act irrationally (read: difficult to get along with). Third, others' skepticism about an

intimidator's qualifications or accomplishments ascribes intelligence as lacking (Rivera et al., 2010, p. 66). If intelligence is perceived as lacking, there would appear to be no threat. However, verbalizing a gendered-racialized comment that can stigmatize socially and politically suggests otherwise. Each factor is individuated thereby directing attention to the one perceived as threatening, as out of (her) place.

Microaggressive controlling image(s) dislocates responsibility from the perpetrator who avoids, if not eludes, claiming responsibility. The invisibility of unintentional bias may offer some insight into what facilitates evading responsibility. When individuals believe themselves to be "good, moral, and decent human beings ... as someone who stands for equality, justice, and respect for everyone" (Sue, 2010a, p. 14) yet have committed microaggressions, it is difficult for them to openly acknowledge their biases and prejudices—the difficulty is in their concern for self-image (Sue, 2010a). Simultaneously, the supposed intimidator (i.e., target) is the problem—her actions and way of being are a *problem*—thereby shifting blame. Constructions of "being the problem" are noted by Ahmed (2012) as accompanying how racism is talked about institutionally that interrupts "the happy image of diversity" (p. 152). She explains that organizations' representations of diversity are through inclusion of those who embody diversity, enabling organizations to present themselves as "getting along, as committed to equality and anti-racis[t]" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 153). Unlike the stereotype of the motherly Latina, which helps to maintain a "happy image" given the racial-gendered implication of serving and attending to others, "you intimidate me" disrupts social relations. Often times, reconciling relations relies upon "building rapport" due to a stereotype (Ahmed, 2012, p. 160) or upon one or both parties assuming responsibility for relational failures. Implicitly sought is that the intimidator reassess her way of being, make her self-critical, insinuate a belief in herself that there must be something wrong with her. In short, the intimidating womyn of color faculty is "individually pathologized" (Calafell, 2012, p. 119). As a result, the intimidated is relieved from critically interrogating what is the "it" within her- or himself that provokes him or her to feel intimidated, whereas the intimidator is left with "the intimate labor of *countering* their idea of you ['you're intimidating']" (Ahmed, 2012, p. 160, emphasis in original).

What becomes apparent in the microaggressive controlling image of "you're intimidating" is the "clash of realities." Sue (2010a) explains that the clash is "most pronounced when a significant power differential exists between groups that hold power and those who are disempowered" (p. 11). He appears to base the power difference mostly on a primary identity category given the examples he offers (e.g., Whites/people of color, men/women, etc.). The complexity of power suggests, however, that a microaggressive controlling image amplifies by accounting for the dynamics between power and context. Power derives not only from primary identity categories but also from institutional role, rank, and/or status that interacts with contextual factors such as constructed notions of threat and the extent to which one may approximate the mythical intersectional norm (Yep, 2016). This combination of power and context not only positions perpetrator and target differently but disempowers a target's response(s) and heightens the fact that "the group who holds the greatest power has the ability to impose reality on less powerful groups" (Sue, p. 12). The reality imposed on female faculty of color is that "you're intimidating" severely restricts the exercise of agency. Both Sue and Rivera et al. (2010) observe the "catch 22" (i.e., the difficulty in ascertaining others' motivations and actions in committing a microaggression and deciding whether to respond) as a reason that precludes targets of microaggressions from responding. Conversely, Hill Collins (1990) advises that not challenging controlling images leaves individuals beholden to it. When combining such predicaments to a microaggressive controlling image, the imposed reality becomes not only a means of sustaining subordination but possibly (post)colonial relations.

The intersectional nature of the named microaggression rectifies the singular approach taken toward the study of microaggressions by scholars who theorize the term and understand it to be experienced. Failing to direct attention to how more than one identity-based microaggression may be expressed in interpersonal interactions undermines collective efforts to redress (in)hospitable climates and neglects the experiential reality of womyn of color faculty. An intersectional approach

to microaggressions reflects “the dual positioning of women of color as women and as members of a subordinated racial group” (Crenshaw, 1993, p. 112). Thus, I define a *racial-gendered microaggression* as (a) everyday (non)verbal and/or environmental images or indignities, regardless of intention, that (b) calls attention to the activation of a controlling image subsequently communicating derogatory or negative racist–sexist messages. The first part of the definition affirms existing conceptions of microaggressions by Sue (2010a) and Solórzano (1998). The second part of the definition indicates controlling images as controllable in that someone has to turn it on (i.e., activate it), the likely candidates being individuals who are threatened, the intimidated. In so doing, the target’s response necessitates deconstructing the assailed controlling image “you’re intimidating” along with its racial–gendered microaggressive elements in order to assess whether—and, if so, how—to respond. With regard to the microaggressive controlling image identified in this essay, there is a quandary. How does one begin to unsettle the controlling image and simultaneously show that she is not intimidating?

Discussion

Evident from extant microaggression scholarship is the need—the *continued need*—to not only document, research, and analyze individuals’ experiences with microaggressions but also extend understandings of microaggressions including what enables them, how they function, etc. Advancing knowledge on microaggressions should not be underestimated in light of the paucity of scholars from marginalized populations nationally who are at the receiving end of microaggressions.

In this article, I argued that “you’re intimidating” or “you intimidate me” is a controlling image that circulates with the academy. The image is based on perceptual renderings and expressions of womyn of color faculty’s bodies, comportment, demeanor, and/or self-presentation that congeal to have them be read as angry or hostile. Discerning the intersectional nature of the image also necessitated consideration of power and contextual dynamics, the effects of which span marginalization, exclusion, and/or discipline. Following explication of the form of the controlling image is recognizing its oppressive nature that occurs by imposition and exclusion via the ideas of threat and the mythical intersectional norm. Instantiations of threat in future controlling images may be similar to or different from those discussed in this article. Three results from a microaggressive controlling image consist of (dis)locating responsibility from individuals who participate in or perpetuate leveling the controlling image onto those who are perceived to embody it; clashing realities that result from the activation of a microaggressive controlling image; and imposing (post)colonial relations. The force of the microaggressive controlling image rests not only in its *expression* (i.e., microaggressive remarks that demean and wear down womyn of color faculty) and cumulative effects for those who experience them but also in its *representation* (i.e., constructed controlling image). A complicating result is the “unenviable position” (Sue, 2010a, p. 16) for the target of a microaggressive controlling image, who contends with both form and content or representation and expression, respectively. This suggests a mutually informing and reinforcing dialectic that requires responsiveness not only at an individual level but, more important, at a structural level. From this essay, then, two contributions result.

The first contribution is articulating the controlling image “you intimidate me” that expands the work of Hill Collins (1990).¹⁰ This is achieved by anchoring the image in contextual elements unique to the academy. Already acknowledged is that institutions in particular media produce controlling images, yet the academy or “the ivory tower” is one site not studied for its role in generating or circulating controlling images. Perhaps the microaggressive controlling image is one way of colonizing in order to subdue womyn of color faculty. Although the institution of academe does not directly create the image named, those who exist within it do, thereby still implicating the structure itself. More precisely, the ivory tower aptly characterizes the academy and necessitates continual questioning for its racial, ethnic, gendered, and sexed complexities. Broadfoot and Munshi (2007) write, “The ivory tower of reason, rationality, and rigid structures colonizes the world of lived experience”

(p. 256). I assert that a mechanism for colonizing the lived experiences of faculty of color (womyn specifically) is the controlling image “you intimidate me” that seeks either their interpellation or capitulation. A consequence of interpellation for womyn of color faculty is the fixation of the image (and its meanings); thus, all that remains is to enact the image. The alternative is capitulation, which may yield “academic legitimacy” to those who work in the service of “the sanitized tone of the Master Narrative” (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007, p. 256). In the end, both interpellation and capitulation are unfulfilling options for womyn of color faculty because both impede recognition of subjectivity on terms other than those presented (i.e., controlling image). In so doing, systems of inequality are maintained with modes of being contingent on those permissible by the controlling image; hence the need to resist and expose the microaggressive controlling image “you intimidate me” when it appears.

Dovetailing the first contribution is conceptualizing *intersectional microaggression*, a new type of microaggression that extends current literature. Expanding on the definition of a racial-gendered microaggression offered on prior pages, I extend it by positing intersectional microaggression. It refers to everyday (non)verbal and/or environmental images or indignities, regardless of intention, that highlight activation of a controlling image that communicates hostile, disparaging, or negative messages based on two or more intersecting identities. Analysis of intersectional microaggression(s) requires a few things. First, scholars identify the identities—and attendant ‘isms’—in play when microaggressions occur. Examples could include sexual orientation and disability or race-ethnicity and class. In so doing, womyn (and faculty) of color’s humanity ceases to be compartmentalized and confined to the most salient aspect of identity. Taking up the charge to analyze intersectional microaggression(s) assists in moving beyond the mono-identity-focused studies that tend to dominate existing literature on microaggressions. To go a step further, one could adopt a thick intersectionalities approach (Yep, 2010, 2015) as a means to explore the complexity of individuals’ positionalities. Next, in this essay, race and gender via the controlling image were most central. To identify intersectional microaggressions in the future will necessitate revealing other instances of a controlling image and its manifestation in addition to those named in this article in order to explicate how the dialectic of expression-representation functions. Third, the study of intersectional microaggression(s) requires analyzing the types and role of power and context in microaggressive interactions. A result is a more nuanced depiction(s) of the ways in which intersectional microaggressions enable, constrain, and/or shape interpersonal relations. What this leads to is that intersectional microaggressions are as much about the totality of identities that variously position individuals in dominant and subordinate roles in the ivory tower as they are about the intersecting nature of a controlling image, power, and context.

Notes

1. Based on the experiences of womyn of color in academe, Flores Niemann (2012a) concludes that they are “especially subject to negative consequences of attributional ambiguity” that stems from the difficulty in discerning whom to trust which negatively affects advancement (p. 489).
2. Work by the communication scholars cited are the earliest published appearances wherein the language of “microaggressions” is adopted to explore communicative interactions. This author acknowledges that a case could be made that scholarship exploring interracial (e.g., Houston, 2000; Orbe & Harris, 2015) works on a parallel plane of—and thus shares a concern with identifying and exposing—what is now recognized as microaggressions.
3. *Microinsults* refers to “behavioral/verbal remarks, or comments that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity” and *microinvalidations* refers to “verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color” (Sue, 2010a, p. 8).
4. Throughout this essay, I adopt Chican@ and Latin@ as the preferred spelling. On this point, Calafell and Holling (2011) write,

The boundary of identity conveyed by and through “Latin@” is gender inclusivity and equity. The “@” symbol expresses an intertwining of Latina and Latino subjects ... [and] “symbolize[s] alliances”—past, present and future ones—between and amongst U.S. Latin@s and Latin American Latina/os and their struggles.” (p. xvi)

5. Rivera et al. (2010) concluded that there are similarities (and differences) between racial-ethnic groups’ experiences with microaggressions. Some similarities included having one’s intellect questioned or communication styles pathologized.
6. “Academic tokenism” restricts “academic freedom and reinforces expectations based on stereotypes.” It “occurs through assumptions, whether implicit or explicit, of inherent—or unfair—connections between the immigrant women’s academic work and their foreign identities” (Lawless & Chen, 2015, p. 43).
7. The examples are discrete, yet by accumulating them, they point toward something more, namely, a controlling image that is best revealed by frontloading the examples and following with analysis.
8. I adopt Martin and Nakayama’s (2010) view of power as based on primary (e.g., race) and secondary identity dimensions (e.g., educational level), as derived from institutions and roles occupied, and as dynamic.
9. Beyond characterizing academic climates as hostile, other scholars liken it “to a ‘war-like battleground’ that precipitates psychological and physiological strains” (Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano, as cited in Cueva, 2014, p. 224).
10. Worth considering elsewhere is whether the named controlling image is parallel to and an academic manifestation of “the educated Black bitch” controlling image that circulates in films (Hill Collins, 2005, p. 145).

Acknowledgments

The author thanks Dreama Moon and Cindy Griffin, each of whom lent unwavering support for and feedback on the ideas presented herein at different junctures of this manuscript. As well, the author appreciates the editor and anonymous reviewers for their support and constructive feedback to strengthen further this essay.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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