Microaggressions In Institutional Climates: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation

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Derald Wing Sue, Ph.D.
Teachers College, Columbia University

What do the following have in common?

- Mel Gibson
- Michael Richards
- Isaiah Washington
- Rosie O’Donnell
- University of Illinois Mascot—Chief Illiniwek
- Don Imus
Did Senator Joe Biden Commit a Racial Microaggression?

- In announcing his presidential run, Mr. Biden was asked what he thought about Barak Obama:

  - "I mean, you got the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy. I mean, that's a storybook, man."
Did John McCain Commit an Ethnic or Religious Microaggression?

- At a political rally, a supporter told McCain, “I don’t trust Obama..He’s an Arab.”
- McCain shook his head, quickly took the microphone and said: “No ma’am..He’s a decent, family man, a citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with. He’s not..!”
Microaggression Examples

**Racial Microaggressions:**

- A White female student clutches her purse more tightly as a fellow Black or Latino male student approaches or passes her. (Hidden Message: You and your group are criminals.).

- A new Asian American colleague, born and raised in the United States is complimented for speaking “good English.” (Hidden Message: You are not a true American. You are a perpetual foreigner in your own country.)
Microaggression Examples

Gender Microaggressions:

- Labeling an assertive female manager as a “bitch” while describing their male counterparts as “a forceful leader.” (Hidden Message: Women should be passive and allow men to be the decision-maker.)

- Mistaking a female physician wearing a stethoscope as a nurse. (Hidden Message: Women should occupy nurturing and not decision-making roles. Women are less capable than men).
Microaggression Examples

- **Sexual Orientation Microaggressions:**

  - Students using the term “gay” to describe a fellow student who is socially ostracized. (Hidden Message: People who are weird, strange, deviant or different are “gay.”)

  - A lesbian client in therapy reluctantly discloses her sexual orientation to a straight therapist by stating she “was into women.” The therapist indicates he was not shocked because by the disclosure because he once had a client who “was into dogs.” (Hidden Message: Same-sex attraction is abnormal and deviant.)
Microaggression Examples

**Disability Microaggressions:**

- A blind employee reports that his coworkers often raise their voices when speaking to him. He responds by saying “Please don’t raise your voice, I can hear you perfectly well.” (Hidden Message: A person with a disability is defined as lesser in all aspects of physical and mental functioning).

- A receptionist uses “baby talk” with a middle-aged man who uses a wheelchair (Hidden Message: People with disabilities are infantilized and function like children.)
Microaggression Examples

- **Environmental Microaggressions**

  - A waiting room office has pictures of the CEO (White male) and his all White male department heads. (Message: Women and employees of color don’t belong here/ Only white males can succeed.)

  - Every counselor at a career/ counseling center is White. (Message: You are an outsider/ You don’t exist.)
Basic Assumptions

1. We have been socialized into a society in which there exists individual, institutional and societal biases associated with race, gender and sexual orientation.

2. None of us are immune from inheriting the biases of our ancestors, institutions and society.

3. It is not “old-fashioned” racism, sexism and heterosexism that is most harmful to people of color, women and LGBTs but the contemporary forms known as *microaggressions*.
Disparities: Old Fashioned Bigotry or Microaggressions

White EuroAmerican males are only 33% of the population:

1. They occupy 80% of tenured positions in higher education.
2. 80% of House of Representatives
3. Over few years between 80% - 90% of the U.S. Senate
4. 92% of Forbes 400 Executive CEO level positions
5. 90% of Public School Superintendents
6. 99.9% of Athletic Team Owners
7. 97.73% of U.S. Presidents
Basic Assumptions

4. The characteristics of these forms of bias are their invisible, unintentional and subtle nature; usually outside the level of conscious awareness.

5. Racial, gender and sexual orientation microaggressions create psychological dilemmas for the perpetrator and recipient because they represent a clash of racial, gender and sexual orientation realities.

6. Microaggressions create a hostile and invalidating climate for marginalized groups, saps their spiritual and psychic energies, and their cumulative nature can result in depression, frustration, anger, rage, loss of self esteem, anxiety, etc.
RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS
(An example)

- 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 and potentially have a harmful or unpleasant psychological impact on the target person or group.
Microaggressions are subtle, stunning, and often automatic exchanges which are “put downs”.

In the world of business, the term “microinequities” is used to describe the pattern of being overlooked, under-respected and devalued because of one’s race or gender.
These exchanges are so pervasive and automatic in daily conversations that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocent and innocuous.

They are, nevertheless, detrimental to persons of color because microaggressions impair performance in the workplace, in the classroom, and in a multitude of other settings by sapping the psychic and spiritual energy of recipients and by creating inequities.
Dynamics of Microaggression: A Personal Example

- The Plane Example: A Personal Experience
- Psychological Dilemmas
  - Clash of Racial Realities
  - Invisibility of Bias
  - Perceived Minimal Harm
  - Catch - 22
RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DILEMMAS

Dilemma One: Clash of racial realities.

“Did the person engage in a microaggression or did the person of color simply misinterpret the action?

The racial reality of people of color is different from the racial reality of White Americans.
RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DILEMMAS

- **Dilemma Two: The Invisibility of Unintentional Expressions of Bias.**

  - The perpetrator of a microaggression is usually sincere in the belief they acted without racial bias.

  - Herein lays a major dilemma. How does one prove that a microaggression has occurred? More importantly, How do we make the perpetrator aware of it?

  - The most accurate assessment about whether racist acts have occurred in a particular situation is most likely to be made from those most disempowered rather than those who enjoy the privileges of “power”
RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DILEMMAS

- **Dilemma Three: Perceived Minimal Harm of Racial Microaggressions.**

- When individuals are confronted with their microaggressive behaviors, the perpetrator usually believes that the victim has overreacted, is being overly sensitive and/or petty.

- Usually, Whites consider microaggressive incidents to be minor and people of color are encouraged (by Whites and oftentimes by other people of color) to “not waste time or effort on it.” “Let it go!”

- However, microaggressions are associated with a negative racial climate and emotions of self-doubt, frustration, and isolation.

- While microaggressions may be seemingly innocuous and insignificant, their effects can be quite dramatic (psychological well-being and inequities in health care, education, and employment.)
Harmful Impact

Studies reveal, that racial microaggressions, while seemingly trivial in nature have major consequences for persons of color because they:

- (a) assail the mental health of recipients (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008),
- (b) create a hostile and invalidating campus climate (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000),
- (c) perpetuate stereotype threat (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002),
- (d) create physical health problems (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999),
- (e) saturate the broader society with cues that signal devaluation of social group identities (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, & Ditlmann, 2008), and
- (f) lower work productivity and problem solving abilities (Dovidio, 2001; Salvatore & Shelton, 2007).

Far from being benign slights, racial microaggressions have major detrimental consequences for people of color.
RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DILEMMAS

Dilemma Four: The Catch-22 of Responding to Microaggressions.

When a microaggression occurs, the recipient is usually placed in a Catch-22. The immediate reaction might be a series of questions:

“Did what I think happen, really happen? Was this a deliberate act or an unintentional slight? How should I respond? Sit and stew on it or confront the person? What are the consequences if I do? If I bring the topic up, how do I prove it? Is it really worth the effort? Should I just drop the matter?”
Catch-22 of Responding

- The levels of conflict that go on within a person of color are multifaceted.

- 1. First, the person must determine whether a microaggression has occurred. People of color rely heavily on experiential reality that is contextual in nature and involves life experiences from a variety of situations.

- To people of color, connecting the dots suggest it is a nonrandom event. Whites evaluate the incident in isolation and fail to see a pattern of bias, are defended by a belief in their own morality, and can in good conscience deny that they discriminated.
2. Second, how one reacts to a microaggression may have differential effects, not only on the perpetrator but the person of color as well. Deciding to do nothing by sitting on one’s anger is one response.

This response can occur because recipients may (a) be unable to determine whether a microaggression has occurred, (b) be at a loss of how to respond, (c) rationalize that “it won’t do any good anyway”, (d) engage in self-deception through denial - “It didn’t happen,” (e) determine the consequences are too great or (f) rescue or protect the offender.

While these explanations for non-response may hold validity to the person of color, not doing anything has potential psychological harm. It may mean a denial of one’s experiential reality, dealing with a loss of integrity, or dealing with pent up anger and frustration likely to take both a psychological and physical toll.
3. Third, responding with anger and striking back is likely to engender negative consequences for persons of color as well. They are likely to be accused of being racially oversensitive, paranoid or that their emotional outbursts confirm stereotypes about minorities.

In this case while feeling better in the immediate moment by relieving pent-up emotions, the reality is that the general situation has not been changed.

In essence, the Catch-22 means you are “damned if you do, and damned if you don’t”.
1. Microassaults are explicit racial derogations characterized primarily by a violent verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior or purposeful discriminatory actions.

- Referring to someone as a “Nigger”, “Jap” or some other racial epithet, discouraging interracial interactions, and serving a White patron before someone of color are examples.

- Microassaults are most similar to what has been called “old fashioned” racism conducted at an individual level.
II. RACIAL MICROINSULT

2. Microinsults are characterized by behavioral or verbal remarks or comments that conveys rudeness, insensitivity and demeans a person’s racial heritage or identity.

A microinsult consists of verbal and nonverbal comments or behaviors that represent subtle snubs, oftentimes outside the level of awareness of the perpetrator, but clearly conveys a hidden insulting message to the recipient of color.
II. RACIAL MICROINSULT

- When an employer tells a prospective candidate of color that “I believe the most qualified person should get the job” or when an employee of color is asked “How did you get your job?”, the underlying message 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 (not because of ability or expertise).

- 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 and avoids eye contact or turns away. In this case, the message conveyed to the person of color is that your thoughts/ideas and contributions are not important.
III. RACIAL MICROINVALIDATION

3. Microinvalidations are characterized by verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color.

Again, this form of microaggression is most likely to be unintentional and only marginally conscious.
When an Asian American (born and raised in the U.S.) is complimented for speaking good English or repeatedly asked where he/she was born, the impact is to negate his/her U.S. American heritage and conveys that he/she is a perpetual foreigner.

When a Black person is told that “I don’t see color” or “We are all human beings”, the effect is to dismiss and negate his/her experience as a racial/cultural being.

When a Latino couple is given poor service at a restaurant and shares it 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/or its importance is being diminished.
Racial Microaggressions
Commonplace verbal or behavioral indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults.

Microinsult
(Often Unconscious)
Behavioral/verbal remarks or comments that convey rudeness, insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity.

Microassault
(Often Conscious)
Explicit racial derogations characterized primarily by a violent verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior or purposeful discriminatory actions.

Microinvalidation
(Often Unconscious)
Verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color.

Environmental Microaggressions
(Macro-level)
Racial assaults, insults and invalidations which are manifested on systemic and environmental levels.

Ascription of Intelligence
Assigning a degree of intelligence to a person of color based on their race.
Second Class Citizen
Treated as a lesser person or group.
Pathologizing cultural values/communication styles
Notion that the values and communication styles of people of color are abnormal.
Assumption of Criminal status
Presumed to be a criminal, dangerous, or deviant based on race.

Alien in Own Land
Belief that visible racial/ethnic minority citizens are foreigners.
Color Blindness
Denial or pretense that a White person does not see color or race.
Myth of Meritocracy
Statements which assert that race plays a minor role in life success.
Denial of Individual Racism
Denial of personal racism or one’s role in its perpetuation.
# Table 1: Examples of Racial Microaggressions

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Microaggression</th>
<th>Message</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alien in Own Land</strong></td>
<td>“Where are you from?” “Where were you born?”</td>
<td>You are not American.</td>
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<td>When Asian Americans and Latino Americans are assumed to be foreign-born</td>
<td>“You speak good English.”</td>
<td>You are a foreigner.</td>
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<td>“A person asking an Asian American to teach them words in their native language.”</td>
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<td><strong>Ascription of Intelligence</strong></td>
<td>“You are a credit to your race.”</td>
<td>People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites</td>
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<td>Assigning intelligence to a person of color based on their race</td>
<td>“You are so articulate.”</td>
<td>It is unusual for someone of your race to be intelligent.</td>
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<td>Asking an Asian person to help with a math or science problem</td>
<td>All Asians are intelligent and good in math/sciences.</td>
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<td><strong>Color Blindness</strong></td>
<td>“When I look at you, I don’t see color.”</td>
<td>Denying a person of color’s racial/ethnic experiences.</td>
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<td>Statements that indicate that a White person does not want to acknowledge race</td>
<td>“America is a Melting Pot”</td>
<td>Assimilate/acculturate to dominant culture.</td>
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<td>“There is only one race, the human race”</td>
<td>Denying the individual as a racial/cultural being.</td>
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<td><strong>Criminality/ Assumption of Criminal Status</strong></td>
<td><strong>A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant based on their race</strong></td>
<td><strong>A White man or woman clutching their purse or checking their wallet as a Black or Latino approaches or passes.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>A store owner following a customer of color around the store.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>A White person waits to ride the next elevator when a person of color is on it.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>You are a criminal.</strong></td>
<td><strong>You are going to steal/ You are poor/ You do not belong.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>You are dangerous.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Denial of Individual Racism</strong></td>
<td>A statement made when Whites deny their racial biases.</td>
<td>“I’m not racist. I have several Black friends.”</td>
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<td>“As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority.”</td>
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<td>I am immune to racism because I have friends of color.</td>
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<td>Your racial oppression is no different than my gender oppression. I can’t be a racist. I’m like you.</td>
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<td><strong>Myth of Meritocracy</strong></td>
<td>Statements which assert that race does not play a role in life successes.</td>
<td>“I believe the most qualified person should get the job”</td>
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<td>“Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough.”</td>
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<td>People of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race.</td>
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<td>People of color are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder.</td>
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<td><strong>Pathologizing Cultural Values/ Communication Styles</strong></td>
<td>The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant/White culture are ideal.</td>
<td>Asking a Black person: “Why do you have to be so loud/animated? Just calm down.”</td>
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<td>To an Asian or Latino person: “Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal.” “Speak up more.”</td>
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<td>Dismissing an individual who brings up race/culture in work/school setting</td>
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<td>Assimilate to dominant culture.</td>
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<td>Leave your cultural baggage outside.</td>
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</table>
| **Second Class Citizen** | Person of color mistaken for a service worker.  
Having a taxi cab pass a person of color and pick up a White passenger  
Being ignored at a store counter as attention is given to the White customer behind you  
“You people…” | 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.  
Whites are more valued customers than people of color. You don’t belong. You are a lesser being. |
|---|---|---|
| **Environmental Microaggressions** | A college or university with buildings that are all named after White heterosexual upper class males  
Television shows and movies that feature predominantly White programs, without representation of people of color  
Overcrowding of public schools in communities of color  
Overabundance of liquor stores in communities of color | You don’t belong/ You won’t succeed here. There is only so far you can go.  
You are an outsider/ You don’t exist.  
People of color don’t/shouldn’t value education.  
People of color are deviant. |