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Deconstructing Racial Microaggressions: An Examination and Analysis

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Towards a Better Understanding

“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” (Sue et al, 2007, pg. 273).

Positionality

In the summer of 2009, I was enrolled in a course called “Context and Current Topics in Public Education” as part of my doctoral program in Educational Leadership for Social Justice. It was an exciting class taught by a dynamic teacher whose teaching style was cutting edge. Never a dull moment in this class with Dr. Smith (a pseudonym), she broached current topics that included Marxism, environmental issues, and the ever-present discussion of the “binary” in our society. Referring to the either-or complex of dichotomous regimes, these binaries always seemed to hold the connotation of ‘us vs. them’; and explained a myriad of public issues which could be solved if only leaders could see the total picture and not just that from a favored position. White-black, old-young, rich-poor, male-female, tall-short, thin-overweight – binaries abound, creating a one-side-privileged, other-side-oppressed system. And once my eyes were open to this issue of privilege-oppression in our society, I have never been the same again.

I come from a side of life whereby I am probably considered by some to be one of the “privileged.” I was raised in an affluent, “blue-blood” family, in an upper-middle class neighborhood in a large metropolitan city on the West Coast. I was privileged to have had private ballet and piano lessons, traveled extensively, and attended college preparatory and boarding schools. I was even a debutante, being presented to society in my cotillion debut. For

all intents and purposes, I grew up in a familial system which some might feel that I had it all and not a care in the world.

But one critical aspect of my life that has affected me both positively and negatively is that I am a multiracial individual and the product of an interracial union: my father is Anglo-American and my mother is African-American and Cherokee Native-American. So as I grew and developed as a person, I navigated multiple racial pathways and found quite often that while one half of my genetic make-up was considered “privileged,” the other half was considered “oppressed.” Due to my racially ambiguous appearance and my family’s social standing I was treated as one of the privileged crowd until my racial mixtures were discovered, revealed, inquired about. Then, due to the out-dated, antiquated, and extremely racist ideology of the “One-Drop Rule” (if you have any African-American ancestry, you are considered black), my privilege was ripped away from me and I was thrown into the oppressed category. And treated as such.

So in July of 2009, when Dr. Smith elaborated and expanded on the Critical Race Theory framework as an educational methodology for understanding systems of power and privilege versus oppression and racism, my understanding of myself in relation to others in the world changed tremendously. I was given a new vocabulary and tools with which to understand racism. And I was introduced to the concept of racial microaggressions.

It is becoming more difficult to pinpoint instances of racism in today’s society. “Old-fashioned racism” (Sue et al., 2007, pg. 271), those acts of violence such as cross-burnings, lynchings, and separate but equal facilities, are more rare in today’s cultural and political landscape, but more hidden and subconscious forms of racism are becoming more common. These more subtle acts are called racial microaggressions and stem from the Critical Race

Theory framework. Whenever a racial microaggression occurs, there is a moment when the victim ponders “Did that person just say that to me because I am a person of color?” It was what Dr. Smith referred to as a ‘psychological pause’. Racial microaggressions incite the constant reminder of the victim being seen as an “other” in the eyes of dominant society.

I left class feeling academically energized in a way I had not felt before. As I tried to sleep that night, I tossed and turned. A barrage of events flooded my consciousness, as I reflected on the psychological pause and the binary of privilege-oppression. Numerous instances of subtle racism clouded my mind and sleep was impossible.

At the elite single-sex high school I attended, when I was reminded of my “different” racial status by friends who claimed we could be friends at school, but could not visit each other at our homes because I was a “minority”: that was a racial microaggression.

When one “friend” in particular said her mother referred to my interracial family and me as “those kind of people”: that was a racial microaggression.

In college, when I went to class to take a final exam despite being very ill and having a 102° temperature, a Caucasian professor said to me, “Oh, you look very pale. I see you’re denying your black roots today”: that was a racial microaggression.

When a Caucasian girlfriend of mine would frequently ask me, “Why do all black people do this or that?”: that was a racial microaggression, and an example of tokenism (Kanter, 1977).

When a Caucasian saleswoman at Bullock’s Wilshire attempted to wait on a Caucasian girlfriend of mine and ignored me, despite the fact I was the one actively looking for a dress and with the financial means to buy, the saleswoman continued to ignore me; that was a racial microaggression.

When, in my school site recently, a Caucasian teacher accused the African-American school administrative assistant of “playing the race card” (in other words, being overly sensitive): that was a racial microaggression.

When I met a man recently who was impressed with the fact that I was a professional ballerina, and had danced in numerous ballet companies, yet, upon discovering my racial backgrounds said to me, “No wonder you’re a dancer! I’ve bet you’ve got that natural rhythm! Show me some of your Hip Hop moves!”: that was a racial microaggression, and an example of an ascription of intelligence (Sue et al, 2007).

Acts of microaggressions were jarring and disturbing to me whenever they occurred. In reflecting upon these and many more racist instances, I determined that I experienced a system of racial microaggressions as a mixed person of partially Caucasian, African, and Native American descents, predominantly by well-intentioned white (Trepagnier, 2006) privileged people. And when I experienced racial microaggressions, it was usually within the school community.

Critical Race Theory

In order to better understand the origins and definitions of racial microaggressions, an understanding of Critical Race Theory is imperative. Critical Race Theory delineates several salient features that give credence to the study of racial microaggressions in the field of education. Yosso (2005) gives a definition of Critical Race Theory “as a theoretical and analytical framework that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses” (pg. 74). Critical Race Theory looks at the deficit thinking model of people of color, and changes its perspective to look at the “ideology of racism” (Yosso, pg. 74); when society takes a look at ideologies, “racist injuries are named, victims of racism can often find their voice” (Yosso, pg. 74-75).

Critical Race Theory, Yosso (2005) continues, “challenges White Privilege... and draws explicitly on the lived experiences of People of Color (through) such methods as storytelling, family histories, (and) narratives” (pg. 73). This shift from white dominant culture ideology to the experiences of people of color allows their voices to be heard. Understanding the unique and diverse experiences of these individuals through the lens of Critical Race Theory encourages new ways of thought for educators.

Critical Race Theory discusses the elements and remnants of “ontological blackness... the blackness that whiteness created” (Duncan, 2005, pg. 95); a blackness structured in our country’s historical framework which “maintain(s) an unequal distribution of economic, social and political resources that privileges white people over people of colour in the US” (Duncan, pg. 95).

Duncan’s (2005) ideas of “ontological blackness” as seen through the eyes of the white dominant culture in the United States goes back to the “notion that black people were primitive and therefore undeserving of full citizenship rights” (Duncan, pg. 96). As “white architects of black education in the U.S.” (Duncan, pg. 96), there is a notion of black students needing to “adjust... their expectations to align with their presumed fixed economic station in society” (Duncan, pg. 97). To take this a step farther would include biracial students who are pulled in opposition between black and white; who, are told by society to “align (their) expectations with social reality in order to avoid frustration and disappointment later in life” (Duncan, pg. 97). In other words, deny your white heritage, because the One-Drop Rule, which we (the white majority) created, insists that you solely identify as black.

Critical Race Theory also includes the methodology of storytelling and gives people of color a voice to share their experiences. Yosso (2005) concurs that Critical Race Theory allows

us to “focus on and learn from the array of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed by socially marginalized groups that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged” (pg. 69).

Lastly, the use of “language… (as a) cultural rope that connects people across generations and even continents” (Duncan, pg. 102) reminds us of the timeliness for this topic of racial microaggressions to be in the educational arena and to provide a useful vocabulary.

Racial Microaggressions

The use of language, whether intentional or unintentional (Sue, 2007), may be demonstrated through racial microaggressions. Racial microaggressions are an aspect of Critical Race Theory, and demonstrate how race and racism are pervasive in society through the use of verbal and body language. Racial microaggressions are acts of discrimination against marginalized groups, and have “hidden and damaging consequences… for persons of color” (Sue, 2010, pg. 5). Research suggests that microaggressions happen consistently and shows that while racial microaggressions may be evident in any interracial relationship, the most common relationship discussed is between a white person (dominant culture) and a person of color (the target).

Sue et al (2007) define racial microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards people of color” (pg. 271). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) also describe racial microaggressions as “stunning small encounter with racism, usually unnoticed by members of the majority race” (pg. 151). Sue and others (2007) also delineate a typology of general microaggressions imposed upon people of color (see Appendix A).

While the term “microaggression” has been in circulation in the social sciences field since 1970, when Chester W. Pierce first described these acts as “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are ‘put-downs’” (Pierce et al, 1978, pg. 66), the study of racial microaggressions is still a relatively new field of research in the topic of racism. Large acts of racism (i.e., hate crimes, riots, etc.) are now generally recognized as repugnant. When these grand-scale acts of racism occur, many in society are appalled that these types of crimes even still exist. To be an outright racist in present day society is absolutely abhorrent. But more subtle acts of racism, racial microaggressions, are “innocuous and insidious” (Sue et al, 2007, pg. 273) and most of the time unseen by the perpetrator, but not to the victim.

Microaggressions are subtle acts of racism that can cause stress, harm, and damage to people of color and other ethnic minorities. These racist instances can be so understated in their delivery or message that the recipient of the microaggression might not be aware of the intent of the microaggression until after it has occurred. The person, therefore, is left wondering just what the statement meant, at times asking himself or herself if what just happened really happened. Over time, in dealing consistently with microaggressions, people of color may begin to feel emotionally drained, psychologically demeaned, and socially guarded.

The perpetrator is usually unaware that their statements or ways of acting are even hurtful to the victim; and they often respond in an insensitive manner, telling the person of color that they were “just kidding and “didn’t think that he or she would take offense”; or other statements denying personal responsibility such as “It’s not that big of a deal... You’re just playing the race card... Don’t be so sensitive.” These types of responses will be discussed later.

Forms of Microaggressions

Sue et al (2007) delineate three ways that microaggressions are prevalent in society: racial, gender (male / female), and sexual orientation (heterosexual / LGBTQ). Current research indicates there are also disability microaggressions. I contend that there are also size microaggressions (tall / short, overweight / thin). For this study, of interest are racial microaggressions.

Sue and others (2007) discuss how the “micro” in the word microaggressions does not indicate that the act of racism is a small one. It is actually quite large-scale to the recipient, due to the daily or very often occurrences of these types of acts. Yet to the perpetrator, so often not aware of the harm of their racial slights, it is on a “micro” level. Sue et al (2007) determine that the offenders look at the microaggression as a one-time slight; a small, insignificant statement or act, that occurs on an incidental basis. For people of color, however, these are daily or regular, consistent experiences that have, over time, psychologically and physically detrimental effects on well-being, self-esteem, and social interaction (Sue, 2010).

Types of Microaggressions

Within the structure of microaggressions consist three types: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue et al, 2007). They are defined as such:

“A microassault is a 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... ‘old fashioned’ racism” (Sue et al, 2007, pg. 274).

Microassaults are generally large-scale acts of racism; examples include riots, cross-burnings, lynchings, separate facilities based on race, hate crimes, etc.

Microinsults and microinvalidations demonstrate more subtle forms of racism, and are the focus of the remainder of this article. Microinsults are “characterized by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity... represent subtle snubs, frequently unknown to the perpetrator, but clearly a hidden insulting message to the recipient of color” (Sue et al, 2007, pg. 274). An example is when an African-American acquaintance recently posted an article on FaceBook on African-American invisibility, and a white friend replied with, “I’d love to discuss this article, but I can’t see you.” This message, although a “joke” by the white friend, was insulting to the person of color, because it showed insensitivity to the plight of feeling invisible in dominant society.

“Microinvalidations are characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color” (Sue et al, 2007, pg. 274). One example previously mentioned was in the case of the African-American school administrative assistant at my school site who was furious over the treatment she received from teachers. When she mentioned that this ill treatment was because of her “being black,” a white teacher exclaimed how she was “playing the race card”; thereby nullifying the assistant’s experiential reality of being a black woman in the dominant context of a predominately white school.

Please refer to Appendix A for a detailed schematic of these three types of racial microaggressions.

Themes of Microaggressions

Within the realm of racial microaggressions are nine categories that delineate salient themes. These are themes that appear within the structure of microaggressions, and seem to reflect dominant society ideology and racist sentiments. Sue (2010) lists these themes as:

1. Alien on own land
2. Ascription of intelligence
3. Color blindness
4. Criminality/assumption of criminal status
5. Denial of individual racism
6. Myth of meritocracy
7. Pathologizing cultural values/communication styles
8. Second-class citizen
9. Environmental microaggressions

Please refer to Appendix B for a detailed list of examples of these themes.

Analysis of Racial Microaggressions

The Racial Microaggressions Process Model (Perspective of the Victim)

What are the effects of racial microaggressions on the recipient? What might the recipient feel or experience as a result of a microaggressive event? What are the effects of racial microaggressions on the perpetrator? Is the perpetrator aware he/she may have instigated a microaggressive incident? Sue (2010) presents a Microaggressions Process Model, which describes the chain of events from the perspective of the victim, and can be deconstructed as such:

Phase One – The Microaggressive Incident: The perpetrator makes a statement or commits a microaggressive act.

Phase Two – Perception: The victim reflects upon that statement or act, asking themselves if what occurred happened because they are a person of color.

Phase Three – Reaction: The victim reflects on how to react to the incident; the reaction is based on thoughts, emotions, actions, and past experience with such encounters.

Phase Four – Interpretation of the Racial Microaggression: The victim consider the context of the microaggression and determines “what meaning is construed to the microaggressive incident” (Sue, 2010, pg. 77); considering who made the statement, what the significance is, and if this is a part of a larger interactional style between victim and perpetrator.

Phase Five – Consequence and Impact: The victim decides what to do about the microaggression and its perpetrator; to ignore it or to discuss it with the perpetrator, understanding that the perpetrator may respond in an abundance of positive or negative ways.

The Perpetrator’s Perspective

Sue and Constantine (2007) delineate “four psychological fears” (pg. 123) that the perpetrator of a racial microaggression may have in dealing with their racial biases. These layered fears may arise when the perpetrator is made aware of the microaggression and its impact on the victim:

Layer One – Fear of appearing racist: Trepagnier (2006) discusses the existence of well-intentioned white people who abhor being seen as a racist. Appearing racist in modern-day society means being equated with the Ku Klux Klan and White Supremacists.

Layer Two – Fear of acknowledging one’s racism: refers to a well-intentioned white person admitting holding racial biases towards people of color (Trepagnier, 2006). When microaggressive statements are made or microaggressive incidents occur, despite good intentions, subtle acts of bias demonstrate racism. It can be difficult for the perpetrator to admit his or her own racist views, because he or she does not want to appear racist (see Layer One above).

Layer Three – Fear of acknowledging White Privilege: It is an ugly truth in the United States that white people have gained power and privilege at the expense and on the backs of black people and other people of color. When racial microaggressions occur, it reinforces the binary of power-privilege. The reason white people do not want to acknowledge their privilege is because to acknowledge it is to admit that they are part of the system that created this injustice; eliciting the common response of “it didn’t start with me.” (See Layers One and Two above.)

Layer Four – Fear of taking personal responsibility to end racism: This refers to the sentiment by a number of white people that “Since this privilege-oppression binary did not start with me and I did not create this unjust system (even though I may benefit from it), then it is not my problem. I do not have a responsibility to undo this system of injustice.” (See Layers One, Two, and Three above).

The Four Dilemmas

Looking at racial microaggressions from both the perspective of the victim and the perpetrator, one can see a conflict. Sue et al (2007) state “microaggressions operate to create psychological dilemmas for both the white perpetrator and the person of color” (pg. 277). In researching this topic, I have deconstructed the dilemmas for the purpose of this article in the following tables {Adapted from D.W. Sue (2007, 2010), restructured and assembled by C.A. Touchstone (2011)}:

Dilemma 1: Clash of Racial Realities

People of Color	White People
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - White people treat People of Color as inferior. - Racism is still a part of daily life. - The educational, housing, financial, occupational playing fields are very unlevel. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - People of color and ethnic minorities are doing well. - There is no more racism. Or, racism is on the decline. (Ex: Obama Presidency – a person of mixed ancestry). - The educational, housing, financial, occupational playing fields are level.

Dilemma 2: The Invisibility of Unintentional Expressions of Bias

People of Color	White People
<p>The microaggressive incident:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - shows racial bias on the part of the white perpetrator. - Whether or not subconscious or meant as a joke, is insulting and demeaning. - Is part of a pattern of similar racial incidents in the daily life of the victim, with “cumulative” (Sue, 2010) effects. 	<p>The microaggressive incident:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - is not biased on the part of the white perpetrator. - is subconscious and/or intended as joke. - is a singular incident in the daily life of the perpetrator, with no residual effects.

Dilemma 3: Perceived Harm of Racial Microaggressions

People of Color	White People
<p>Believe that, concerning the microaggressive incident, no matter how subtle or small, is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hurtful - Psychologically and physically harmful, and stressful (Sue, 2010) 	<p>Believe that, concerning the microaggressive incident:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - People of color are “overreact(ing) and (are) being overly sensitive and/or petty” (Sue et al, 2007, pg. 278). <p>And are:</p> <p>Dismissive concerning potential harm to the victims; “It’s no big deal.”</p>

Dilemma 4: The Catch-22 of Responding

People of Color	White People
<p>How do I respond to this microaggressive incident?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If I ignore it... - If I attack it... - If I discuss it... - The bottom line: “damned if you do, and damned if you don’t” (Sue et al, 2007, pg. 279). 	<p>How the Person of Color responds to the microaggressive incident determines how the White Person responds:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ... it sends the message that it was insignificant. - ... it propagates possible future stereotypes of people of color. - ... it provokes the idea of “playing a race card.”

This Catch-22 dilemma inspires the need for more research in the area of racial microaggressions, and how to make individuals of all races aware of these subtle acts of racism.

Implications for Educators

Perpetrators of racial microaggressions continue the binary system of privilege vs. oppression for people of color in the United States. In an educational setting, school administrators, faculty, and staff should be made aware of the implications of these racist acts and help both perpetrators and recipients of racial microaggressions to find ways to handle situations of discrimination. Here are some suggestions:

1. Become aware of your own personal racial biases based on upbringing and family origins, and present-day biases. “Explore (your) own racial identities and (your) feelings about other racial groups” (Sue et al, 2007, pg. 283).
2. Become aware of the existence of racial microaggressions. “Increase (your) ability to identify racial microaggressions in general and in (yourself) in particular” (Sue et al, 2007, pg. 283).
3. Become aware of how stereotypes are perpetuated in society. Be careful to not tokenize (Kanter, 1977) others, making them the racial representative for an entire race of people.
4. Look at racism from the perspective of others. “Understand how racial microaggressions... detrimentally impact (people) of color” (Sue et al, 2007, pg. 283).
5. Give up the four fears. “Accept responsibility for taking corrective actions to overcome racial biases” (Sue et al, 2007, pg. 283).

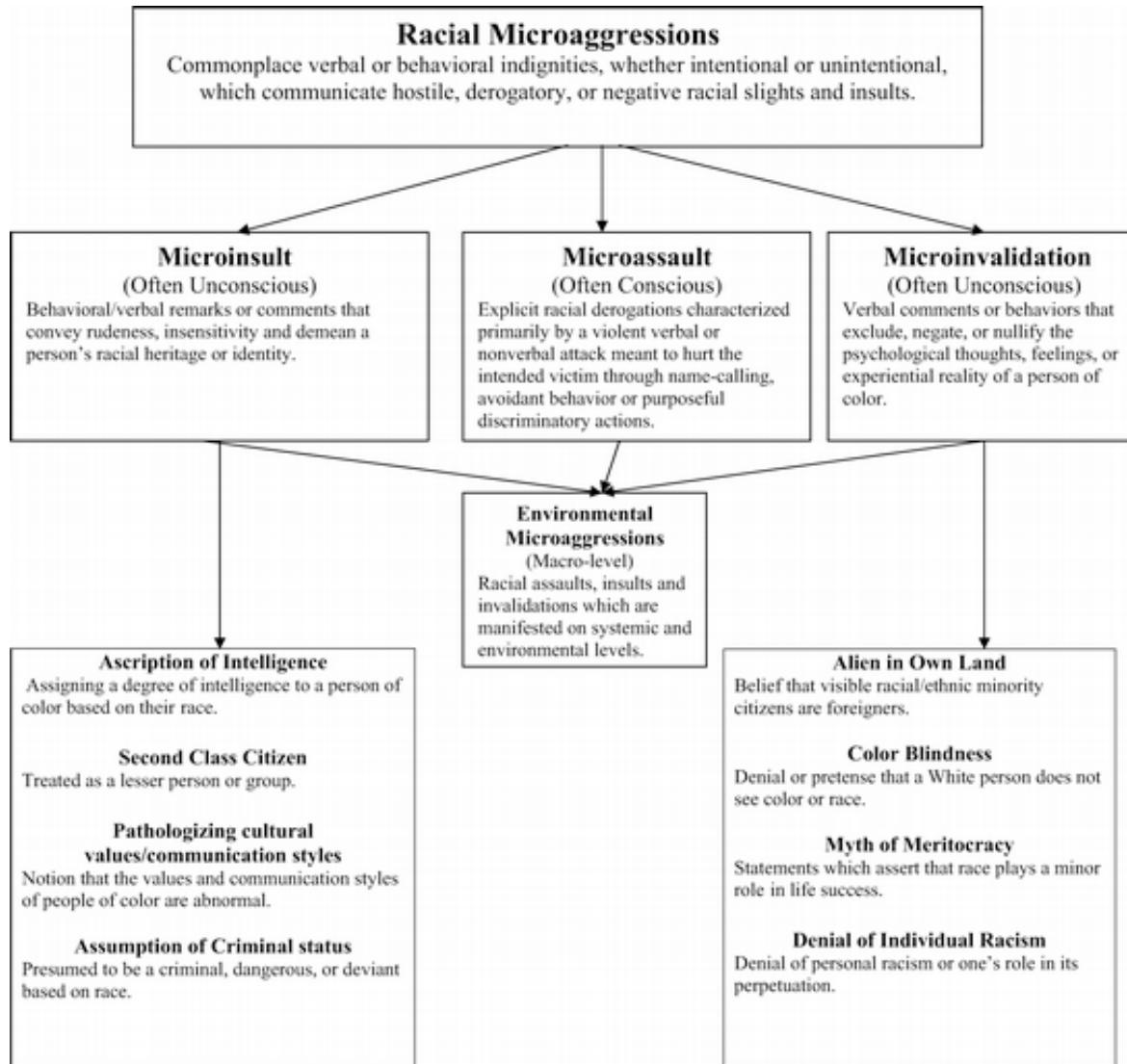
Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to define, explain, and summarize racial microaggressions for educators. In describing what microaggressions are, explaining the process from the perspectives of both victim and perpetrator, and making recommendations for eliminating such

interactions, it is my hope that this research has given educators the tools in understanding racial microaggressions. Having a better understanding of these racist acts and how to transform tenuous race relations into harmonious ones will allow educators to create safe spaces in their classrooms so that all can learn. This research is also beneficial to society at large in that demystifying racial and other microaggressions will present ways to combat racism and create a more socially just society. And finally, the United States can be what it claims to be: a place of “liberty and justice for all.”

Appendix A

Categories of and Relationships Among Racial Microaggressions



From “Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice” By Derald Wing Sue, Christina M. Capodilupo, Gina C. Torino, Jennifer M. Bucceri, Aisha M. B. Holder, Kevin L. Nadal, and Marta Esquilin in American Psychologist, 2007, Vol. 62, No. 4, 271-286.

Appendix B

Examples of Racial Microaggressions Grid

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Microaggression</i>	<i>Message</i>
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	Asking an Asian person to help with a math or science problem. “You are a credit to your race.”	All Asians are intelligent and good in math / sciences. People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites.
Criminality / Assumption of Criminal Status A person of color is presumed to be a criminal, dangerous, or deviant based on their race.	A White man or woman clutches their purse or checks their wallet as a Black or Latino approaches or passes. A store-owner following a customer of color around the store.	You are a criminal. You are going to steal / You are poor / You do not belong.

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.
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.

<p>Pathologizing cultural values / communication styles</p> <p>The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant / White culture are ideal</p>	<p>Asking a Black person: “Why do you have to be so loud / animated? Just calm down.”</p> <p>To an Asian or Latino person: “Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal.” “Speak up more.”</p> <p>Dismissing an individual who brings up race / culture in work / school setting.</p>	<p>Assimilate to dominant culture.</p> <p>Leave your cultural baggage outside.</p>
<p>Second-class citizen</p> <p>Occurs when a White person is given preferential treatment as a consumer over a person of color</p>	<p>Person of color mistaken for a service worker</p> <p>Having a taxi cab pass a person of color and pick up a White passenger</p> <p>Being ignored at a store counter as attention is given to the White customer behind you</p> <p>“You people . . . ” (and I would add, “some people” “these people” – Touchstone, 2011).</p>	<p>People of color are servants to Whites. They couldn’t possibly occupy high-status positions.</p> <p>You are likely to cause trouble and/or travel to a dangerous neighborhood.</p> <p>Whites are more valued customers than people of color.</p> <p>You don’t belong. You are a lesser being.</p>

Environmental microaggressions Macro-level microaggressions, which are more apparent on systemic and environmental levels	A college or university with buildings that are all named after White heterosexual upper class males. Television shows and movies that feature predominantly White people, without representation of people 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.
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