

Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life

Implications for Clinical Practice

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Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color. Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities. A taxonomy of racial microaggressions in everyday life was created through a review of the social psychological literature on aversive racism, from formulations regarding the manifestation and impact of everyday racism, and from reading numerous personal narratives of counselors (both White and those of color) on their racial/cultural awakening. Microaggressions seem to appear in three forms: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation. Almost all interracial encounters are prone to microaggressions; this article uses the White counselor – client of color counseling dyad to illustrate how they impair the development of a therapeutic alliance. Suggestions regarding education and training and research in the helping professions are discussed.

Keywords: microaggression, microassault, microinsult, microinvalidation, attributional ambiguity

Although the civil rights movement had a significant effect on changing racial interactions in this society, racism continues to plague the United States (Thompson & Neville, 1999). President Clinton's Race Advisory Board concluded that (a) racism is one of the most divisive forces in our society, (b) racial legacies of the past continue to haunt current policies and practices that create unfair disparities between minority and majority groups, (c) racial inequities are so deeply ingrained in American society that they are nearly invisible, and (d) most White Americans are unaware of the advantages they enjoy in this society and of how their attitudes and actions unintentionally discriminate against persons of color (Advisory Board to the President's Initiative on Race, 1998). This last conclusion is especially problematic in the mental health professions because most graduates continue to be White and trained primarily in Western European models of service delivery (D. W. Sue & Sue, 2003). For that reason, this article focuses primarily on White therapist – client of color interactions.

Because White therapists are members of the larger society and not immune from inheriting the racial biases of their forebears (Burkard & Knox, 2004; D. W. Sue, 2005), they may become victims of a cultural conditioning process that imbues within them biases and prejudices (Abelson, Dasgupta, Park, & Banaji, 1998; Banaji, Hardin, & Rothman, 1993) that discriminate against clients of color. Over the past 20 years, calls for cultural competence in the helping professions (American Psychological Association, 2003; D. W. Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992) have stressed the importance of two therapist characteristics associated with effective service delivery to racial/ethnic minority clients: (a) awareness of oneself as a racial/cultural being and of the biases, stereotypes, and assumptions that influence worldviews and (b) awareness of the worldviews of culturally diverse clients. Achieving these two goals is blocked, however, when White clinicians fail to understand how issues of race influence the therapy process and how racism potentially infects the delivery of services to clients of color (Richardson & Molinaro, 1996). Therapists who are unaware of their biases and prejudices may unintentionally create impassés for clients of color, which may partially explain well-documented patterns of therapy underutilization and premature termination of therapy among such clients (Burkard & Knox, 2004; Kearney, Draper, & Baron, 2005). In this article, we describe and analyze how racism in the form of racial microaggressions is particularly problematic for therapists to identify; propose a taxonomy of racial microaggressions with potential implications for practice, education and training, and research; and use the counseling/therapy process to illustrate how racial microaggressions can impair the therapeutic alliance. To date, no conceptual or theoretical model of

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racial microaggressions has been proposed to explain their impact on the therapeutic process.

The Changing Face of Racism

In recent history, racism in North America has undergone a transformation, especially after the post-civil rights era when the conscious democratic belief in equality for groups of color directly clashed with the long history of racism in the society (Jones, 1997; Thompson & Neville, 1999). The more subtle forms of racism have been labeled *modern racism* (McConahay, 1986), *symbolic racism* (Sears, 1988), and *aversive racism* (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002). All three explanations of contemporary racism share commonalities. They emphasize that racism (a) is more likely than ever to be disguised and covert and (b) has evolved from the "old fashioned" form, in which overt racial hatred and bigotry is consciously and publicly displayed, to a more ambiguous and nebulous form that is more difficult to identify and acknowledge.

It appears that modern and symbolic racism are most closely associated with political conservatives, who disclaim personal bigotry by strong and rigid adherence to traditional American values (individualism, self-reliance, hard work, etc.), whereas aversive racism is more characteristic of White liberals (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1996, 2000). Aversive racists, according to these researchers, are strongly motivated by egalitarian values as well as antiminority feelings. Their egalitarian values operate on a conscious level, while their antiminority feelings are less conscious and generally covert (DeVos & Banaji, 2005). In some respects, these three forms of racism can be ordered along a continuum; aversive racists are the least consciously negative, followed by modern and symbolic rac-

ists, who are somewhat more prejudiced, and finally by old-fashioned biological racists (Nelson, 2006).

Although much has been written about contemporary forms of racism, many studies in health care (Smedley & Smedley, 2005), education (Gordon & Johnson, 2003), employment (Hinton, 2004), mental health (Burkard & Knox, 2004), and other social settings (Sellers & Shelton, 2003) indicate the difficulty of describing and defining racial discrimination that occurs via "aversive racism" or "implicit bias"; these types of racism are difficult to identify, quantify, and rectify because of their subtle, nebulous, and unnamed nature. Without an adequate classification or understanding of the dynamics of subtle racism, it will remain invisible and potentially harmful to the well-being, self-esteem, and standard of living of people of color (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Ironically, it has been proposed that the daily common experiences of racial aggression that characterize aversive racism may have significantly more influence on racial anger, frustration, and self-esteem than traditional overt forms of racism (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Furthermore, the invisible nature of acts of aversive racism prevents perpetrators from realizing and confronting (a) their own complicity in creating psychological dilemmas for minorities and (b) their role in creating disparities in employment, health care, and education.

The Manifestation of Racial Microaggressions

In reviewing the literature on subtle and contemporary forms of racism, we have found the term "*racial microaggressions*" to best describe the phenomenon in its everyday occurrence. First coined by Pierce in 1970, the term refers to "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal ex-



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changes which are ‘put downs’” (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978, p. 66). Racial microaggressions have also been described as “subtle insults (verbal, non-verbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously” (Solórzano et al., 2000). Simply stated, microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group. In the world of business, the term “*microinequities*” is used to describe the pattern of being overlooked, underrespected, and devalued because of one’s race or gender. Microaggressions are often unconsciously delivered in the form of subtle snubs or dismissive looks, gestures, and tones. These exchanges are so pervasive and automatic in daily conversations and interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocent and innocuous. Yet, as indicated previously, microaggressions are detrimental to persons of color because they impair performance in a multitude of settings by sapping the psychic and spiritual energy of recipients and by creating inequities (Franklin, 2004; D. W. Sue, 2004).

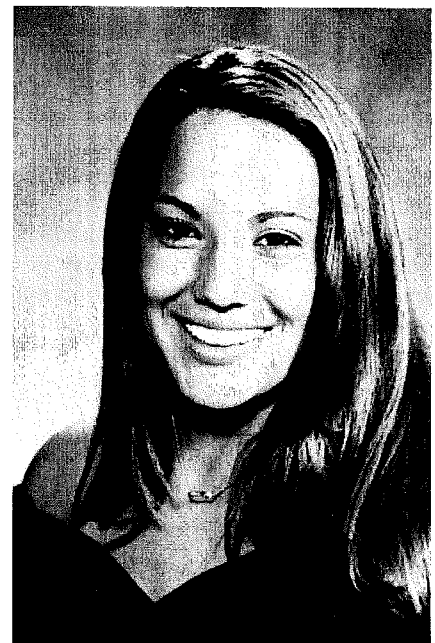
There is an urgent need to bring greater awareness and understanding of how microaggressions operate, their numerous manifestations in society, the type of impact they have on people of color, the dynamic interaction between perpetrator and target, and the educational strategies needed to eliminate them. Our attempt to define and propose a taxonomy of microaggressions is grounded in several lines of empirical and experiential evidence in the professional literature and in personal narratives.

First, the work by psychologists on aversive racism (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1996; Dovidio et al., 2002), studies suggesting the widespread existence of dissociation between implicit and explicit social stereotyping (Abelson et

al., 1998; Banaji et al., 1993; DeVos & Banaji, 2005), the attributional ambiguity of everyday racial discrimination (Crocker & Major, 1989), the daily manifestations of racism in many arenas of life (Plant & Peruche, 2005; Sellers & Shelton, 2003; Vanman, Saltz, Nathan, & Warren, 2004), and multiple similarities between microaggressive incidents and items that comprise measures of race-related stress/perceived discrimination toward Black Americans (Brondolo et al., 2005; Klonoff & Landrine, 1999; Utsey & Ponterotto, 1996) and Asian Americans (Liang, Li, & Kim, 2004) all seem to lend empirical support to the concept of racial microaggressions. Second, numerous personal narratives and brief life stories on race written by White psychologists and psychologists of color provide experiential evidence for the existence of racial microaggressions in everyday life (American Counseling Association, 1999; Conyne & Bemak, 2005; Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, & Alexander, 2001). Our analysis of the life experiences of these individuals and the research literature in social and counseling psychology led us to several conclusions: (a) The personal narratives were rich with examples and incidents of racial microaggressions, (b) the formulation of microaggressions was consistent with the research literature, and (c) racial microaggressions seemed to manifest themselves in three distinct forms.

Forms of Racial Microaggressions

Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group. They are not limited to human encounters alone but may also be environmental in nature, as when a person of color is exposed to an office setting that unin-



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tentionally assails his or her racial identity (Gordon & Johnson, 2003; D. W. Sue, 2003). For example, one's racial identity can be minimized or made insignificant through the sheer exclusion of decorations or literature that represents various racial groups. Three forms of microaggressions can be identified: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation.

Microassault

A microassault is an explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions. Referring to someone as "colored" or "Oriental," using racial epithets, discouraging interracial interactions, deliberately serving a White patron before someone of color, and displaying a swastika are examples. Microassaults are most similar to what has been called "old fashioned" racism conducted on an individual level. They are most likely to be conscious and deliberate, although they are generally expressed in limited "private" situations (micro) that allow the perpetrator some degree of anonymity. In other words, people are likely to hold notions of minority inferiority privately and will only display them publicly when they (a) lose control or (b) feel relatively safe to engage in a microassault. Because we have chosen to analyze the unintentional and unconscious manifestations of microaggressions, microassaults are not the focus of our article. It is important to note, however, that individuals can also vary in the degree of conscious awareness they show in the use of the following two forms of microaggressions.

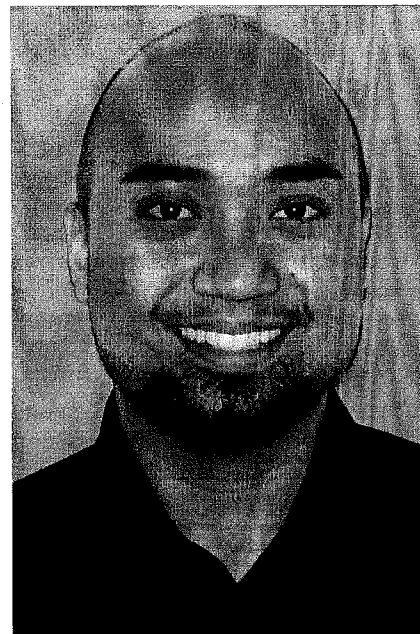
Microinsult

A microinsult is characterized by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's

racial heritage or identity. Microinsults represent subtle snubs, frequently unknown to the perpetrator, but clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient of color. When a White employer tells a prospective candidate of color "I believe the most qualified person should get the job, regardless of race" or when an employee of color is asked "How did you get your job?", the underlying message from the perspective of the recipient may be twofold: (a) People of color are not qualified, and (b) as a minority group member, you must have obtained the position through some affirmative action or quota program and not because of ability. Such statements are not necessarily aggressions, but context is important. Hearing these statements frequently when used against affirmative action makes the recipient likely to experience them as aggressions. Microinsults can also occur nonverbally, as when a White teacher fails to acknowledge students of color in the classroom or when a White supervisor seems distracted during a conversation with a Black employee by avoiding eye contact or turning away (Hinton, 2004). In this case, the message conveyed to persons of color is that their contributions are unimportant.

Microinvalidation

Microinvalidations are characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color. When Asian Americans (born and raised in the United States) are complimented for speaking good English or are repeatedly asked where they were born, the effect is to negate their U.S. American heritage and to convey that they are perpetual foreigners. When Blacks are told that "I don't see color" or "We are all human beings," the effect is to negate their experiences as racial/cultural beings (Helms, 1992).



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When a Latino couple is given poor service at a restaurant and shares their experience with White friends, only to be told “Don’t be so oversensitive” or “Don’t be so petty,” the racial experience of the couple is being nullified and its importance is being diminished.

We have been able to identify nine categories of microaggressions with distinct themes: alien in one’s own land, ascription of intelligence, color blindness, criminality/assumption of criminal status, denial of individual racism, myth of meritocracy, pathologizing cultural values/communication styles, second-class status, and environmental invalidation. Table 1 provides samples of comments or situations that may potentially be classified as racial microaggressions and their accompanying hidden assumptions and messages. Figure 1 visually presents the three large classes of microaggressions, the classification of the themes under each category, and their relationship to one another.

The experience of a racial microaggression has major implications for both the perpetrator and the target person. It creates psychological dilemmas that unless adequately resolved lead to increased levels of racial anger, mistrust, and loss of self-esteem for persons of color; prevent White people from perceiving a different racial reality; and create impediments to harmonious race-relations (Spanierman & Heppner, 2004; Thompson & Neville, 1999).

The Invisibility and Dynamics of Racial Microaggressions

The following real-life incident illustrates the issues of invisibility and the disguised problematic dynamics of racial microaggressions.

I [Derald Wing Sue, the senior author, an Asian American] recently traveled with an African American colleague on a plane flying from New York to Boston. The plane was a small “hopper”

with a single row of seats on one side and double seats on the other. As the plane was only sparsely populated, we were told by the flight attendant (White) that we could sit anywhere, so we sat at the front, across the aisle from one another. This made it easy for us to converse and provided a larger comfortable space on a small plane for both of us. As the attendant was about to close the hatch, three White men in suits entered the plane, were informed they could sit anywhere, and promptly seated themselves in front of us. Just before take-off, the attendant proceeded to close all overhead compartments and seemed to scan the plane with her eyes. At that point she approached us, leaned over, interrupted our conversation, and asked if we would mind moving to the back of the plane. She indicated that she needed to distribute weight on the plane evenly.

Both of us (passengers of color) had similar negative reactions. First, balancing the weight on the plane seemed reasonable, but why were we being singled out? After all, we had boarded first and the three White men were the last passengers to arrive. Why were they not being asked to move? Were we being singled out because of our race? Was this just a random event with no racial overtones? Were we being oversensitive and petty?

Although we complied by moving to the back of the plane, both of us felt resentment, irritation, and anger. In light of our everyday racial experiences, we both came to the same conclusion: The flight attendant had treated us like second-class citizens because of our race. But this incident did not end there. While I kept telling myself to drop the matter, I could feel my blood pressure rising, heart beating faster, and face flush with anger. When the attendant walked back to make sure our seat belts were fastened, I could not contain my anger any longer. Struggling to control myself, I said to her in a forced calm voice: “Did you know that you asked two passengers of color to step to the rear of the ‘bus’?” For a few seconds she said nothing but looked at me with a horrified expression. Then she said in a righteously indignant tone, “Well, I have never been accused of that! How dare you? I don’t see color! I only asked you to move to balance the plane. Anyway, I was only trying to give you more space and greater privacy.”

Attempts to explain my perceptions and feelings only generated greater defensiveness from her. For every allegation I made, she seemed to have a rational reason for her actions. Finally, she broke off the conversation and refused to talk about the incident any longer. Were it not for my colleague who validated my experiential reality, I would have left that encounter wondering whether I was correct or incorrect in my perceptions. Nevertheless, for the rest of the flight, I stewed over the incident and it left a sour taste in my mouth.

The power of racial microaggressions lies in their invisibility to the perpetrator and, oftentimes, the recipient (D. W. Sue, 2005). Most White Americans experience themselves as good, moral, and decent human beings who believe in equality and democracy. Thus, they find it difficult to believe that they possess biased racial attitudes and may engage in behaviors that are discriminatory (D. W. Sue, 2004). Microaggressive acts can usually be explained away by seemingly nonbiased and valid reasons. For the recipient of a microaggression, however, there is always the nagging question of whether it really happened (Crocker & Major, 1989). It is difficult to identify a microaggression, especially when other explanations seem plausible. Many people of color describe a vague feeling

Table 1
Examples of Racial Microaggressions

Theme	Microaggression	Message
Alien in own land When Asian Americans and Latino Americans are assumed to be foreign-born	"Where are you from?" "Where were you born?" "You speak good English." A person asking an Asian American to teach them words in their native language	You are not American. You are a foreigner.
Ascription of intelligence Assigning intelligence to a person of color on the basis of their race	"You are a credit to your race." "You are so articulate." Asking an Asian person to help with a math or science problem	People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites. It is unusual for someone of your race to be intelligent. All Asians are intelligent and good in math/sciences.
Color blindness Statements that indicate that a White person does not want to acknowledge race	"When I look at you, I don't see color." "America is a melting pot." "There is only one race, the human race."	Denying a person of color's racial/ethnic experiences. Assimilate/acculturate to the dominant culture. Denying the individual as a racial/cultural being.
Criminality/assumption of criminal status A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant on the basis of their race	A White man or woman clutching their purse or checking their wallet as a Black or Latino approaches or passes A store owner following a customer of color around the store A White person waits to ride the next elevator when a person of color is on it	You are a criminal. You are going to steal/ You are poor/ You do not belong. You are dangerous.
Denial of individual racism A statement made when Whites deny their racial biases	"I'm not racist. I have several Black friends." "As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority."	I am immune to racism because I have friends of color. Your racial oppression is no different than my gender oppression. I can't be a racist. I'm like you.
Myth of meritocracy Statements which assert that race does not play a role in life successes	"I believe the most qualified person should get the job." "Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough."	People of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race. People of color are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder.
Pathologizing cultural values/communication styles The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant/White culture are ideal	Asking a Black person: "Why do you have to be so loud/animated? Just calm down." To an Asian or Latino person: "Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal." "Speak up more." Dismissing an individual who brings up race/culture in work/school setting	Assimilate to dominant culture. Leave your cultural baggage outside.
Second-class citizen Occurs when a White person is given preferential treatment as a consumer over a person of color	Person of color mistaken for a service worker Having a taxi cab pass a person of color and pick up a White passenger	People of color are servants to Whites. They couldn't possibly occupy high-status positions. You are likely to cause trouble and/or travel to a dangerous neighborhood.