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THOUGHTS ON MICROAGGRESSION,
SOCIO CULTURAL TRAUMA, AND
THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL FIELD

A Discussion Paper

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JUNE 2020

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Bernie completed the Gestalt Training Program XVIII in 2017 and the Working with Physical Process training program in 2019 at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland. She is currently enrolled in the Developmental Somatic Psychotherapy Training at the Center for Somatic Studies in New York City. Bernie has written and volunteered for New Gestalt Voices. Bernie trusts in the therapeutic process and believes that profound growth is possible when we understand our personal experience and development within the context of political and social systems and within our own bodies.

In the past few days, I have been reflecting on microaggressions. What is a microaggression? Who determines whether a microaggression has occurred? What is my duty if I am accused of a microaggression? How can I care for myself if I have been microaggressed upon by another? What does all of this have to do with gestalt therapy/theory (if anything)? If I microaggress (or am microaggressed upon) is there a way that gestalt theory can help me better understand the dynamic, help me language what is happening, help me feel less defensive or less victimized?

According to Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal & Torino (2007), a microaggression is the “brief and commonplace daily verbal or behavioral indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults that potentially have a harmful or unpleasant psychological impact on the target group or person.” Microaggressions are often associated with race, but can impact any number of marginalized identity variables (sex, gender, class, ability, nationality, religion). By definition, the person making the microaggression does not intend to injure the other and is usually unaware of the impact of their words or actions. In any interracial interaction, there is a potential for microaggression (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, (2007)). I submit that whether a microaggression occurs depends, at least in

part, upon the subjective experience of the recipient¹. He/she/they determine the impact of another's words or actions based upon their subjective experience, as it is lived in the moment.

Although the literature on microaggression does not typically utilize field theory to explain the phenomenon, in my opinion, it seems a natural, logical fit. The phenomenological field (as it is described, for example, in Brownwell, 2010), is the subjective, lived experience of the here and now. Brownwell (2010, pp. 137) states: "The phenomenal field can be thought of as the universe of experience open to a person at any given moment... It is epistemic in nature, for it has to do with how a person experiences/knows whatever he or she is experiencing/knowing. Working from within this field, a therapist is not concerned with what "really" happened; rather, it is what the client reports about what happened, or is currently happening, that is of concern....²"

1 This statement is not meant to limit the definition of a microaggression. Rather, it is a starting point from which further discussion might flow. While one's subjective experience might be sufficient ground for a microaggression, arguably a microaggression can occur without talking subjective experience of the intended recipient into account. For example, another member of the oppressed group may be present and bear witness to a microaggression (as an unintended "recipient"). Even though this third person is not the intended "recipient" of the microaggression, they may experience harm as a result. Further a bigoted comment may have a harmful impact upon a recipient without the recipient attributing it to oppression. Rather they may attribute the remark to a personal failing. It could be argued that Not recognising a remark as microaggressive is indicative of internalised oppression.

2 The phenomenological field is perhaps where a discussion of microaggressions *begins*. However, this is not to say that as therapists we should not balance increasing awareness of the phenomenological field with increasing awareness of the

One of the strengths we have as gestaltists is our field theory. There are different aspects of the field and different definitions that are pertinent to field theory, for example, the ontic field or the pneumenal field (see e.g., Brownwell, 2010). But when it comes to understanding microaggressions, the phenomenological field is figural. For the phenomenological field is the lived and felt experience of the organism/individual as he/she/they are living and experiencing it. The phenomenological field is unquestionable; it is real; it is the fluid, dynamic truth and the reality of the individual. The phenomenological field is where the microaggression occurs, where it is felt, where it is lived.

I submit that a microaggression is something that is field dependent. For example, to draw from my own life experiences, I have a lot of negative introjects around embodying my femininity and sensuality that stem from my experiences with the Roman Catholic Church. (To be fair, I also have a lot of positive introjects around the importance of social justice and activism that stem from my experiences with the Roman Catholic Church... but that's another topic.) I experience these negative introjects as internalized oppression. There might be a day when I am feeling relatively good about myself and my embodied feminine self, such that those negative

ontic field. Arguably, as feminist therapists might suggest, our role includes helping clients recognise the hidden oppressive messages in the ontic field and considering how these messages impact their quality of life.

introjects are not particularly active in me. If someone compliments me on my appearance or remarks on how I am moving my body, I might be able to say “thank you” and walk away feeling empowered and more whole.

On another day, if I am feeling particularly shame-bound and the same person makes the same comment under the same circumstances, I might feel that they have microaggressed upon me. Their comment might be received by me as a form of objectification of my body or as an implication that there is something “dirty” or shameful in the way I am presenting myself, as opposed to a comment that remarks on one aspect of myself that is acknowledged to be part of an integrated whole self. The only difference in these two instances is my phenomenological field in the moment that the comment is received.

One can easily see how this reality could devolve into victim blaming (e.g., suggesting that the recipient of the words/actions is “too sensitive”).

But if I experience a microaggression because of my phenomenological field in the moment it is delivered, is that my problem, a problem of the self? Is that the problem of the microaggressor, a problem of the other? Or rather is it a problem of the “situation” (to draw inarticulately from Relational Change’s SOS model,

Denham-Vaughan and Chidiac, 2013) or the ontic field (“what actually is”, Brownwell, 2010, pp. 138)? If I consider the situation, is there more space, more room for movement? If I consider the situation, can both self and other avoid the feelings of shame and guilt that so often crop up in the context of microaggression? What if I (as microaggressor) can start the conversation not with “I didn’t mean to hurt you - you’re too sensitive,” but rather with “we are living in a terrible situation that both contributed to my experience of hurting you and to your experience of hurt... how can I, with humility, through contact, take responsibility for my words and/or actions?”³ By taking into account the situation, I can have more self-compassion and less defensiveness. This, in turn, helps me to be more receptive to the experiences and needs of the other.⁴

3 This is not to suggest that the recipient of the microaggression should focus only on the context/environment/field, as the source of the pain is relational and (in most cases) occurs between people. Part of the “work” is creating a relational crucible where difficult conversations can occur, where pain can be expressed and validated. And, at the same time, while not deflecting from personal responsibility, looking at the larger context (the ontic field) may help lessen defensiveness and increase the aggressor’s willingness to take responsibility. It could be argued that a source of the pain is the ontic field (the social conditions, the environment) as it is manifested through the words and actions of the aggressor. Whether a microaggression occurs, from the perspective of gestalt therapy, might depend upon the interaction between the ontic field and the phenomenological field of the (intended or unintended) recipient of the aggressor’s word or actions.

4 To use an example that is not tied to power or privilege, if I am walking through a crowded hall and accidentally step on someone’s toes, I don’t say that the crowded hall injured them. I recognize that the crowded hall put me in the position of harming the other. But I took the action - my foot stepped on their toes. Taking the whole situation into account, I apologise freely and openly and consider how I could have done (and plan to do) better the next time I am in a crowded hallway.

When I experience a microaggression, it is linked to socio-cultural trauma... in my case, this trauma is often tied to the patriarchy or to class. For many, it is tied to race. For all of us (I submit) it is tied to capitalism and the devaluing of our human “being-ness.” Socio-cultural trauma lives in my bones and runs through my blood... as it does, in one way or another, for all of us. Whether we have privilege or not, we are all victims of this larger system. The differences between us lie in the comfort the system provides to us in exchange for our collusion. And, speaking from experience, comfort is the enemy of change.

So, I guess one of my challenges to myself (and to you, dear reader) is to ask “how comfortable am I?” What does this comfort cost me? What does this comfort buy me? What does this comfort cost others? Can I tolerate the discomfort of asking these questions even though I have the privilege of looking away?

And back to the topic of microaggressions more specifically.

When it comes to microaggressions, there is an element of grace (for lack of this agnostic’s ability to find a better word) needed in dealing with them. This idea is explicit in Multicultural therapy and (I submit) implicit in gestalt’s field theory. When someone experiences a

microaggression, we accept their phenomenological field, their reality, their truth, without questioning its validity. We don't minimize by saying "they're too sensitive," "they're overreacting" – in doing so, we would collude with the larger system of oppression. If we have "presence," (e.g., Yontef, 1993) we can approach the other person with an open heart, giving them the benefit of the doubt rather than the invalidation of our defensiveness. If we have "presence" we sit in the discomfort of their reality, even if it very different from our own.

When I have experienced a microaggression, it takes a lot of courage for me to say "ouch" rather than to listen to my own introjects around being "too sensitive." If I speak up, it often isn't graceful. Sometimes it is quite sharp. In that moment, I am usually living in a phenomenological field that is informed by a history of socio-cultural trauma and oppression. To speak up is an act of resistance, rebellion, and survival—it is how I honor my own humanity; it is how I honor my relationship with you; it is how I express hope and love. To be trusted to receive such an act of resistance and vulnerability is an honor and a gift. How can we open our hearts to receive this kind of love and hope from the other? How can we stand not in opposition, but side by side, facing the situation that impacts us all? DiAngelo (2018) provides some guidance:

“Racism is the norm rather than an aberration. Feedback is key to our ability to recognize and repair our inevitable and often unaware collusion. In recognition of this, I try to follow these guidelines: 1. How, where, and when you give me feedback is irrelevant—it is the feedback I want and need. Understanding that it is hard to give, I will take it any way I can get it. From my position of social, cultural, and institutional white power and privilege, I am perfectly safe and I can handle it. If I cannot handle it, it’s on me to build my racial stamina. 2. Thank you. The above guidelines rest on the understanding that there is no face to save and the game is up; I know that I have blind spots and unconscious investments in racism. My investments are reinforced every day in mainstream society. I did not set this system up, but it does unfairly benefit me, I do use it to my advantage, and I am responsible for interrupting it. I need to work hard to change my role in this system, but I can’t do it alone. This understanding leads me to gratitude when others help me.”

Take it all with a grain of salt. These are my ever-changing thoughts on a complicated, gut-wrenching, emergent situation.

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PUBLISHING INFORMATION

Thoughts on Microaggression, Socio-Cultural Trauma
and the Phenomenological field © Bernadette O’Koon
2020

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First Published June 2020

ISBN download (awaiting)

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and the Phenomenological Field is published by New
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