

Feminism and Forgiveness: How Catholic Women Respond to Gender-Based Microaggressions

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TODAY'S PRESENTATION



Part 1: Project Overview



Context, Methodology, and Purpose



OVERVIEW/CONTEXT

Gender-based interpersonal discrimination builds up over time, causing physiological and psychological harm. **Continued exposure to microaggressions has the potential to disrupt an individual's spiritual understanding of the world,** and faith often plays some role in the process of responding, restoring, and healing. Existing research on Christian targets of gender-based discrimination points to forgiveness as a recurring psychological and spiritual dilemma. However, in-depth examinations of forgiveness, especially as understood through the lens of gender, are scarce. In response to this knowledge gap, **I am proposing a qualitative examination of how Catholic women relate to the concept of forgiveness in the wake of gendered microaggressions.**

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This project will consist of **in-depth, semi-structured interviews** with 6-8 women who have experienced gender-based microaggressions. Other conditions for participation include a minimum age of 18 years, as well as past/present identification with the Catholic faith. Interviews will last ~50 minutes each and explore **how the individual's faith has informed their understanding of forgiveness, and consequently, their psychosocial response to microaggressions.** After collecting interview data, I plan to code the transcripts for thematic elements and identify common themes. I hope to put lived experiences in dialogue with existing literature on Christianity, forgiveness, and gender-based misconduct.

PURPOSE/SIGNIFICANCE

Given that this is an exploratory research project, I hope to derive pertinent themes to guide future investigation. Essentially, the goal of this research is to learn how individuals' faith has informed their lived understanding of microaggressions and forgiveness. Examining how Catholic interpretations of forgiveness impact women and GNC individuals experiencing gendered microaggressions is an important step towards **understanding the nuances of faith as an avenue of restoration and healing.**

Part 2: Review of Literature



**An Introduction to Gender-Based Microaggressions
and Catholic Narratives of Forgiveness**



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*Microaggressions are “**commonplace verbal or behavioral indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative... slights and insults**” to a marginalized group.*

(Sue, 2010, p.8)

TYPES & EXAMPLES OF MICROAGGRESSIONS (Sue 2010)

Micro-Insults

Subtle comments that are rude, insensitive, and demeaning (typically unconscious).

Micro-Assaults

Explicit verbal attacks or clearly discriminatory nonverbal behavior (often conscious).

Micro-Invalidations

Negates the experience of a marginalized person by elevating the dominant narrative (typically unconscious).

Examples of Gender-Based Microaggressions

- Condescending remarks or assumptions (especially in academic/professional settings)
- Denial of women's reality (rape culture, victim-blaming, not believing survivors)
- Devaluing comments (ie, "he throws like a girl")
- Verbal harassment and appearance-based commentary

IMPACT OF MICROAGGRESSIONS

- **Physical Health:** Physiological stress responses have a “weathering” effect on the body; one study found that “greater job stress related to bias had higher fibrinogen levels, believed to be correlated with coronary heart disease” (Sue, 2010).
- **Mental Health:** Both covert and subtle forms of sexism contribute to a reduced sense of self-efficacy and have the potential to cause clinical depression. Ongoing hypervigilance related to bias may leave individuals physically and mentally fatigued (Sue, 2010).
- **Social Responses:** A study of women in academia found that common responses to microaggressions included silence/passivity, assertive confrontation, and support-seeking behavior between women (Almond et al., 2021).

Quenstedt-Moe & Popkess, 2014

“Forgiveness is described as an **intrapersonal experience** that includes the **release of negative feelings, behaviors, and beliefs** towards a person who has unjustly violated another’s moral rules.”

Romero & Mitchell, 2008

“Forgiveness involves **forgoing destructive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors** and, instead, **engaging in constructive responses** following an interpersonal offense.”

Jackson, 2018

“Forgiveness **prevents angry feelings from turning into hatred** and **waives some things allowed by strict justice**”

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON FORGIVENESS (Jackson, 2018)

- Observes the tension between the values of justice and radical love- in Jackson's negotiation, "agapic love has priority as expressing the holiness of God, and it often rises majestically above strict justice but never falls below it into injustice."
- For Jackson, to choose forgiveness is to emulate Jesus's love. The wrongdoer may not have a "right" to forgiveness, but radical love allows the hurt party to temper just punishment with mercy. That said, Jackson argues that retributive justice can coexist with forgiveness so long as it does not stem from a place of vengeance or hatred.

CATHOLICISM & THE FORGIVING PERSONALITY (Mullet et al., 2003)

- Mullet studied Catholic believers and non-believers, as well as churchgoers and non-churchgoers. Operating on a scale of forgiveness vs revenge, the primary determining factor was social investment in religion, with churchgoers scoring highly on measures of forgivingness.
- After adjusting for age, there was no significant difference between male and female participants.
- “The willingness to forgive is not much affected by the belief in God; it is only affected by attendance in church. It is, therefore, mainly the degree of social commitment to religion that seems to make a difference.”

FORGIVENESS IN CATHOLIC WOMEN (Romero & Mitchell, 2008)

- The measurement instrument distinguishes cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of forgiveness. Affective subscales include the category “Toward God,” which asks whether the individual has forgiven the offender in personal prayer.
- Higher levels of religiousness/spirituality in Catholic women were associated with higher levels of forgiveness, especially in the affective and religious domains.
- The authors hypothesize that “because of the strong emphasis on unconditional forgiveness in Roman Catholic theology, participants may have been particularly forgiving.”

Part 3: Progress Reflection



Where I've Been, Where I'm At, and
Where I'm Going



PROJECT ROADMAP

**Initial IRB
Application**

**Distribution &
Recruitment**

**Transcription
& Coding**

**Feedback &
Revisions**

**Data
Collection**

**Synthesis with
Literature**

PROJECT EVOLUTION & THE IRB PROCESS

Initial Proposal

“Catholicism, Forgiveness, and Gender-Based Violence: A Survivor-Centered View”

Revised Proposal

“Feminism and Forgiveness: How Catholic Women Respond to Gender-Based Microaggressions”

While the focus on religious narratives of forgiveness remained the same, I chose to look at microaggressions rather than gender-based violence. This shift was based on guidance from Loyola’s IRB. Faculty members were concerned that the phrasing gender-based violence might lead participants to talk about unprocessed trauma from sexual violence, which would constitute a significant risk to emotional well-being.

DISTRIBUTION & RECRUITMENT

I recruited participants in collaboration with professors from Loyola's social work, sociology, and theology departments. I also recruited through the Gannon Center's alumni network and the LUC Institute for Pastoral Studies.

STUDY OPPORTUNITY: GENDER-BASED MICROAGGRESSIONS THROUGH A CATHOLIC LENS

Arden Schultz, an undergraduate researcher at Loyola University Chicago, is recruiting interviewees to discuss if/how Catholic narratives of forgiveness influence the way women and gender non-conforming folks experience and respond to acts of gender-based microaggressions and discrimination.

Eligibility Requirements:

- Must be a woman or non-binary person, at least 18 years old
- Must have been raised Catholic and/or currently identify with the Catholic faith
- Must have experienced at least one incident of interpersonal, gender-based discrimination, such as...

Sexist Jokes
Appearance-Based Commentary
Verbal Harassment
Misgendering
Harmful Stereotyping
Condescending Remarks

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Ongoing Work: Interview, Transcription and Analysis

- At the time of this symposium, I will have conducted six of eight total interviews. In these interviews, participants and I explore their past and ongoing relationship to Catholicism, incidents of gender-based discrimination, and attitudes/experiences surrounding forgiveness.
- My next steps in the project will be to transcribe and anonymize the interviews, and to begin the thematic coding process.

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