

TIFFANY JANA

*Author of Overcoming Bias and Erasing Institutional Bias*

MICHAEL BARAN

# SUBTLE ACTS OF EXCLUSION

How to Understand,  
Identify, and Stop  
Microaggressions

## **Praise for *Subtle Acts of Exclusion***

“This is an unreasonable manifesto. It’s unreasonable because it challenges us to take responsibility, to be kind, to dig in, and to change the invisible corners of our culture. We’ve got work to do. Unreasonable is precisely what we need.”

—**Seth Godin, author of *This Is Marketing***

“In my work, I have seen how Black people, especially young Black women, are frequently excluded by ‘well-intentioned’ people. Some of the exclusions are not subtle at all, but many of them are. The subtle ones are especially insidious and pervasive and hard to fight back against. This book skillfully uses stories and research to build a deep understanding that may actually be able to take something negative and turn it into an opportunity to productively come together and create more support, trust, and equity. Now that’s a feat! Jana and Baran have found a way to give shape and depth to a topic that is difficult to grasp and difficult to speak up about because of its subtlety. But more than that, they have provided a language that we can all use to actually have open and productive conversations about topics that have become incredibly divisive. I can see applications of this framework not just for work but for higher education and beyond.”

—**Aimee Meredith Cox, PhD, Director of Undergraduate Studies, Department of African American Studies, and Associate Professor, Departments of Anthropology and African American Studies, Yale University, and author of *Shapeshifters***

“Tiffany Jana and Michael Baran have provided us a powerful tool to help us learn about how subtle forms of bias can profoundly impact people’s sense of belonging and their ability to perform at the highest level. Through thoughtful research and powerful examples, they have not only brilliantly articulated the problem but also offered us a pathway to a solution. Kudos!”

—**Howard Ross, author of *ReInventing Diversity*, *Everyday Bias*, and *Our Search for Belonging***

“This book should open the floodgates for people to tell their own stories of being subtly excluded at work, with a new language that will make it so much easier to address out in the open and create teachable moments. As a little person, I have experienced so many subtle acts of exclusion over my career, whether it’s people telling me I look ‘cute’ or having to constantly fight for respect and validity. I wish every one of my colleagues over the years had been able to read this book!”

—**Becky Curran Kekula, Director, Disability Equality Index, Disability:IN**

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**How to Understand, Identify,  
and Stop Microaggressions**

**TIFFANY JANA**

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**MICHAEL BARAN**



Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

## Subtle Acts of Exclusion

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*I dedicate this book to my  
incomparable daughter, Saba*

—TIFFANY JANA



*For my love Jill and our inspiring children,  
Rio, Solomon, Raphael, and Carmelo*

—MICHAEL BARAN



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# INTRODUCTION

## Changing Minds and Behavior

THIS IS A BOOK about the subtle, confusing, insidious things that people say and do that end up excluding people with marginalized identities. This happens even though, for the most part, people are not intending to exclude others at all. In fact, it's quite the opposite. They may be trying to compliment someone or learn more about a person or be funny or build closeness. For decades now, people have called these slights "microaggressions," but in this book we will use the term "subtle acts of exclusion" (SAE) as a way to better describe and communicate this phenomenon. If we are going to create spaces that are more inclusive, respectful, and collaborative, we must understand and address these interactions.

Most people believe they are well intentioned, good people who don't go around causing harm. When we do inadvertently cause harm, we are often confused or surprised at other people's responses. We may deem them overly sensitive and rely on our good intentions as cover for the impact of our actions. Unfortunately, our mindset and our behaviors are not always aligned. The authors of this book believe that to truly address subtle acts of exclusion, we need to collectively shift both our mindset and our behaviors.

This is the case because we tend to judge ourselves and others differently. We think to ourselves, "I had good intentions," or "I'm

not prejudiced,” while at the same time believing that others might be uncaring, selfish, or even intentionally mean when they violate our boundaries. We may wonder why our offenders didn’t realize that they were putting us down. In this way, we may set the relational bar low for ourselves and high for others. “My good intentions are enough,” we think to ourselves as we minimize our offenses against others. But when someone offends us, their good intentions are an insufficient excuse for their behavior. As coauthors, we believe that the bar should be equalized. We cannot accept simple excuses for ourselves and impose more substantial expectations on others. We need to set a higher bar for ourselves as well. The offenses described in this book are real, though the names and details have been changed. We write this to help both the offender and the offended. We all need support so we can move forward in kindness.

We write this book with the belief that a better way of relating across differences is really possible. In fact, we both have dedicated our adult lives and professions to that precise end. We, and countless others, long for a world where cross-cultural competency is the norm—where differences are celebrated and respected, and people are seen and acknowledged for the unique and individual essence they embody. We find ourselves quite far from that place now. But we offer this collection of experiences, perspectives, and tools so that you might help cocreate a new reality in which everyone is empowered to express who they are without fear of being put down or left out. This vision of a new, inclusive reality begins with a shift in the mind and ends with the embrace of new behaviors.

We begin our journey with an illustrative story that coauthor Baran witnessed firsthand.

I was at a community conversation on race in Frederick, Maryland, near where I live. It was organized by the Frederick County Human Relations Commission. A rich diversity of people showed up on this particular evening to discuss how to talk with one

another about race issues. Normally, I'm the one facilitating or leading these types of conversations, so it was a nice change of pace to be a participant. The facilitator showed a video that encouraged people to speak up when someone says something offensive, even if they don't know exactly what to say. The discussion was positive and productive.

And then Elaine stood up to speak. Elaine is a white woman who dedicates much of her free time to working toward racial justice. So it was somewhat of a shock when she addressed Bryan, the African American man who had spoken before her, and said, "You were so articulate in the way you said that." Before she could even finish her comment, the room clamored for her to stop. She didn't realize what was happening and kept talking for a bit. She eventually stopped and asked, "What's going on?" At that point, someone in the audience said, "You just called that man 'articulate,' which is a microaggression, and we are stopping you."

Elaine protested, "But I was just trying to give him credit and compliment him. He said that really well. I wasn't being aggressive at all. What's the problem?" At this point, people tried to explain that a lot of it has to do with the word "articulate" and its history. They also explained that the word communicated that Elaine was surprised that Bryan was so well spoken. I'm not sure if it ever became clear to her amid the confusion. I think Elaine was mortified because she was trying to do everything right—to compliment and give credit where credit was due.

In a nutshell, that's what's confusing about subtle acts of exclusion—they happen when people are not intending to do anything bad. In fact, they even happen when people are trying hard to be their best selves at a community conversation specifically on race! Good people commit SAE. Actually, everyone does, including the authors of this book. They do so because of a lack of understanding about other people's experiences or they do so because of unconscious biases. They do it at home, they do it in public spaces, and they do it at work. But

because of the subtlety and confusion surrounding SAE, people often find it hard to speak up when it happens. Instead of having a productive conversation, we end up with silence, resentment, ignorance, and tension. We wrote this book to improve this situation by building a common understanding and language around SAE and a common framework for what to do when subtle acts of exclusion happen.

We have found that many people in our own corporate and community workshops and keynotes react similarly to Elaine, surprised to hear that calling someone “articulate” would be considered a microaggression, or SAE. They might ask in disbelief, “So I’m not allowed to compliment someone?” We have experienced firsthand people’s confusion over microaggressions, thinking that what matters is the speaker’s intent, when in fact what matters is the impact of the acts. We have witnessed people getting exasperated, thinking that you can’t say anything anymore without someone getting upset. However, we want to reassure you that’s not the case. In fact, it’s easy to learn how to compliment someone without committing a subtle act of exclusion in the process. If the woman in the community conversation had said, “Great point, Bryan!” no one would have thought twice about it.

This book aims to build a new kind of deep understanding around subtle acts of exclusion that will help all of us commit fewer of them in the future. As authors, our goal is to help readers move beyond a vague feeling that something isn’t right when they overhear or experience an SAE. We want readers to have a better understanding of why it isn’t right and be able to articulate the reasons.

And the book recognizes that SAE are not going to disappear tomorrow. As such, we provide guidelines for what to do when these exclusions happen at work and beyond. We want people to feel comfortable and confident speaking up to address SAE when they see or hear them. This book clarifies that it is everyone’s responsibility to speak up, and it helps readers know what to say when they do speak up. We give people a clear set of guidelines on how to speak up if an SAE is experienced, if it is just overheard, or if you are the person

that committed the SAE. We also address what organizations can do to support these individual efforts and to facilitate moving their cultures toward more inclusivity.

The deep understanding we build and the guidelines for practical action come from our unique collaboration as authors who have different identities, privileges, and educational experiences but who have arrived at a similar professional place with a common vision. To that end, we offer a little bit about who we are and why this work matters to us.

**DR. TIFFANY JANA:**

When you walk through life at the intersections, the halfway points between two truths or two polarities, it affects you. I am “intersectional” in the original sense of the term, coined by Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw, in that I have lived most of my life identifying as female and Black. The world still experiences me mostly as female, but my gender identity has evolved to a new intersection. Again I am in the middle of multiple truths. And it’s less my identity that has evolved as my understanding of who I am and the language I have access to.

This book means so much to me personally because I get to leverage my professional experience as a global diversity, equity, and inclusion consultant in service of greater connection between humans. I spend my life helping individuals, communities, and leaders increase their cultural fluency, their empathy for people different from them. My goal is to help humankind cultivate a sense of belonging and genuine inclusion for all people.

I come to this, my fourth book, as a Black, a gender nonbinary, a Christian, an invisibly disabled, a domestic violence survivor, and an LGBTQIA person who grew up speaking Spanish and German and traveling the world. I’ve been on welfare and I have enjoyed the privileges of professional success. I’m a mother, a divorcee, an artist, and an academic. All of these identities have



profoundly informed my experiences and shaped the way I think, act, and live.

While I have certainly experienced my fair share of microaggressions—as well as initiated far too many to enumerate—my identities have done exponentially more than make me a target or a victim. In fact, my multiple identities, including being Black identified with multiracial DNA from all over the globe, have fueled my empathy for more of humanity than most people. You see, it's easy to empathize with people who are like you. When you see yourself reflected in another person's experiences or situation, your heart extends toward them and sometimes you feel their joy and their pain almost as if it were your own. The same is not intrinsically true for people with whom you don't have as much in common.

When race, nationality, sexual orientation, gender, faith, political affiliation, socioeconomic class, disability, and other identities differ greatly from our own, we can sometimes dismiss the pain and experiences of others far too quickly. Of course, this is not universally true. But if it were not true, we would not need movements like #BLM (Black Lives Matter—against violence and systemic racism toward Black people), #MeToo (against sexual harassment and sexual assault), and #WontBeErased (civil rights for transgender people) to raise the voice and visibility of those suffering the injustice of a societal lack of compassion. My connectedness to so many communities, particularly the more historically marginalized ones, affords me the privilege of seeing, feeling, and understanding a broad array of experiences. When someone else's pain becomes your own, it's easier to serve your fellow human as an ally and a conspirator instead of just a paralyzed bystander.

I have multiple advanced business degrees, have founded three diversity-focused companies, and have two decades of experience as an inclusion advocate and practitioner. This is why

so much of what I offer in this book is framed through an organizational lens. I do believe that our institutions can be wonderful places to organically come together across differences and hone some of these deeply urgent interpersonal skills. The skills and tools presented in this book will not only help create stronger, more resilient organizational cultures, but they will also help create tighter bonds, increase empathy, and nurture a sense of psychological safety and belonging.

Though there is a strong organizational focus, the content has utility for any person interested in or ready to do the work of being a better, more informed, and compassionate person. I believe strongly that true freedom lies in the ability to embrace who you are without fear—to shine your light and be seen and appreciated—without the exhaustion of having to justify your very existence. I do pray that my experiences, identities, and perspectives help you on your journey to becoming a more intentionally inclusive ally who cultivates a sense of belonging for all people.

**DR. MICHAEL BARAN:**

Unlike Tiffany, I walk through the world with a lot of privilege, making it so I am not the subject of many subtle acts of exclusion. By “privilege,” I don’t mean that I am rich or that I grew up having everything handed to me. I mean that my gender, sexuality, and race don’t make it harder for me in my daily life, and in fact confer both overt and hidden advantages. As a heterosexual white man, married with kids, it’s rare that I ever even experience subtle acts of exclusion. As a Jewish person, I experience SAE around religion sometimes, though that’s only a small part of what led me to the perspectives in this book.

I grew up in a fairly homogenous small town in Connecticut. As a young adult, I certainly hadn’t heard about diversity and inclusion work, but was unknowingly launched into that career trajectory by the relationships I formed as I got to know a more

diverse group of people. I learned from people who, unlike me, did feel marginalized, did face injustices and inequalities, and did experience subtle acts of exclusion. It felt so clearly wrong, unfair, and seemingly avoidable. I had many questions about why it was historically so common for humans to exploit others, form unequal societies, and discriminate against groups of people both consciously and unconsciously.

I turned to those questions in graduate school. To me and my colleagues and mentors in cultural anthropology and cognitive psychology at the University of Michigan, it seemed that answering those questions required a deep understanding of both culture and cognition—how human thinking works based on cultural input and experiences. The eight years I spent investigating those questions played a truly formative role in the way I came to see the world, the way I approach my diversity and inclusion work, and the way I think about topics such as the ones in this book.

But studying brains and culture can be tricky, for different reasons. Studying one's own culture is sometimes challenging because we take so many things for granted and don't even notice. I don't know who said it first, but you can think of culture for humans like water to a fish. It's everywhere and therefore hard to even see or contemplate. So one of the things anthropologists often do is go somewhere unfamiliar to do their research for an extended period to gain a more objective perspective on culture itself. In the beginning, so much is unfamiliar and you have to ask about everything, the explicit and the implicit. And eventually, through everyday living in that culture and through extensive systematic research, you get pretty good at picking out subtle cultural messages and underlying patterns of thinking. That is helpful as you analyze your research and also as you go about any new projects in your "home" culture.

In terms of brains, psychologists had been trying to study how the mind works from laboratory experiments with mostly

undergraduate students who agreed to participate in research studies for credit when they took introductory psychology classes. But doing research in a controlled lab context with just college undergraduates is a limited way to figure out how human minds work more generally. Many psychologists have come to see that the research must be conducted with a wider sample of the human population and that the experiments must be conducted in a more real-world context.

Because of those challenges, I decided to do my fieldwork in Northeast Brazil for two years using a combination of qualitative participant observation (deep immersion into everyday life) and quantitative experiments that were more based in real-world contexts and scenarios. I wanted to try to answer for myself some critical questions that social scientists were debating. Is “race” in Brazil really different than it is in the United States or is it fundamentally the same? How are the ways that Brazilians think about race learned from cultural messages? And how do the cognitive categories of race influence how discrimination plays out in Brazil? The idea is that by answering those questions in a specific place, you learn something about how identity and discrimination work more broadly and can apply that understanding anywhere in the world.

To study those complex questions, I decided to do my investigations with children of different ages—to see how the learning happens from the youngest ages up through adulthood. And it just happened to be a fascinating time to study this in Belmonte in the Brazilian state of Bahia, when the cultural messages were going through a big transition. One year children were taught in schools that everyone was *morena*, or “brown” and racially mixed. The next year, children were taught that there was no such thing as brown and that everyone was either Black or white.

The experience of living there and focusing my attention on these research questions informs my approach to diversity and