BELONGING: The Feeling That We "Belong" May Depend in Part on "Affirmations"

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ABSTRACT
This essay describes a poignant concern brought to the ombuds office that helped me to understand how micro-affirmations are a major part of the scaffolding of "belonging."

KEYWORDS
belonging, micro-aggressions, micro-inequities, micro-affirmations, unconscious bias, intersectionality.

In 1973 a quiet, young Black woman came to my office after hours, without giving her name. (Many small details of this story have been changed to protect confidentiality). I had recently been appointed by the President and Chancellor of MIT as an early type of ombudsperson. I was expected to be completely confidential, and impartial—albeit with a special concern for gender, race, and religion.

I had been happy to wait to meet Ms. X; many compelling cases came to me off-hours. My visitor introduced herself, a bit uncertainly, saying that she thought that she should resign from MIT but had read about my appointment. She only had a few minutes; she had to get home, but had wanted to meet me. We talked for just a bit.

"Thank you for your saying that you had wanted to meet me. And—you say you have decided to leave. You describe working very hard, you are getting a lot done, and yours is an important lab. Has something happened to make you unhappy at MIT?"

"No," she said. "No one has been mean, or disrespectful, or has done anything wrong; nothing like that." Long pause. "It's just …*cold*. I don't *belong* here."

I wanted to learn what she meant by "cold." Would she consider waiting a few weeks to resign? That is—might she possibly be willing to keep a log of everything anyone said to her, and then come back—to discuss her experience before she decided to resign? And, maybe … she and I could discuss other jobs here? I said I was sad to think MIT might lose her. She kindly said that was fine, and a month later, she brought me her logbook. She silently handed it to me. I glanced at her for permission—and then opened it. The logbook showed the dates for each day of the month, including the weekends and a major holiday.

It was completely blank.

My visitor told me that for the entire month no one had said anything to her at all. She had an inbox and an outbox, each of them always filled with work to be done and tasks completed; she was punctilious about every task, always on time, and was given a lot of work. However, no one had spoken to her about her work, or the holiday, a recent public success in that lab, or even the weather. I kept thinking about her earlier words: "It is just *cold*. I don't *belong* here."

At the time, I was thinking hard about the concept of micro-aggressions. Like so many other people, I had learned about micro-aggressions from the work of Professor Chester Pierce, a warm acquaintance at Harvard and MIT (Pierce, 1970). I had been expecting to work on big structural issues at MIT, like day care, the pension plan, and salary equity—macro issues if you will—and I did work on macro issues. However, inspired by Dr. Pierce, I also collected *all* of the concerns that everyone brought in to me, small as well as large, at the rate of maybe 20-90 a week.

And, indeed, many concerns appeared, at first glance, as "*micro*" issues. A name left off a list; a name misspelled. Women and people of color addressed by the name of another person of the same race and gender. A failure to introduce someone. A person who inadvertently offered food with their left hand to a devout Muslim. Some micro-issues seemed hostile—or even very hostile—to me, and I greatly appreciated Dr. Pierce' insights about *aggressions*.

But some concerns seemed to me completely unconscious slights, or stemming from ignorance, incompetence, or negligence. Some were precipitated by accident—as when a person in charge suddenly got sick, communications failed through oversight or thoughtlessness, and someone was left out of an important trip. I began to think of a much larger set of micro-injuries that

included all of the above. I saw the *whole lot, both "aggressive" and not "aggressive," as micro-inequities*—apparently small happenings that had consequences that were seen to be *unfair* (Rowe, 1973; Rowe, 1974; and Rowe, 1977). I defined such micro-inequities as "apparently small events which are often ephemeral and hard-to-prove, events which are covert, often unintentional, frequently unrecognized by the perpetrator, which occur wherever people are perceived to be 'different'" (Rowe, 2008).

In 1973, I quickly came to believe that micro-inequities that are based on a person's identity, taken together, provide a powerful scaffolding for structural discrimination to continue (Rowe, 1973; Rowe, 1974; Rowe, 1977; and Rowe, 2008). Micro-inequities are, themselves, a potent part of structural discrimination, though often subtle and ephemeral. The constant nature—of racist and sexist, xenophobic, religious, homophobic, and other discriminatory micro-messages—does damage for at least two reasons. One is the direct injury that can result from apparently small acts—like attributing a good idea to the wrong person.

Another reason for damage is that even in circumstances where reasonable people would say that that a micro-injury was caused by a complete coincidence, it can be hard for the recipient to know for sure. In a discriminatory milieu, many people live in an uncertainty that saps energy.

Micro-inequities, whether hostile or completely accidental, provide polluted air and an unfair playing field for many people. But it can be hard for others to see the barriers. (My longtime MIT ombuds colleague Professor Clarence Williams, and a then student, now MIT Professor Kristala Jones Prather, illuminated these points in powerful ways with a series of eight MIT videos called *It's Intuitively Obvious.*[1])

I learned a lot from listening to Ms X. I have thought many times since, for almost 50 years, about cultures that are perceived as *cold*. Not mean or disrespectful in an obvious way, just cold. A culture lacking in interpersonal affirmations important to human beings. A culture where someone is not protesting but feels that they do not belong. I thought about the narrator in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (Ellison, 1952) who says, "I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either."

Ms. X was working in a lab of all men, all working intensely hard, none of them Black, most of them older than she. As I listened to Ms. X I wondered: Was the apparent invisibility of Ms. X about racism? About her gender? About her rank and role, as support staff? A type of age-ism with respect to a younger person? Was this just a group of shy, reserved scientists, with a total, nonstop focus on work, and with very few social skills? Maybe *all* of the above?

I wondered what was actually happening here, and concluded that I could not tell—in part because different men in the lab might have had different reasons not to speak to Ms. X. Each man, if asked, might have explained it differently. And also—as we now know from neuroscience—humans mostly do not consciously even know, ourselves, why we do things.

And, most importantly, how did Ms. X analyze the scene? Was she thinking about race? Or gender? Or race and gender and role and age and class, as an example of what Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw named "intersectionality" (Crenshaw, 2023), to refer to a person with several social identities, any (or all) of which could lead to discrimination?

I could not know the source(s) of discrimination if any, and, in any case, what mattered then was what Ms. X thought. Ms. X wanted to discuss other job opportunities at MIT, and I listened intently

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[1] The videos and their history can be found at https://www.blackhistory.mit.edu/archive.

as she talked about what mattered to her. I thought to myself that maybe I would learn, from her choice of the next job, more about her own assessment of the shortcomings of the lab.

In the next several weeks, she was offered two positions, and I thought I did maybe learn something from her decision. She chose a job where she would be working with graduate students—and with many people of color. Dropping by my office during the following year, Ms. X made clear that she really enjoyed the diversity in her office, and the variety of assignments given to her at the new job. (Someone there had bothered to find out about more of her considerable abilities and interests. She got promoted several years later.)

Ms. X gave me permission to talk with the lab director after she left. But this left me thinking about how to talk with the lab director. Would I mention that discrimination can be multifaceted? (For example, discrimination can involve race, gender, sexual identity and orientation, religion, ethnicity, class or appearance, or some combination of those factors.) That is, would I mention that bias might be inspired by one identity or several identities? And discrimination can injure just by omissions, without any conscious wish to injure, aggression, or apparent hostility.

Thinking further, was it important to know what actually happened, that is, was the "cold" climate actually a micro-*aggression*? Or was it a micro-*inequity*—perhaps a simple cross-cultural difference that had poignant negative consequences? Is it important to discern the difference? That is, should we react to all micro-inequities the same way—or react differently to the subset that is aggressive?

I then asked myself: If I do not know what happened, will it be easier for the lab director to "hear" me, if I use the language of "inequities" rather than appearing to accuse someone of an aggression? On the other hand, which are the situations where that would be an error or a cop-out?

As I remember, at the time, I decided to focus on the future. I discussed with the lab director whether "micro-affirmations" could have created a workplace where Ms. X felt she belonged. (I define micro-affirmations as "apparently small acts, which are often ephemeral and hard-to-see, events that are public and private, often unconscious but very effective, which occur wherever people wish to help others to succeed." (Rowe, 2008)). At base, affirming behavior is not complicated. For example, behavior that is perceived by another person to be consistently respectful is affirming. Receiving friendly feedback about how to improve our work is often affirming. Just noticing the real achievements of another person often is affirming, and a consistent experience of being affirmed may help people to feel they belong. But the perceptions of the recipient matter; affirmations probably only help when they are *perceived* by the other person to be genuine and appropriate.

Professors Roger Fisher and Daniel Shapiro wrote of five core emotional concerns: *appreciating* the other person, finding a basis of *affiliation* with the other, respecting the *autonomy* of the other, the *status* of the other, and the *role* that the other person is playing (Fisher & Shapiro, 2005). Meeting core emotional concerns, genuinely and appropriately, can help all of us to feel we belong.

In addition, practicing affirming behavior in a consistent way may help us to avoid bias—both with people like us, and with people different from ourselves. If we *consciously* try to behave with everyone in a way that is perceived as affirming, we may be able to block some of our unconscious bias. We may be able to mitigate or remedy some of our ignorance, ineptitude, negligence, and thoughtlessness. And to avoid unconscious favoritism toward those we perceive to be like us.

We do not even have to understand all the differences among people if we consistently react genuinely and appropriately and respectfully to everyone. (However, trying hard to understand our differences and soul-searching may often improve our ability to be perceived as affirming.)

Over the years I have learned more about affirming behavior. *Self*-micro-affirmations—as described by Professors Daniel Solórzano, Lindsay Pérez Huber, and their co-author Layla Huber-Verjan—help people of minority identities to feel they belong (Solórzano, Pérez Huber, & Huber-Verjan, 2020). That is, their research illustrates how people of minority identities can and do affirm each other, in many, apparently "small" but very important ways, as they work and live in diverse communities. "Racial micro-affirmations" illuminate a way that community members can and do deeply appreciate each other and strengthen their affiliations, affirming each other in various ways.

Does it have to take much time? Dr. Spencer Johnson and Kenneth Blanchard immortalized the efficiency and possible effectiveness of micro-affirmations in teaching about the "one-minute manager" (Johnson & Blanchard, 1982). They taught that careful planning to affirm goals and excellence and "redirect" unhelpful behavior can happen in many brief episodes, in supervision of others.

Since 1973 I have received a dozen or more suggestions of additional reasons that micro-affirmations may be useful (Rowe, 2017). Scholars and practitioners have hypothesized that genuine and appropriate affirmations may do more than block our unconscious biases. For example, since people can actually change their attitudes by improving their behavior, consistently practicing genuine affirmations might actually lessen our unconscious biases.

Meeting the core emotional concerns of others might help ameliorate damage from discrimination. Practicing affirming behavior provides a good role model for others—especially if supervisors do it. Affirming others may evoke reciprocal affirmations in a way that fosters a virtuous cycle. Micro affirmations can help build trust in relationships, and support learning and performance—in both the affirmed and the affirmer.

There are some caveats to consider. Suppose an individual provides affirmations only to people they perceive to be in some way disadvantaged? This could sometimes help—possibly, for example, if a bystander who has observed a person experiencing clearly unfair treatment responds with *macro*-affirmations of that person. On the other hand, Anna Giraldo-Kerr, CEO of Shades of Success Inc., notes that one does not wish either to be acting like someone's savior or even appearing to be doing so (A. Giraldo-Kerr, personal communication, December 2021). It may be that being and appearing trustworthy by almost everyone requires affirming the genuine achievements of virtually everyone. Michael Patrick Hearn, in a recent article describing Alex Haley as a mentor, wrote: "His motto was 'Find the good and praise it'" (Hearn, 2021).
So it would seem that universal micro-affirmations might help everyone to feel they belong. But when and how will they help? As Giraldo-Kerr also noted (A. Giraldo-Kerr, personal communication, December 2021):
Why would people of minority identities want to belong to an organization/community/place of work where their identities are perceived as inferior? If dominant systems, processes, and norms remain unchanged, do micro-affirmations really contribute to "belonging" or merely to cope? Is true belonging dependent on a whole culture that values, fosters, and advocates for equity or not?
"Feeling we belong" may, thus, depend in part on micro-affirmations—*and* on all our underlying systems and subsystems, processes, and norms. Truly feeling we belong also depends on building a community that in fact values and fosters equity. It may be the case that micro-affirmations, practiced consistently, will help build a culture of inclusion— as well as contribute to individuals thriving where such a culture exists.

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