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Microaggressions within the LGBTQ+ Community: An Autoethnography

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Microaggressions within the LGBTQ+ Community: An Autoethnography



Image by Branden Padilla found on Affinity Magazine

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Senior Capstone
Practical and Professional Ethics
Creative Project
Dr. Maria Villaseñor
School of Humanities and Communication
Spring 2018

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Name: Erika Perez

Concentration: Practical and Professional Ethics

Title: Microaggressions within the LGBTQ+ Community: An Autoethnography

1. **Project Description:** I will expand on the research I have been doing with UROC that deals with Microaggressions within the LGBTQ+ community. The literature review answered the questions: *How microaggressions are exhibited between members of the LGBTQ+ community? How do microaggressions affect the quality of communication within the LGBTQ+ community?* I explored previous research on microaggressions, homonormativity, self-reflexivity, and interdependence to answer these questions. I have used my research to educate and empower my queer communities about microaggressions and the violence they create within the community.

For my capstone project I will expand on this research by doing an autoethnography. The advantages of doing an autoethnography is that I am giving access to my personal experiences, that help the audience understand my narrative being presented to show that unlearning microaggressions is a process.

2. **Alignment with Common Theme:** This is an important topic because in the different arising issues that are happening in the United States, it is now more than ever clear that people need to not only listen, but to understand the different stories of individuals to lead to a more inclusive atmosphere. Especially in the LGBTQ+ community, where the oppressed can become the oppressors.
3. **Expectations:** My expectations are to identify artifacts were I have committed microaggressions in the LGBTQ+ community. This would include facebook posts, past memories and experiences. I will also be journaling to reflect on these artifacts and why it was a microaggression towards the LGBTQ+ community.
4. **Specific Skills Required:** Reflective writing, which I have acquired through all the HCOM courses I have taken.
5. **Next Steps:**
 - a. I will do extensive research on how to do an autoethnography.
 - b. I will contact Bianca Zamora from the Otter Cross Cultural Center to help me conduct my autoethnography since she has done one before.
 - c. I will reflect on past behaviors/ideas – self reflexivity

6. **Timeline:**

Dates	Deliverables
March 10, 2018	Meet with Bianca
March 26, 2018	Have already done some research on autoethnography
April 10, 2018	Started working on my autoethnography
April 20, 2018	Start working on writing portion
April 25, 2018	Have a draft finished
April 27, 2018	Work on poster

Abstract:

This autoethnography is about different points in my life where I committed microaggressions towards the LGBTQ+ community specific to different genders, sexual orientations and/or how people in the community present themselves. I use “thick intersectionality” – an embodied exploration of the complex particularities of individuals’ lives and identities associated with their race, class, gender, sexuality, and national locations – as a means of portraying my message, voicing the emotions that I felt, and the identity I occupied at that moment. I show that the intersectionalities of queer folks’ identities create unconscious microaggressions towards other queer folks. The purpose of my autoethnography is to show that people are capable of accepting and learning from their mistakes and to demonstrate that microaggressions can be applicable within the LGBTQ+ community.

Keywords: autoethnography, thick intersectionality, microaggressions

Introduction:

I am a first-generation, queer, non-binary, immigrant turned citizen, McNair Scholar through the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Center (UROC) and student. These are all the identities I have attributed to myself. All of my identities intersect in one way or another. One identity that led me to do this autoethnography is being a McNair/UROC Scholar. I have been doing research on – *you guessed it* – microaggressions within the LGBTQ+ community. My research has changed a lot since I first started now it focuses on microaggressions applied only to gender and sexual orientation. In my research I define microaggressions and separate them into the three categories. (1) *Microinvalidations* are often unconscious and exhibit, “communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person” (Sue, D. W., p. 37). *Microassaults* are “conscious, deliberate, and either subtle or

explicit biased attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors” (Sue, D. W., p. 28). Microassaults can be harmful, while the person wasn’t present at the time the intent of a microassault seen as an attack and tells the recipient that they are less than human (Sue, D. W., p. 28). *Microinsults* are, “communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage” (Sue, D. W., p. 31). I theorize that microaggressions are attributed to *homonormativity* and *transnormativity*. What it all comes down to is trying to make individuals aware, and if aware, knowledgeable about the microaggressions that do happen within the LGBTQ+ community. When I started to do research and pieced everything together, I soon came to realize that I was an agent of microaggressions. One task I gave myself in writing this autoethnography (designed for queer and trans folks) is to hold judgment on who I used to be and who I am now.

Theoretical Framework

Mary Romero defines intersectionality as looking at different levels of racism, sexism, classism, and other “-isms” in the many ways they intersect with one another and how they affect our daily lives (Romero, p. 36). She continues to state that “we have many social identities that position us in different places at different times... There is not an essence of race or any other social identity because each identity exists simultaneously with others; and therefore, they change the way we experience each” (Romero, p. 36). However, Gust A. Yep argues that rather than using intersectionality, people should aim to use “*thick intersectionality*,” which he refers to as “a deeper and more embodied exploration of the complex particularities of individuals’ lives and identities associated with their race, class, gender, sexuality, and national locations.” To really get to the “thick” part of how he defines intersectionalities, he continues to state, “understanding their history and personhood in concrete time and space, and the interplay

between individuals subjectivity, personal agency, systemic arrangements, and structural forces” are essential to understanding the lives of people. Yep suggests to look at the person’s lived experiences occupying one particular intersection and the reality of themselves. Given Yep’s definition, I will examine the *thick intersectionalities* I held in the different recollections.

Methodology

The term autoethnography is defined “as cultural analysis through personal narrative” (Orbe, p. 17). Stories are powerful and instrumental in how they help construct people’s identities and how we have interpersonal relationships with others (Bocher, 2012). In the field of research and academics autoethnographies are not mentioned, and when they are people look at you with confusion followed with the question, “what is that?” When I define what an ethnography is — studying other people and cultures — and say that it gets flipped to analyzing myself and the culture I am part of critically. People gasp and say, “wow that is so powerful”. Since I started my research in 2017, I have been able to acknowledge the mistakes I can remember doing in the past with regards to the microaggressions I committed. Ellis and Bochner (2006) believe that “autoethnography does something in our life world with its unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative ways” (p. 433). With this definition that Ellis and Bochner give I argue that autoethnography is a tool of inquiry that can help others understand the lived experiences of a queer person who has experienced a level of violence in my queerness.

Autoethnographic Recollections

I was hanging out with my then best friend from high school in my room. We were watching a movie and had just gotten Subway sandwiches to eat. She was laying on my twin bed and I took

my desk chair. On the desk there was a Subway drink cup. I wasn't really paying attention to the movie since I had seen it a lot of times already. So I was switching between looking at my phone and the tv screen. In between switching from looking to one screen to another I noticed that she had this funny smile on her face like she was off in her own world. I thought it was funny because I had never seen her smile this goofy before. I took a photo and posted it on my facebook and captioned it, "Haha, look at this *faggots* weird ass smile xD."

At the time I did not think anything of it. I can also recall that I said the word *faggot* a lot as a term of endearment, even though now I don't think there's anything endearing about it. I can also take a look at who I hung around with during that time in highschool. A lot my "friends" at the time said that word and somehow I adopted it. I can't say that word without doing a big gulp before I say it or even type it now.

My dad and our family got invited to my dad's co-workers party on the weekend that same weekend we had some out of town family members coming to visit us, so they joined us in the party. We all went to the party, and my dad says that his friend, la Güera, said her friend was going to perform as a drag queen performer. I was excited because this was the first time I had seen a drag performer. We all packed into our car and got to the party around 5pm.

The tables were all full, but we managed to find a place to sit. My cousin and I went to go get tacos. As we got closer to the taquero I could smell and hear the carne asada. My mouth watered looking at the different choices we had.

"Me puede dar uno de carna asada y el otro de al pastor," I said to the taquero.

“Nomas quiero dos o quiere mas?” He asked

“No mas dos,” I replied.

I went to the table where the chile verde y chile rojo were. I put tiny drops of the chile verde. I grabbed some cilantro and sprinkled it on the tacos along with cebolla. I grabbed some radishes that were sitting there. I went and sat back down next to my cousin.

My cousin and I joked and talked about random things. A little after we finished eating the dj announced that the performance was about to start. My cousin and I switched our chairs around waiting patiently. There were two performers. One was really tall and the other impersonated Selena. As the tall drag queen started to perform we watched attentively. We laughed at the things they were doing. The Selena drag queen had a spot on performance that I did not appreciate at the time, but looking back now I do. The tall drag queen was the closing act. She was doing this amazing lipsync and somewhere in the middle of the song she did a move where she tripped or seemed like she had tripped. My cousin and I laughed. I managed to take a picture. I posted that picture on facebook and captioned it, “sHE is tripping.” Looking back at it this was an unconscious microaggression because I knew they were male bodied and did drag, but I didn’t know if they identified as a woman or man. It wasn’t within my right to say what they did or didn’t identify as.

It was on a Saturday when I came to an open house for transfer students here at CSUMB. The whole day I was filled with anxiety of coming to a new campus and meeting new people. There were a lot of people who came so main quad was crowded so that really didn’t help my anxiety. I came with my girlfriend Theresa. We went around from table to table to see of any information

that I thought I might find handy. As we walked around I could see the LGBTQ+ table since it stood out with the rainbow flag.

“Do you wanna go make friends with the other gays?” Theresa asked jokingly.

“Heck no.” I replied laughing.

While I was out to my friends in San Jose I did not see myself as *that type of gay, who's too gay*. By that type of gay I mean someone who is out and *screams gay*. I remember avoiding that table during the open house. Over the semesters of being here at CSUMB I have learned that there is not right way of being gay and I have also learned that people now, since I am part of PRIDE Club here at CSUMB, might see me as someone who *screams gay*.

Discussion

Growing up my parents never talked badly about the LGBTQ+ community, or if they did I was never present for it. However, I was raised in Catholicism, and I knew that there was sin in being queer. All throughout my life I knew I was queer, and I never repressed those feelings. But I did practice homophobia to the extent that it would be considered a microaggression. As I try not to place judgement on myself I can attribute the microaggressions I committed to *homonormativity*. Homonormativity, as defined by Lisa Duggan, is "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption." To put it simply, homonormativity is applying heteronormativity—assuming every person is straight, in their behavior and sexual orientation—to the LGBTQ+ community. However, homonormativity is not assuming every

person is gay, but instead assuming LGBTQ+ people want to be heteronormative. As I mentioned growing up queer was something I never spoke about, but somehow I knew it was “wrong” because in the media I never saw representation of queer couples or someone being different in the sense of their gender binary. All too often I would have first impressions of people, which would consist of me saying someone is *too gay* or *too butch* or *too queer*. These are thoughts that kept occurring in how I stereotyped someone. On the flip side, I have critiqued people on not being queer enough when I myself, based on the standards I had placed on those individuals, was not being queer enough. It could be possible that I had heteronormative ideals placed on these individuals who were being too queer, but I had placed some as not being queer enough. I internalized what I felt about myself or how I thought others saw me.

Stereotypically speaking I look queer. I have short hair and dress more masculine. While I look stereotypically queer, I never felt I was queer enough. I felt that there was more I could be doing in the queer community, for example being more active, being well versed in inclusive language, or knowing every queer artist. In this journey of being queer, I have realized that there is no wrong or right way to be queer. I internalized the thoughts of being too queer or not queer enough based on the ideals and stereotypes the media has placed on the queer community. It comes from the supporters of the queer community to dismantle the stereotypes of who queers are or who they are not, to dismantle the gender binary of presenting masculine and feminine and being able to just accept myself—us—as our own authentic selves. One thought I hope queer individuals will take into consideration is to love ourselves authentically for who we are and how we may choose to express who we are without worrying about what the outside thinks. This is a

hard concept to grasp since we have constantly been trying to fill the heteronormative standards we are taught from an early age. So have patience in the ways you grow in being queer.

bell hooks states that Nathaniel Branden's work, *The Six Pillars of Self-esteem*, highlight important dimensions of self-esteem (hooks, 2000, p. 55). Living consciously is one pillar hooks writes about. She says living consciously means, "we think critically about ourselves and the world we live in. We dare to ask ourselves the basic questions who, what, when, where, and why." Answering these questions creates a level of awareness in how we can understand why we said something, who we were with, when in our life (bad or good) it happened, and what the impacts are of the things we said. Another pillar that hooks talks about is taking responsibility. hooks states Branden defines it as, "to take responsibility for my actions and the attainment of my goals... For my life and well-being." hooks follows that definition by arguing that "taking responsibility does not mean that we deny the reality of institutionalized injustice". Putting this into an example, you are sitting next to someone who identifies as queer. Another person comes and starts saying homophobic slurs to them. Whether you choose to stand up to them or walk away matters most. I choose these two pillars that I believe matter most because a lot of queer individuals, like myself, have no self-love or not enough self-love, so we internalize that hatred. I believe this is the first step in being able to grow resiliently and overcome the microaggressions one LGBTQ+ person may have towards the wider community.

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Reflective Essay

This autoethnography was an extension of the research I have been doing with UROC. My main research is about microaggressions within the LGBTQ+ community focusing on gender and sexuality as opposed to race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality. The term racial microaggressions was coined in 1970 by Psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce, which he used to illustrate the discrimination towards Black individuals in the media (Nadal, p.41). Dr. Derald Wing Sue, was one of the first to extend and define how Microaggressions are interpreted now. Sue had first proposed different categories for racial microaggressions in a 2007 article focused on how they manifest in clinical practice in the *American Psychologist* (Vol. 2, No. 4). He defined *microaggressions* as, “brief, daily assaults on minority individuals, which can be social or environmental, verbal or nonverbal, as well as intentional or unintentional” (Sue, D. W., 2010). There, he notes three types of current racial aggressions: microassaults, microinvalidations, and microinsults. As noted briefly, research that has been conducted on microaggressions has been largely based on race. The research that has been conducted about racism, discrimination, and microaggressions that include the LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, and Plus) community, focuses on its effects as perpetrated by outside agents, such as a cisgender person towards the LGBTQ+ community, with the exception of Kevin L. Nadal, *That's So Gay!: Microaggressions and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community*. The research I am doing with UROC is more traditional. So for my capstone I wanted to do something a bit more creative as well as being able to show a personal aspect as to why microaggressions can be exhibited. I know this is the start of my autoethnography and will expand on it more in the future. Apart from it being part of the research I do at UROC this

project also showed things I have learned in the HCOM courses I have taken such as the creative writing course I took which allowed me to add dialogue which provided me with the necessary skills that would help me make my autoethnographical recollections clearer.

The aesthetics of my project is that it has a research structure and a research concept (autoethnography) that is seen as just a creative reflection, but also many argue that it can be seen as qualitative research. For the autoethnography I had to reflect on experiences I have had where I have shown microaggressions towards the LGBTQ+ community. In those experiences I show imagery of where the microaggressions I committed took place. I show my voice in the way I write and the dialog of what I can remember that I said. The way I decided to do my creative project is from the different autoethnographies I read, while they all varied in style the structure was similar where they introduced autoethnographies and connected it with a theoretical framework.

The target audience for my creative project is other queer folks who have struggled with internalized hatred. I choose this audience as my main audience because I am queer and I know other people who identify within the LGBTQ+ community have often experienced some sort of hatred in their queerness. To further that I want to show that it's okay to experience the hatred towards ourselves and others and that what matters is how we can move forward into making the LGBTQ+ community more inclusive. I also highlight two of the six pillars that bell hooks talks about in her book *All About Love* that can lead to creating/developing self-love. One of those pillars is living consciously to be able to have awareness in the actions or the things you say and the second pillar I use is taking responsibility for those actions and things your say. In the end, I

want this project to bring awareness to the internalized hatred that queer and trans folks face and to be patient in the way queer and trans folks grow towards having self-love and loving others.

The process of how I crafted my creative project I choose three of my fondest memories where I committed microaggressions towards the LGBTQ+ community in the past. For some of them I knew I had to go back and look through Facebook. When I was going back through my timeline on Facebook I remembered that I deleted some of those posts because when I started my research I hated that I said the things I said before. I was trying not to place judgement on myself throughout this entire process as well, which I found difficult. In looking back at memories I had I would write them down and reflected on them and tried to think of the state of mind I was in as well as the situation I was in and who I was with at the time that all of that happened. I also had to keep myself accountable for writing out my capstone project and doing some research on how to write an autoethnography. I also met with Bianca Zamora because she was someone who has done an autoethnography in the past. She sent me some sources and other autoethnographies to look at so I may get a sense of how to structure and what others folks autoethnographies look like when they are done.

My creative project is placed in different times in my life in highschool, when I attended community college, and coming into CSUMB. The way I connect with the different areas of social and cultural aspects involved research, self-reflection, and reading other artists' works. The microaggressions I committed can be attributed to being raised in Catholicism because the culture I grew up in was Latinx and Catholicism is the main religion there. To a social aspect I think that there are many queer people who internalize a lot of hatred. While I'm not saying that other ethnicities don't go through it I think that Latinx culture is known for ostracizing LGBTQ+

people take for example in September 2017 there were marches all across Mexico where people voiced their negative opinion on gay marriage. There are different works that inspire me are bell hooks, Frida Kahlo, Audre Lorde, and Gloria E. Anzaldúa who have all been icons in talking about their queerness in their writings. They have all inspired me to be unapologetically queer and reflect on the ways I have held privilege with my queerness.

I hope that readers can read my autoethnography empathetically and for those readers who are queer to be able to understand that we cannot not blame ourselves entirely for experiencing hatred within ourselves and other queer folks. As I mentioned I wanted my capstone project to connect with my original research, but I also want it to show why my research is so personal to me. It's personal because I write about the ways I exhibited microaggressions to others as being someone who identified within the queer community then and now showing that growing towards self-love is possible and that if you aren't there that it is a process and everyone goes at their own pace.

Final Synthesis Essay

In HCOM 475-01 I have contributed the different perspectives I hold because of my intersectionalities. When the subject of immigration came upon during our class readings and discussions I was able to give input because I am an immigrant turned citizen and my parents are also immigrants. I was also to contribute to the fact that I am queer and was raised in Latinx culture so I understand some of the difficulties that come with those two identities.

Growing up in Latinx culture I was able to contribute to a class discussion where we talked about race and the color of your skin. I know in my family I have heard that the lighter your skin is the brighter your future is. In being queer I was able to add more discussion to the article, *Performance Piece*, written by Julia Serano. I can relate to them when they say, "... countless restless nights I spent as a pre-teen wrestling with the inexplicable feeling that I should be female." While I am biologically female, I don't attach myself to that gender or the male gender, just somewhere in between. This article also gave me more of an insight on how to approach gender. Rather than saying gender is a social construct we should move to the gender *binary* being a social construct because some folks hold gender really close to them, them being trans people who have fought to be identified as man or woman, or even for someone who doesn't fit the binary and has to constantly tell people not to prescribe them to the two genders.

Another reading that I enjoyed and could contribute to was the *Diary of a Reluctant Dreamer* by Alberto Ledesma. Some of the passages hit home for me because I am an immigrant and my parents are too. I was born in Guanajuato, Mexico. I was lucky enough to have been brought to el otro lado as a one year because I don't have any memories of Mexico or having to feel fear from being separated from my parents for four days. The memories I do have are of my

parents. My dad working two jobs and hardly getting time to see him and my mom staying at home during the day taking care of us and then having to go to work at night with my dad. Growing up I was undocumented but when I was seventeen and in my junior year of highschool we got a letter from the government that my parents and my application to become residents of the U.S. was going to start processing. My parents were filled with joy and I was too. The application process moved pretty fast and after I became a resident between three to five years I got the chance to become a citizen. When I became a citizen I thought the way people were gonna see me change, but they didn't. When Ledesma said, "We are at Disneyland for our summer vacation. A policeman passes by and I feel him stare me down. That's when I realize that nothing has changed." This passage resonated with me because after I got residency and after I became a citizen I thought people would see me differently, however, as Ledesma pointed out sometimes things don't change and people will see you a certain way forever.

I have been able to demonstrate how I am able to work collaboratively with others when having to do lead a seminar discussion. I chose who I got to lead the seminar with. It was challenging when we both had different ideas of how to lead a seminar and what we key terms we should include. I also needed to have some sort of organization in what I was doing and my partner was more relaxed way of preparing for the presentation. However, being able to lead this seminar showed that I was flexible in being able to work with different leading styles.

To continue to show how I was able to work collaboratively with others in different class meetings Professor Villaseñor paired us in small groups to discuss discussion questions that were given to us by other student seminar leaders. Sometimes individuals would have different views from my own and I approached their views trying to empathetically listen to them. Another way

I continued my ability to work well with others has been when I Professor Villaseñor has asked us to give feedback on our classmates projects. I have been able to take that feedback and apply it to my creative work.

Since majority of the humanities field involves working independently on a project and my autoethnography has been an extension of the research I have already done with the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Center (UROC) here at CSUMB I have been working independently for awhile. One of the difficulties I face with working independently is keeping myself accountable for the deliverables and the dates I have set myself up for. I also enjoyed being able to work on this creative project by myself and being able to emerge myself in it.

My senior project demonstrates a deeper understand of my sections shared theme my providing ways in how people, mainly queer identifying people can move towards accepting themselves, but also hold themselves and each other accountable. I also talk about social standards that are placed upon queer folks.

My senior project has met the published criteria and standards for assessment of a creative project because my deliverables for the creative project are very clearly delineated and approved by Professor Villaseñor. I have also completed my deliverables in a timely manner. My creative project clearly informs people of the shared topic of the capstone seminar. My project format falls into the realm of Human Communication Major, where it helps individuals, more specifically queer individuals, with interpersonal communication and how they might be able to overcome internalized hatred and move towards accomplishing a more inclusive space. This autoethnography project also creates a unique perspective into how microaggressions can happen

within the LGBTQ+ community and creates awareness to people who identify within the LGBTQ+ community and people who are supporters of that community.