UNDERSTANDING MICROAGGRESSIONS

A PACKET OF RESOURCES

ARTICLES & FRAMEWORKS

COMPILED BY SANDRA (CHAP) CHAPMAN, ED.D.
Dr. Sue defines racial microaggressions as “everyday slights, insults, putdowns, invalidations, and offensive behaviors that people of color experience in daily interactions with generally well-intentioned White Americans.”

Consider the following three examples adults and students of color have experienced in school settings.

1. A New York native Latina, who grew up poor in Spanish Harlem, approaches the spread of food provided by parents during an annual Teacher Appreciation Day. This is the teacher’s first time at a prestigious and predominantly white independent school and, as part of her introduction to the community, parents were informed that she grew up in Spanish Harlem. A white parent offers the Latina teacher lox for her bagel and she declines, stating that she has actually never had lox and does not think she will like it. The white parent responds loudly, “I can’t believe you have lived in the city all your life and have never had lox. You are so deprived.”

2. A Southeast Indian teacher, born in Chicago and living in NYC for the past 15 years, joins his colleagues for lunch in a prestigious and predominantly white high school. It is a hot day in early June and the school’s air-conditioner isn’t working. A few flies have made their way down to the cafeteria. As he brushes away a fly from his plate, a white colleague says, “Oh you don’t mind the flies, you’re Indian.”

3. A group of high school female identified students attending a school which supports children’s professional lives as artist and musicians were discussing their possible futures. Two girls are from Korea, living away from their families to pursue their dreams before returning home, and the other three are white students from NYC. After complaining of a chipped nail, one of the white students turns to one of the Korean students and says, “Maybe you can own a nail salon and I can get a discount when I visit.” The other white students join in the laughter. The Korean students look confused at this American reference as well as to the portrayal of them as anything less than the classical musicians they are training to become.

Cultural racism (individual and institutional expressions of dominance of one group’s cultural heritage as the main form of operating in an organization) and racial macroaggressions (the systemic and institutional forms of racism that support and validate individual acts of racial microaggressions) contribute to individual and group harm. How do people of color shield themselves from these insidious and daily remarks and educate white people about the damage of racial micro and macroaggressions?
Understanding & Healing from Racial Microaggressions

My foundation for learning about this topic is from the scholarly work of Dr. Derald Wing Sue and his research team. This packet contains articles and exercises to learn more about the impact of microaggressions and strategies for shifting your mindset, which is an ever shifting process and requires a habit of continuous practice. I highly recommend also reading one (or more) of the following books.

- Williams, L. (2002). *It’s the Little Things: Everyday interactions that anger, annoy, and divide the races.*

Interested in scheduling a workshop with me on understanding microaggressions, see description below and contact me at www.chapequity.com.

**MICROAGGRESSIONS: NAVIGATING THE HURT & BUILDING RESILIENCE**

Workshop facilitated by Dr. Sandra Chapman

Dr. Derald Wing Sue is the leading author of racial microaggressions, “the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities that communicate hostile or derogatory racial slights and insults to people of color.” Participants will use the power of story to process racial stress and racial microaggressions. As a foundation, Dr. Chap will refer to the scholarly work of Dr. Derwld Wing Sue, Dr. William E. Cross, Dr. Janet Helms and Dr. Howard Stevenson. These frameworks will help us talk about ways to address and heal from racial stress in the workplace, consider ways to apply this knowledge to our own work as anti-racist educators, and practice doing the work we need to do with students.

Through dialogue, video clips, and a look at racial identity development and the microaggression process model, participants will learn effective strategies for nourishing the soul, building resilience, and educating others. In small and whole groups shares audience members will come to a better understanding of how to recuperate from delivering and/or receiving racial microaggressions.
Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life

Implications for Clinical Practice

Derald Wing Sue, Christina M. Capodilupo, Gina C. Torino, Jennifer M. Bucceri, Aisha M. B. Holder, Kevin L. Nadal, and Marta Esquelin

Teachers College, Columbia University

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: microagression, 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 imbibes 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 impasses 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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rational 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-
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-
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).
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 rigidly 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 microagression, however, there is always the nagging question of whether it really happened (Crocker & Major, 1989). It is difficult to identify a microagression, especially when other explanations seem plausible. Many people of color describe a vague feeling...
### Table 1

**Examples of Racial Microaggressions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Microaggression</th>
<th>Message</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alien in own land</td>
<td>&quot;Where are you from?&quot;</td>
<td>You are not American.</td>
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<tr>
<td>When Asian Americans and Latino Americans are assumed to be foreign-born</td>
<td>&quot;Where were you born?&quot;</td>
<td>You are a foreigner.</td>
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<td>&quot;You speak good English.&quot;</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>Ascription of intelligence</td>
<td>&quot;You are a credit to your race.&quot;</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 on the basis of their race</td>
<td>&quot;You are so articulate.&quot;</td>
<td>It is unusual for someone of your race to be intelligent.</td>
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<td></td>
<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>Color blindness</td>
<td>&quot;When I look at you, I don’t see color.&quot;</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>&quot;America is a melting pot.&quot;</td>
<td>Assimilate/acculturate to the dominant culture.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;There is only one race, the human race.&quot;</td>
<td>Denying the individual as a racial/cultural being.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Criminality/assumption of criminal status</td>
<td>A White man or woman clutching their purse or checking their wallet as a Black or Latino approaches or passes</td>
<td>You are a criminal.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant on the basis of their race</td>
<td>A store owner following a customer of color around the store</td>
<td>You are going to steal/You are poor/You do not belong.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>A White person waits to ride the next elevator when a person of color is on it</td>
<td>You are dangerous.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Denial of individual racism</td>
<td>&quot;I’m not racist. I have several Black friends.&quot;</td>
<td>I am immune to racism because I have friends of color.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A statement made when Whites deny their racial biases</td>
<td>&quot;As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority.&quot;</td>
<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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<tr>
<td>Myth of meritocracy</td>
<td>&quot;I believe the most qualified person should get the job.&quot;</td>
<td>People of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Statements which assert that race does not play a role in life successes</td>
<td>&quot;Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough.&quot;</td>
<td>People of color are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathologizing cultural values/communication styles</td>
<td>Asking a Black person: &quot;Why do you have to be so loud/animated? Just calm down.&quot;</td>
<td>Assimilate to dominant culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant/White culture are ideal</td>
<td>To an Asian or Latino person: &quot;Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal.&quot; “Speak up more.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Dismissing an individual who brings up race/culture in work/school setting</td>
<td>Leave your cultural baggage outside.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second-class citizen</td>
<td>Person of color mistaken for a service worker</td>
<td>People of color are servants to Whites. They couldn’t possibly occupy high-status positions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Occurs when a White person is given preferential treatment as a consumer over a person of color</td>
<td>Having a taxi cab pass a person of color and pick up a White passenger</td>
<td>You are likely to cause trouble and/or travel to a dangerous neighborhood.</td>
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</table>
that they have been attacked, that they have been disrespected, or that something is not right (Franklin, 2004; Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). In some respects, people of color may find an overt and obvious racist act easier to handle than microaggressions that seem vague or disguised (Solórzano et al., 2000). The above incident reveals how microaggressions operate to create psychological dilemmas for both the White perpetrator and the person of color. Four such dilemmas are particularly noteworthy for everyone to understand.

**Dilemma 1: Clash of Racial Realities**

The question we pose is this: Did the flight attendant engage in a microaggression or did the senior author and his colleague simply misinterpret the action? Studies indicate that the racial perceptions of people of color differ markedly from those of Whites (Jones, 1997; Harris Poll commissioned by the National Conference of Christians and Jews, 1992). In most cases, White Americans tend to believe that minorities are doing better in life, that discrimination is on the decline, that racism is no longer a significant factor in the lives of people of color, and that equality has been achieved. More important, the majority of Whites do not view themselves as racist or capable of racist behavior.

Minorities, on the other hand, perceive Whites as (a) racially insensitive, (b) unwilling to share their position and wealth, (c) believing they are superior, (d) needing to control everything, and (e) treating them poorly because of their race. People of color believe these attributes are reenacted everyday in their interpersonal interactions with Whites, oftentimes in the form of microaggressions (Solórzano et al., 2000). For example, it was found that 96% of African Americans reported experiencing racial discrimination in a one-year period (Klonoff & Landrine, 1999), and many incidents involved being mistaken for a service worker, being ignored, given poor service, treated rudely, or experiencing strangers acting fearful or intimidated when around them (Sellers & Shelton, 2003).

**Dilemma 2: The Invisibility of Unintentional Expressions of Bias**

The interaction between the senior author and the flight attendant convinced him that she was sincere in her belief that she had acted in good faith without racial bias. Her actions and their meaning were invisible to her. It was clear that she was stunned that anyone would accuse her of such despicable actions. After all, in her mind, she acted with only the best of intentions: to distribute the weight evenly on the plane for safety reasons and to give two passengers greater privacy and space. She felt betrayed that her good intentions were being questioned. Yet considerable empirical evidence exists showing that racial microaggressions become automatic because of cultural conditioning and that they may become connected neurologically with the processing of emotions that surround prejudice (Abelson et al., 1998). Several investigators have found, for example, that law enforcement officers in laboratory experiments will fire their guns more often at Black criminal suspects than White ones (Plant & Peruche, 2005), and Afrocentric features tend to result in longer prison terms (Blair, Judd, & Chapel, 2004). In all cases, these law enforcement officials had no conscious awareness that they responded differently on the basis of race.

Herein lies a major dilemma. How does one prove that a microaggression has occurred? What makes our belief that the flight attendant acted in a biased manner any more plausible than her conscious belief that it was generated for another reason? If she did act out of hidden and unconscious bias, how do we make her aware of it? Social psychological research tends to confirm the existence of unconscious racial biases in well-intentioned Whites, that

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Microaggression</th>
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<tr>
<td>Second-class citizen (continued)</td>
<td>Being ignored at a store counter as attention is given to the White customer behind you “You people . . .”</td>
<td>Whites are more valued customers than people of color. You don’t belong. You are a lesser being.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental microaggressions</td>
<td>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 Overcrowding of public schools in communities of color Overabundance of liquor stores in communities of color</td>
<td>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.</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 1 (continued)
nearly everyone born and raised in the United States inherits the racial biases of the society, and that the most accurate assessment about whether racist acts have occurred in a particular situation is most likely to be made by those most disempowered rather than by those who enjoy the privileges of power (Jones, 1997; Keltner & Robinson, 1996). According to these findings, microaggressions (a) tend to be subtle, indirect, and unintentional, (b) are most likely to emerge not when a behavior would look prejudicial, but when other rationales can be offered for prejudicial behavior, and (c) occur when Whites pretend not to notice differences, thereby justifying that “color” was not involved in the actions taken. Color blindness is a major form of microinvalidation because it denies the racial and experiential reality of people of color and provides an excuse to White people to claim that they are not prejudiced (Helms, 1992; Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000). The flight attendant, for example, did not realize that her “not seeing color” invalidated both passengers’ racial identity and experiential reality.

**Dilemma 3: Perceived Minimal Harm of Racial Microaggressions**

In most cases, when individuals are confronted with their microaggressive acts (as in the case of the flight attendant), the perpetrator usually believes that the victim has overreacted and is being overly sensitive and/or petty. After all, even if it was an innocent racial blunder, microaggressions are believed to have minimal negative impact. People of color are told not to overreact and to simply “let it go.” Usually, Whites consider microaggressive incidents to be...
minor, and people of color are encouraged (oftentimes by people of color as well) to not waste time or effort on them.

It is clear that old-fashioned racism unfairly disadvantages people of color and that it contributes to stress, depression, shame, and anger in its victims (Jones, 1997). But evidence also supports the detrimental impact of more subtle forms of racism (Chakraborty & McKenzie, 2002; Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999). For example, in a survey of studies examining racism and mental health, researchers found a positive association between happiness and life satisfaction, self-esteem, mastery of control, hypotension, and discrimination (Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). Many of the types of everyday racism identified by Williams and colleagues (Williams & Collins, 1995; Williams, Lavizzo-Mourey, & Warren, 1994) provide strong support for the idea that racial microaggressions are not minimally harmful. One study specifically examined microaggressions in the experiences of African Americans and found that the cumulative effects can be quite devastating (Solórzano et al., 2000). The researchers reported that experience with microaggressions resulted in a negative racial climate and emotions of self-doubt, frustration, and isolation on the part of victims. As indicated in the incident above, the senior author experienced considerable emotional turmoil that lasted for the entire flight. When one considers that people of color are exposed continually to microaggressions and that their effects are cumulative, it becomes easier to understand the psychological toll they may take on recipients’ well-being.

We submit that covert racism in the form of microaggressions also has a dramatic and detrimental impact on people of color. Although microaggressions may be seemingly innocuous and insignificant, their effects can be quite dramatic (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002). D. W. Sue believes that “this contemporary form of racism is many times over more problematic, damaging, and injurious to persons of color than overt racist acts” (D. W. Sue, 2003, p. 48). It has been noted that the cumulative effects of racial microaggressions may theoretically result in “diminished mortality, augmented morbidity and flattened confidence” (Pierce, 1995, p. 281). It is important to study and acknowledge this form of racism in society because without documentation and analysis to better understand microaggressions, the threats that they pose and the assaults that they justify can be easily ignored or downplayed (Solórzano et al., 2000). D. W. Sue (2005) has referred to this phenomenon as “a conspiracy of silence.”

**Dilemma 4: The Catch-22 of Responding to Microaggressions**

When a microaggression occurs, the victim is usually placed in a catch-22. The immediate reaction might be a series of questions: Did what I think happened, really happen? Was this a deliberate act or an unintentional slight? How should I respond? Sit and stew on it or confront the person? If I bring the topic up, how do I prove it? Is it really worth the effort? Should I just drop the matter? These questions in one form or another have been a common, if not a universal, reaction of persons of color who experience an attributional ambiguity (Crocker & Major, 1989).

First, the person must determine whether a microaggression has occurred. In that respect, people of color rely heavily on experiential reality that is contextual in nature and involves life experiences from a variety of situations. When the flight attendant asked the senior author and his colleague to move, it was not the first time that similar requests and situations had occurred for both. In their experience, these incidents were nonrandom events (Ridley, 2005), and their perception was that the only similarity “connecting the dots” to each and every one of these incidents was the color of their skin. In other words, the situation on the plane was only one of many similar incidents with identical outcomes. Yet the flight attendant and most White Americans do not share these multiple experiences, and they evaluate their own behaviors in the moment through a singular event (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). Thus, they 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 (D. W. Sue, 2005).

Second, how one reacts to a microaggression may have differential effects, not only on the perpetrator but on the person of color as well. Deciding to do nothing by sitting on one’s anger is one response that occurs frequently in people of color. This response occurs because persons of color may be (a) unable to determine whether a microaggression has occurred, (b) at a loss for how to respond, (c) fearful of the consequences, (d) rationalizing that “it won’t do any good anyway,” or (e) engaging in self-deception through denial (“It didn’t happen.”). Although these explanations for nonresponse may hold some validity for the person of color, we submit that not doing anything has the potential to result in psychological harm. It may mean a denial of one’s experiential reality, dealing with a loss of integrity, or experiencing pent-up anger and frustration likely to take psychological and physical tolls.

Third, responding with anger and striking back (perhaps a normal and healthy reaction) is likely to engender negative consequences for persons of color as well. They are likely to be accused of being racially oversensitive or paranoid or told that their emotional outbursts confirm stereotypes about minorities. In the case of Black males, for example, protesting may lend credence to the belief that they are hostile, angry, impulsive, and prone to violence (Jones, 1997). In this case, the person of color might feel better after venting, but the outcome results in greater hostility by Whites toward minorities. Further, while the person of color may feel 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.” What is lacking is research that points to adaptive ways of handling microaggressions by people of color and suggestions of how to increase the awareness and sensitivity of Whites to microaggressions so that they accept responsibility for their behaviors and for changing them (Solórzano et al., 2000).
Racial Microaggressions as a Barrier to Clinical Practice

In a broad sense, counseling and psychotherapy can be characterized as the formation of a deeply personal relationship between a helping professional and a client that involves appropriate and accurate interpersonal interactions and communications. For effective therapy to occur, some form of positive coalition must develop between the parties involved (D. W. Sue & Sue, 2003). Many have referred to this as the “working relationship,” the “therapeutic alliance,” or the “establishment of rapport” (D. W. Sue & Sue, 2003). A strong therapeutic relationship is often enhanced when clients perceive therapists as credible (trustworthy and expert) and themselves as understood and positively regarded by their therapists (Strong & Schmidt, 1970). Helping professionals are trained to listen, to show empathic concern, to be objective, to value the client’s integrity, to communicate understanding, and to use their professional knowledge and skills to aid clients to solve problems (Grencavage & Norcross, 1990).

As a therapeutic team, therapist and client are better prepared to venture into problematic areas that the client might hesitate to face alone. Research suggests that the therapeutic alliance is one of the major common factors of any helping relationship and is correlated with successful outcome (Lui & Pope-Davis, 2005; Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000). More important, however, are findings that a client’s perception of an accepting and positive relationship is a better predictor of successful outcome than is a similar perception by the counselor (Horvath & Symonds, 1991). Thus, when clients do not perceive their therapists as trustworthy and when they feel misunderstood and undervalued, therapeutic success is less likely to occur. Often times, the telltale signs of a failed therapeutic relationship may result in clients being less likely to self-disclose, terminating prematurely, or failing to return for scheduled visits (Burkard & Knox, 2004; Kearney, Draper, & Baron, 2005).

Although the task of establishing an effective therapeutic relationship applies to the entire helping spectrum, working with clients who differ from the therapist in race, ethnicity, culture, and sexual orientation poses special challenges. White therapists who are products of their cultural conditioning may be prone to engage in racial microaggressions (Locke & Kiselica, 1999). Thus, the therapeutic alliance is likely to be weakened or terminated when clients of color perceive White therapists as biased, prejudiced, or unlikely to understand them as racial/cultural beings. That racism can potentially infect the therapeutic process when working with clients of color has been a common concern voiced by the President’s Commission on Mental Health (1978) and the Surgeon General’s Report on Mental Health: Culture, Race and Ethnicity (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). It has been postulated that therapist bias might partially account for the low utilization of mental health services and premature termination of therapy sessions by African American, Native American, Asian American, and Latino/Hispanic American clients (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

Yet research also reveals that most people in our nation believe in democracy, fairness, and strong humanistic values that condemn racism and the inequities that it engenders (Dovidio et al., 2002). Such a statement is arguably truer for mental health professionals, whose goals are to help rather than hinder or hurt clients of color. Both the American Psychological Association and the American Counseling Association have attempted to confront the biases of the profession by passing multicultural guidelines or standards that denounce prejudice and discrimination in the delivery of mental health services to clients of color (American Psychological Association, 2003; D. W. Sue et al., 1992). Like most people in society, counselors and therapists experience themselves as fair and decent individuals who would never consciously and deliberately engage in racist acts toward clients of color. Sadly, it is often pointed out that when clinician and client differ from one another along racial lines, however, the relationship may serve as a microcosm for the troubled race relations in the United States. While many would like to believe that racism is no longer a major problem and that the good intentions of the helping profession have built safeguards against prejudice and discrimination, the reality is that they continue to be manifested through the therapeutic process (Ussey, Gernat, & Hammam, 2005). This is not to suggest, however, that positive changes in race relations have not occurred. Yet, as in many other interactions, microaggressions are equally likely to occur in therapeutic transactions (Ridley, 2005).

The Manifestation of Racial Microaggressions in Counseling/Therapy

Microaggressions become meaningful in the context of clinical practice, as relational dynamics and the human condition are central aspects of this field. The often unintentional and unconscious nature of microaggressions (Dilemma 2: Invisibility) poses the biggest challenge to the majority of White mental health professionals, who believe that they are just, unbiased, and nonracist. Further, mental health professionals are in a position of power, which renders them less likely to accurately assess (Dilemma 1: Conflict of Racial Realities) whether racist acts have occurred in their sessions. Thus, the harm they perpetrate against their clients of color is either unknown or minimized (Dilemma 3: Minimal Harm). Microaggressions not only oppress and harm, but they place clients of color in the unenviable position of a catch-22 (Dilemma 4).

In clinical practice, microaggressions are likely to go unrecognized by White clinicians who are unintentionally and unconsciously expressing bias. As a result, therapists must make a concerted effort to identify and monitor microaggressions within the therapeutic context. This process is reminiscent of the importance of becoming aware of potential transference and countertransference issues between therapist and client and how they may unintention-
ally interfere with effective therapy (Woodhouse, Schlosser, Crook, Ligiero, & Gelso, 2003). The inherent power dy-
namic in the therapeutic relationship further complicates
this issue, as therapists are in a position of power to make
diagnoses and influence the course of treatment. The power
dynamic between therapist and client also effects the
catch-22 of responding to microaggressions because clients
may be less likely to confront their therapists and more
likely to question their own perceptions in the event of a
microaggression.

Table 2 provides a few examples of microaggressions
in counseling practice under each of the nine categories
identified earlier. Under Color Blindness, for example, a
client of color stresses the importance of racial experiences
only to have the therapist reply, “We are all unique. We are
all individuals.” or “We are all human beings or the same
under the skin.” These colorblind statements, which were
intended to be supportive, to be sympathetic, and to convey
an ability to understand, may leave the client feeling mis-
understood, neglected, invalidated, and unimportant (es-
specially if racial identity is important to the client). Moreover
these statements presume that the therapist is capable of
not seeing race and impose a definition of racial reality on
the client (Neville et al., 2000).

Under Denial of Individual Racism, a common re-
response by Whites to people of color is that they can
understand and relate to experiences of racism. In Table 2,
under this category, we provide the following anecdote: A
client of color expresses hesitancy in discussing racial
issues with his White female therapist. She replies, “I under-
stand. As a woman, I face discrimination too.” The
message is that the therapist believes her gender oppression
is no different from the client’s experiences of racial/ethnic
oppression. This response is problematic because such at-
tempts by the therapist to explain how he or she can
understand a person of color’s experience with racism may
be perceived by the client as an attempt to minimize the
importance of his or her racial identity, to avoid acknowled-
ging the therapist’s racial biases, or to communicate a
discomfort with discussing racial issues. Furthermore, the
therapist excuses himself or herself from any blame or fault
in perpetuating racism and the power of racism. This fail-
ure to acknowledge the significance of racism within and
outside of the therapy session contributes to the breakdown
of the alliance between therapist and client. A therapist’s
willingness to discuss racial matters is of central impor-
tance in creating a therapeutic alliance with clients of color
(Cardemil & Battle, 2003).

Under the category “Alien in Own Land,” many Asian
Americans and Latino/Hispanic Americans report that they
are commonly seen as perpetual foreigners. For example, a
female Asian American client arrives for her first therapy
session. Her therapist asks her where she is from, and when
told “Philadelphia,” the therapist further probes by asking
where she was born. In this case, the therapist has assumed
that the Asian American client is not from the United States
and has imposed through the use of the second question the
idea that she must be a foreigner. Immediately, a barrier is
created in the helping relationship because the client feels
invalidated by the therapist (she is perceived as a foreigner,
not a U.S. citizen). Unfortunately, the Asian American
client is unlikely to question her therapist or point out the
bias because of the power dynamic, which causes her to
harbor resentment and ill feelings toward the therapist.

We contend that clients of color are at increased risk
of not continuing in the counseling/therapy session when
such microaggressions occur. Worse yet, they will not
receive the help they need and may leave the session
feeling worse than when they first sought counseling. Be-
cause it is unlikely that clinicians intentionally create hos-
tile and unwelcoming environments for their ethnic minor-
ity clients, it can be assumed that these biases are being
expressed through microaggressions. Therapists can con-
voy their bias to their ethnic minority clients in myriad
ways, such as by minimizing symptoms for Asian Ameri-
cans on the basis of a false belief in the “model” minority
(D. W. Sue & Sue, 2003) or by placing greater emphasis on
symptoms such as paranoid delusions and substance abuse
in Native Americans and Africans Americans, who are
believed to suffer from these afflictions (U.S. Department
of Health and Human Services, 2001).

Last, White counselors and therapists can impose and
value their own cultural worldview while devaluing and
pathologizing the cultural values of their ethnic minority
clients. Previous research has shown that pathologizing
clients’ cultural values has been a major determinant of
clients of color discontinuing psychotherapy (S. Sue, Fu-
jino, Hu, & Takeuchi, 1991). Many clients of color may
feel misunderstood by their therapists because of a lack of
cultural understanding. Asian American or Latino Ameri-
can clients who enter therapy to discuss family issues such
as feeling obligated, stressed, or overwhelmed with excess
family responsibilities may be encouraged by therapists to
speak out against their families or to make decisions re-
gardless of family support or expectations. Therapists may
be unaware that they may be directly invalidating cultural
respect for authority and imposing an individualistic view
over a collectivist one.

Future Directions in the
Understanding of Racial
Microaggressions

With respect to racism, D. W. Sue (2004, p. 762) has stated
that the greatest challenge society and the mental health
professions face is “making the ‘invisible’ visible.” That
can only be accomplished when people are willing to
openly and honestly engage in a dialogue about race and
racism. In that respect, the education and training of mental
health professionals must incorporate issues of race and
culture. One would ordinarily expect that mental health
professionals would be more willing than most to dialogue
on this topic, but studies suggest that White clinicians
receive minimal or no practicum or supervision experi-
ences that address race and are uncomfortable broaching
the topic (Knox, Burkard, Johnson, Suzuki, & Ponterotto,
2003). Many White trainees in therapy dyads experience
anxiety in the form of poor articulation, faltering and/or
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Microaggression</th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alien in own land</td>
<td>A White client does not want to work with an Asian American therapist because “she will not understand my problem.”</td>
<td>You are not American.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When Asian Americans and Latino Americans are assumed to be foreign-born</td>
<td>A White therapist tells an American-born Latino client that he/she should seek a Spanish-speaking therapist.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ascription of intelligence</td>
<td>A school counselor reacts with surprise when an Asian American student had trouble on the math portion of a standardized test.</td>
<td>All Asians are smart and good at math.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assigning a degree of intelligence to a person of color on the basis of their race</td>
<td>A career counselor asking a Black or Latino student, “Do you think you’re ready for college?”</td>
<td>It is unusual for people of color to succeed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Color blindness</td>
<td>A therapist says “I think you are being too paranoid. We should emphasize similarities, not people’s differences” when a client of color attempts to discuss her feelings about being the only person of color at her job and feeling alienated and dismissed by her co-workers.</td>
<td>Race and culture are not important variables that affect people’s lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statements which indicate that a White person does not want to acknowledge race</td>
<td>A client of color expresses concern in discussing racial issues with her therapist. Her therapist replies with, “When I see you, I don’t see color.”</td>
<td>Your racial experiences are not valid.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Criminality/assumption of criminal status</td>
<td>When a Black client shares that she was accused of stealing from work, the therapist encourages the client to explore how she might have contributed to her employer’s mistrust of her.</td>
<td>You are a criminal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant on the basis of their race</td>
<td>A therapist takes great care to ask all substance abuse questions in an intake with a Native American client, and is suspicious of the client’s nonexistent history with substances.</td>
<td>You are deviant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial of individual racism</td>
<td>A client of color asks his or her therapist about how race affects their working relationship. The therapist replies, “Race does not affect the way I treat you.”</td>
<td>Your racial/ethnic experience is not important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A statement made when Whites renounce their racial biases</td>
<td>A client of color expresses hesitancy in discussing racial issues with his White female therapist. She replies “I understand. As a woman, I face discrimination also.”</td>
<td>Your racial oppression is no different than my gender oppression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myth of meritocracy</td>
<td>A school counselor tells a Black student that “if you work hard, you can succeed like everyone else.”</td>
<td>People of color are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder. If you don’t succeed, you have only yourself to blame (blaming the victim).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statements which assert that race does not play a role in succeeding in career advancement or education</td>
<td>A career counselor is working with a client of color who is concerned about not being promoted at work despite being qualified. The counselor suggests, “Maybe if you work harder you can succeed like your peers.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathologizing cultural values/communication styles</td>
<td>A Black client is loud, emotional, and confrontational in a counseling session. The therapist diagnoses her with borderline personality disorder.</td>
<td>Assimilate to dominant culture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant/White culture are ideal</td>
<td>A client of Asian or Native American descent has trouble maintaining eye contact with his therapist. The therapist diagnoses him with a social anxiety disorder.</td>
<td>Leave your cultural baggage outside.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advising a client, “Do you really think your problem stems from racism?”</td>
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trembling voices, and mispronunciation of words when directly engaged in discussions about race (Utsey et al., 2005). It is interesting that such nonverbal behaviors also serve as a form of racial microaggression. When helping professionals have difficulty addressing race issues, they cut off an avenue for clients of color to explore matters of bias, discrimination, and prejudice.

**Education and Training and Racial Microaggressions**

It is clear that mental health training programs must support trainees in overcoming their fears and their resistance to talking about race by fostering safe and productive learning environments (Sanchez-Hucles & Jones, 2005). It is important that training programs be structured and facilitated in a manner that promotes inquiry and allows trainees to experience discomfort and vulnerability (Young & Davis-Russell, 2002). Trainees need to be challenged to explore their own racial identities and their feelings about other racial groups. The prerequisite for cultural competence has always been racial self-awareness. This is equally true for understanding how microaggressions, especially those of the therapist, influence the therapeutic process. This level of self-awareness brings to the surface possible prejudices and biases that inform racial microaggressions. A first step for therapists who want to integrate an understanding of racism’s mental health effects into the conceptualization of psychological functioning is to undergo a process of learning and critical self-examination of racism and its impact on one’s life and the lives of others (Thompson & Neville, 1999). For White clinicians, it means addressing the question “What does it mean to be White?” and being fully cognizant of their own White racial identity development and how it may intrude on people of color (Helms, 1992, 1995). In addition, it has been suggested that articulating a personal theory of reality and of therapeutic change in the context of an environment of racism is one way to begin integrating knowledge of racism with the practice of psychotherapy (Thompson & Neville, 1999). Education and training must aid White clinicians to achieve the following: (a) increase their ability to identify racial microaggressions in general and in themselves in particular; (b) understand how racial microaggressions, including their own, detrimentally impact clients of color; and (c) accept responsibility for taking corrective actions to overcome racial biases.

**Research on Racial Microaggressions**

A major obstacle to understanding racial microaggressions is that research is in a nascent state. Researchers continue to omit subtle racism and microaggressions from their research agendas, and this absence conveys the notion that covert forms of racism are not as valid or as important as racist events that can be quantified and “proven.” In fact, omitting microaggressions from studies on racism on the basis of a belief that they are less harmful encourages the profession to “look the other way.” Moreover, the fact that psychological research has continued to inadequately address race and ethnicity (Delgado-Romero, Rowland, & Galvin, 2005) is in itself a microaggression. Pursuing a line of research examining how cross-racial dyadic compositions impact the process and outcome of counselor/client interactions would be a tremendous contribution to the field of counseling and clinical psychology. Helms and Cook (1999) noted that racial consciousness is a critical consideration in determining White therapists’ ability to operate effectively in cross-racial dyads.

For mental health purposes, it would be useful to explore the coping mechanisms used by people of color to stave off the negative effects of microaggressions. The fact that people of color have had to face daily microaggressions and have continued to maintain their dignity in the face of such hostility is a testament to their resiliency (D. W. Sue, 2003). What coping strategies have been found to serve them well? A greater understanding of responses to microaggressions, both in the long term and the short term, and of the coping strategies employed would be beneficial in arming children of color for the life they will face. Such research is necessary because without documentation and analysis to help better understand microaggressions, the threats that they pose and the assaults that they justify can be easily ignored or downplayed (Solórzano et al., 2000).

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**Table 2 (continued)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Microaggression</th>
<th>Message</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Second-class citizen Occurs when a White person is given preferential treatment as a consumer over a person of color</td>
<td>A counselor limits the amount of long-term therapy to provide at a college counseling center; she chooses all White clients over clients of color. Clients of color are not welcomed or acknowledged by receptionists.</td>
<td>Whites are more valued than people of color.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Environmental microaggressions Macro-level microaggressions, which are more apparent on a systemic level</td>
<td>A waiting room office has pictures of American presidents. Every counselor at a mental health clinic is White.</td>
<td>You don’t belong/Only white people can succeed. You are an outsider/You don’t exist.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Studying the long-term impact that microaggressions have on mental health functioning, self-esteem, self-concept, and racial identity development appears crucial to documenting the harm microaggressions inflict on people of color. The taxonomy of microaggressions proposed here may make it easier to explore other social psychological questions as well.

First, it is highly probable that microaggressions vary in their severity and impact. As indicated, a microassault does not evoke a guessing game because the intent of the perpetrator is clear. However, the racist intent of microinsults and microinvalidations is less clear and presents different dilemmas for people of color. Some questions to ponder include the following: (a) Are the three forms of racial microaggressions equal in impact? Are some themes and their hidden messages more problematic than others? Although all expressions may take a psychological toll, some are obviously experienced as more harmful and severe than others. (b) Is there a relationship between forms of racial microaggressions and racial identity development? Recent research and formulations on White racial identity development and the psychosocial costs of racism to Whites (Helms, 1995; Spanierman, Armstrong, Poteat, & Beer, 2006) imply that forms of racial microaggressions may be associated with certain statuses or trait clusters. (c) Finally, is it possible that different racial/ethnic groups are more likely to encounter certain forms of racial microaggressions than others? A preliminary study suggests that Asian Americans are prone to be victims of microinvalidations with themes that revolve around “alien in one’s own land” (D. W. Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007) rather than microinsults with themes of “criminality.” Is it possible that Blacks are more likely to be subjected to the latter than to the former? What about Latinos and American Indians?

Second, the challenge in conducting research aimed at understanding microaggressions involves measurement. Adequate assessment tools need to be created to effectively explore the new and burgeoning field of microaggression research. Although there are several promising race-related stress and discrimination measures, such as the Perceived Ethnic Discrimination Questionnaire (PEDQ; Brondolo et al., 2005), the Color-Blind Racial Attitude Scale (COBRAS; Neville et al., 2000), the Index of Race Related Stress (IRRS; Utsey & Ponterotto, 1996), and the Schedule of Racist Events (SRE; Klonoff & Landrine, 1999), none of them is directly aimed at distinguishing between categories of racial microaggressions or their intentional or unintentional nature. The PEDQ uses four subscales that broadly measure stigmatization, harassment, workplace discrimination, and social exclusion; the COBRAS is specific to a person’s minimization of race and racism; the IRRS uses Jones’s (1997) framework to measure individual, institutional, and societal racism; and the SRE is aimed at measuring frequency of racist incidents. All contain examples of racial microaggressions that support our taxonomy, but none makes conceptual distinctions that allow for categorical measurements of this phenomenon. It seems imperative that specific instruments be developed to aid in understanding the causes, consequences, manifestations, and elimination of racial microaggressions.

**Conclusion**

Nearly all interracial encounters are prone to the manifestation of racial microaggressions. We have chosen mainly to address the therapeutic relationship, but racial microaggressions are potentially present whenever human interactions involve participants who differ in race and culture (teaching, supervising, training, administering, evaluating, etc.). We have purposely chosen to concentrate on racial microaggressions, but it is important to acknowledge other types of microaggressions as well. Gender, sexual orientation, and disability microaggressions may have equally powerful and potentially detrimental effects on women, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals, and disability groups. Further, racial microaggressions are not limited to White–Black, White–Latino, or White–Person of Color interactions. Int erethnic racial microaggressions occur between people of color as well. In the area of counseling and therapy, for example, research may also prove beneficial in understanding cross-racial dyads in which the therapist is a person of color and the client is White or in which both therapist and client are persons of color. Investigating these combinations of cross-racial dyads would be useful, because it is clear that no racial/ethnic group is immune from inheriting the racial biases of society (D. W. Sue, 2003). We encourage future research in these two areas because all forms of microaggressions have detrimental consequences.

**REFERENCES**


Helms, J. E. (1992). A race is a nice thing to have: A guide to being a white person or understanding the white persons in your life. Topeka, KS: Content Communications.


In *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender and sexual orientation*, Sue (2010) describes a process that People of Color generally experience when a racial micro aggression occurs. These five phases speak to the emotional burden that People of Color shoulder as they move from phase one, the incident, to phase five, the impact. Sue (2010) then describes resilience and strength that can be developed as People of Color attempt to move forward, through, and past these daily insults.

In addition, Dr. Sue offers some understanding of the psychological costs to white people. These social conditions, and the four layers of fears, are the roadblocks that white people must navigate in order to build their own strategies. He then offers seven ethical mandates which, when practiced together, may build white people’s capacity for action.

For a deeper understanding of the process model for People of Color and the psychological cost to white people, please refer to his text (see above).
### Phase One
**Potential Microaggressive Incident or Event**  
Verbal - Nonverbal/Behavioral - Environmental

#### African American Microaggressions
- ascription of intellectual inferiority
- second-class citizen
- assumption of criminality
- assumption of inferior status
- assumed universality of the Black (Latino/a) experience
- assumed superiority of White cultural values/communication styles

#### Asian American Microaggressions
- alien in one’s own land
- ascription of intelligence
- denial of racial reality
- exoticization of Asian American women
- invalidation of interethnic differences
- pathologizing cultural values/communication styles
- second class citizens
- invisibility

### Phase Two
**Perception and Questioning of the Incident**
- was the incident racially motivated?
- what is the relationship with the perpetrator?
- what is the racial/cultural identity development of the recipient?
- what is the thematic content of the microaggression?
- what are the personal experiences of the target?

### Phase Three
**Reaction Process**  
Verbal - Nonverbal/Behavioral - Environmental

- healthy paranoia
- sanity check
- empowering and validating self
- rescuing offenders

### Phase Four
**Interpretation and Meaning**
- you do not belong
- you are abnormal
- you are intellectually inferior
- you are not trustworthy
- you are all the same

### Phase Five
**Consequences and Impact**
- powerlessness
- invisibility
- forced compliance/loss of integrity
- pressure to represent one’s group

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Summary by Sandra (Chap) Chapman, Ed. D.
From, Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation by Dr. Derald Wing Sue
### The Way Forward

#### Strength Through Adversity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Heightened perceptual wisdom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Considerable evidence suggest that oppressed groups have developed an ability to discern the truth and determine reality better than those who occupy positions of power and privilege. Accurate perception means the ability to read between the lines, to see beyond the obvious, and to become aware of inconsistencies between verbal and nonverbal behaviors of oppressors. Heightened perception and wisdom protects oppressed people from having their experiential realities invalidated.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nonverbal and contextualized accuracy</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There is a recognition that nonverbal behaviors are more accurate barometers of biased attitudes and actions. It has been suggested that women are better at reading nonverbal behaviors than men and that people of color are also better at reading nonverbal communication than Whites. Communication theory reveals that 30-40% of communication occurs verbally, while the remainder depends on nonverbal/contextual cues; that, nonverbal behaviors are least under conscious control; and messages are more accurate than verbal ones. As healthy functioning is correlated with the ability to accurately read nonverbal communication and discern “the truth,” this suggests that oppressed groups may possess strengths unmatched by oppressors.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bicultural flexibility</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Because people of color are always exposed to cultural values, beliefs, and standards of the dominant society, they must deal with pressures to conform to the larger standards of those in power. In dealing with forced compliance and pressures to assimilate and acculturate, marginalized groups have developed a bicultural flexibility that allows them to maintain their own sense of integrity. One of the major advantages of being bicultural or multicultural is the ability to see multiple worldviews and more readily understand the other’s point of view.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collectivistic sense of group identity and peoplehood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oppressed groups rely heavily on one another for a collective sense of identity, for validation and confirmation of their experiences, and for sharing with one another healthy coping mechanisms to overcome invalidation. A sense of group identity is forged through common experiences of oppressions and lessons learned that survival depends on one another. Racial and ethnic pride also seems to immunize people of color against forces like racism.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It appears that social support through a sense of belonging, ethnic collectivistic cultural values, extended family systems, communities, and group resources buffer oppressed groups against a hostile society and provide cultural nutrients that validate their worldviews and lifestyles.
Psychosocial Costs to Perpetrators of Racial Microaggressions  
Dr. Derald Wing Sue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Conditioning</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| - bias and prejudice become institutionalized and systemized into the norms, values and beliefs of society  
- these beliefs are passed on to generations via socialization and cultural conditioning  
- these “normative standards” and beliefs are enforced by society through education, mass media, significant others, and institutions |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture of Silence</th>
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</table>
| - we do not willingly consent to such heinous actions, therefore, it is desirable to perpetuate a “culture of silence”  
- Silencing occurs when:  
  - oppressed are not allowed to express their thoughts and outrage  
  - their concerns are minimized  
  - they are punished for expressing ideas at odds with the dominant group |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whiteness as conferred dominance</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| - White American people are socialized into Eurocentric values, beliefs, standards, and norms  
- all other group norms are consciously and unconsciously compared to this default set of norms  
- dominant culture became institutionalized with resulting psychological, sociological, economical, political, and legal implications  
- White supremacy and overt/covert racism become culturally conditioned into the lives of White people, albeit without their informed consent |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Four Psychological Fears or Obstacles to Honest Self-Examination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Layer One - Fear of Appearing Racist</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| - studies indicate that race is among the most automatic and quickest ways to categorize people  
- one of the disconcerting microaggressions experienced by people of color from well-intentioned Whites is color-blindness - the avoidance by Whites to acknowledge that they notice a racial difference  
- denial is most prevalent in this layer |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Layer Two - Fear of Acknowledging One’s Racism</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| - the resistance to acknowledging racist attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in oneself is linked to a major conflict dealing with self-image and identity  
- White Americans have been taught egalitarian values, that everyone should be treated equally  
- harboring anti-minority feelings shatters one’s self-concept as a good and moral human being  
- anger/defensiveness are most prevalent in this layer |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Layer Three - Fear of Acknowledging White Privilege</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| - when the first two layers are unmasked, another deeper layer of realization presents itself - the possibility that Whites have benefitted from racism  
- strong feelings of guilt are prevalent in this layer |

Summary by Sandra (Chap) Chapman, Ed. D.  
From, Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation by Dr. Derald Wing Sue
Psychosocial Costs to Perpetrators of Racial Microaggressions
Dr. Derald Wing Sue

Layer Four - Fear of Taking Personal Responsibility to End Racism

- How do you deal with your own racism and the benefits and advantages that have been enjoyed individually and collectively?
- During this time you are aware of systemic societal forces and must decide how and when to act against them
- hopelessness and helplessness are prevalent in this layer

The Way Forward
The Ethical Mandate

Racial microaggressions are manifestations of oppression. It reflects a worldview of superiority - inferiority, albeit in a much more subtle but equally harmful manner as overt forms of oppression. It remains invisible because of a cultural conditioning process that allows perpetrators to discriminate without knowledge of their complicity in the inequities visited upon people of color.

The way forward is a difficult journey, but the moral and ethical mandate for social justice requires action, not passivity and inaction. Continued work on antiracism has shown the importance of establishing the following conditions to combat racial bias and prejudice. Additionally, each is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition to combat racism. In other words, change is most likely to be positive when all seven conditions exist. Each would require considerable elaboration, but are only briefly listed here. A more thorough description can be found in D. W. Sue (2003)

1. Have intimate contact with people who differ from us in race, culture, ethnicity.
2. Working together in a cooperative rather than a competitive environment.
3. Sharing mutual goals (superordinate goals) as opposed to individual ones.
4. Exchanging and learning accurate information rather than stereotypes or misinformation.
5. Sharing an equal status relationship with other groups instead of an unequal or imbalanced one.
6. Having leadership and authority as supportive of group harmony and welfare.
7. Feeling a sense of unity or spiritual interconnectedness with all humanity.

Albert Einstein: “The world is too dangerous to live in - not because of the people who do evil, but because of the people who sit and let it happen.”

Martin Luther king, Jr. “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”
The following worksheets were created with educators in mind. They are real racial microaggressions and macroaggressions that have occurred in school settings. In edition to practicing ways of identify racial microaggressions when they occur, I have included a worksheet that builds the target’s resiliency skills with the use of Dr. Howard Stevenson’s “Come Back Line” approach.

A come-back-line is NOT an insult given to the person who delivered the microaggression. It is a statement that can build an inner sense of truth which is then verbalized towards the perpetrator. This verbalization allows recipients of racial microaggressions to name their racial reality.

An example of a youth of color using text messages with white friends to name his racial reality can be found in this blog post, My son is not ok!
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MA Scenario</th>
<th>MA Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Two 9th grade Latinas are conversing in Spanish in the lobby of the school, having just met at new student orientation. A senior peer leader approaches them and says, “Hey, where are you two from?” One student names a school in another district and the 2nd student mentions the elementary school down the street. The senior says, “No, really, where are you from? Where were you born?” Both were born in the same town as the senior, and so were their parents.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. A white male director wants to introduce the new divisional principal, an Indian female, to the school community. In addition to listing her many skills and qualifications as a division head, he mentions how articulate she is.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. During a faculty meeting a Latino teacher explains that he is given odd looks by white parents when he attempts to socialize with them and their children on the weekends. The teacher thinks it is because the students and families have limited experiences with Latinos. A white administrator says his race has nothing to do with it since the administrator also gets this from all kinds of parents who do not know him very well.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. An African-American male student is picked up by truancy police because he is assumed to be skipping school when in fact his school has a late start to their day. He asks the police officers to call the school or his mother, but he is ignored and driven around the neighborhood before finally being dropped off at the school. The student is rattled and does not know what to say to his teachers when he is questioned about being even later to school than he was supposed to be.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. In response to being confronted about a comment a white teacher made to a student of color about her hair being “disheveled”, the teacher says, “My best friend is Black and my dentist is Latino.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Developing Resilience With Comeback Lines

“Recovering is more important than covering up.” ~ Sue (2010)

1. Two 9th grade Latinas are conversing in Spanish in the lobby of the school, having just met at new student orientation. A senior peer leader approaches them and says, “Hey, where are you two from?” One student names a school in another district and the 2nd student mentions the elementary school down the street. The senior says, “No, really, where are you from? Where were you born?” Both were born in the same town as the senior, and so were their parents.

   - This was an example of a micro____________________(see the list of racial microaggression).

   - If I heard this microaggression I would say or do the following:

   - If I received this microaggression my comeback line would be:

   - If another student was observing this microaggression I would like them to say or do the following:

2. Do you have a personal example of a microaggression related to any aspect of your identity?

   - This was an example of a micro____________________

   - When I received this microaggression I wish my comeback line would have been:
Alien in Own Land
assumptions that Latinx Americans and Asian Americans are foreign born;
“Where are you from?”; “You speak good English”

Color Blindness
statements that indicate that a white person does not want to acknowledge race;
“America is a melting pot”; denying people of color as racial or cultural beings

Denial of Individual Racism
white people denying their racial biases; “I’m not a racist, I have several friends of color.”

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”

Second Class Citizen
a white person is given preferential treatment as a consumer;
assumption that a person of color is going to cause trouble (so won’t pick them up in a cab

Assumption of Criminality
a person of color is considered dangerous, criminal, or deviant;
store owner/worker following a person of color in a store

Myth of Meritocracy
statements which assert that race does not have to do with one’s success or failures in life;
everyone can succeed in this society if they work hard enough

Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles
assumption that white values and communication styles are the norm;
asking a Latinx person why they speak so loudly or an Asian person why they speak so softly
Impact of micro aggressions at the parent level.
This email is from a parent to her child’s teacher. How might you respond?
Review the RESET model and brainstorm a response.

As a parent leader, I grapple with sharing my own experiences and leaving space for others to talk. Today's PA equity meeting left me feeling a little open and vulnerable because we touched on the Black male experience and I am raising one. I didn't have the words between 8:45 and 10:00 am, but if I'm being honest I wasn't sure how this would be received - let's face it - I wasn't courageous enough. But on my walk to my office, I was able to take a breath and felt like it would be ok share the following:

My son is one of three boys who identify as Black in his grade. They are all 10 or 11 years old. All of them tall - all of them sweet as pie and smart as a whip. I’ve been at this school long enough now to see social scenarios flare and subside and trust that this is par for the course. However, I think it's important to note that the parent community has a responsibility to be focused on the choice of words we use when we discuss our kids during these social challenges. Anecdotally, each of the three boys in the__ grade - including mine - has been referred to as one or a combination of the following: Bully, Aggressive, Violent, Liar and Angry. As parent, I’ve heard these things presented casually, as well as in the form of gossip - as if the language that is being used is not inflammatory or at least I should assume it is not meant to be inflammatory because, "you know what I mean" and "they [white patents who are my friends] can tell me [patent leader of color and friends to all].” Hearing those words, it seems the expectation is that I will have insight - or perhaps that I will have the words that make them feel better about the behavior of one or all of these boys - or worse yet, they expect that I will say nothing at all. These microaggressions build up and as a mom of color it is extremely frustrating and hurtful to know that my son - no matter what situation I put him in - or no matter how sweet and humble he can be - will always be operating at a deficit because grown-ups have implicit biases against boys of color.

Ignoring how that makes me feel as a parent for the moment and thinking only about the boys, the point I am making is this. These words - Bully, Aggressive, Violent, Liar, Angry, etc land differently when speaking about a Black child and can pathologize a young child's experience for years when at most - he was having a playground dispute just like the rest of the white children out there whose behavior is exactly the same. A simple choice of words can make all the difference, or if you're in ear shot of those words, learning to stand up and mitigate the flagrant use of those words - is a simple way to be a good friend, a parent peer.

This conversation is scratching the surface and while the scratch is felt differently by everyone I hope that we all have more opportunities to talk it through.
When you have delivered a microaggression, we encourage you to consider and practice the following steps to have a Reset Conversation.

**Redirect the conversation**
Change the focus from your need to understand what you did or how it landed on a person as a microaggression, so you do not take away the other person’s need to prioritize self-care. If the person has to explain and help you understand what you did, they are no longer in self-care.

**Emphasize your action**
In addition to an apology, admit what and where you were wrong, if you know. Take on the burden of navigation, which requires you to be vulnerable and clear in your role.

**Skip self-justification**
Do not focus on intent - live momentarily in the impact. Be mindful of the reflex to experience white fragility (sadness) or white lashing (anger).

**Explore accountability**
After the apology comes the work. Take responsibility (reactive) and consider ways to engage in accountability (proactive). People of Color want a collective call to arms whereby white people do their share of the work. Recognize that healing from the microaggression is People of Color’s work.

**Thank you - it is a gift**
When you are told you caused a racial microaggression, see it as a gift.

> “Thank you for pointing this out to me. I will continue to work on it.”

Practicing RESET can help you lower your racial anxiety, build your relationships with people of color, grow in your knowledge about historical, personal and systemic bias. Be mindful that it can be awkward at first. We strongly suggest accessing the engaging and learning strategies in the Racial Anxiety section on page 28.
WORKSHOP BRAINSTORM:
Bouncing Back: Building Resilience
After Experiencing or Causing Racial Microaggressions

During our workshop on resilience and microaggressions, we asked participants who identified as people of color, indigenous, and/or multiracial to name microproficiencies they wanted their white colleagues to learn. Microproficiencies, a term coined by Dr. Ali Michael, are the understandings, statements, and actions that members of a privileged group can demonstrate that support and empower members of the marginalized group.

White people often ask, “Tell me what to do!” Here is a partial answer to that question:

- Make yourself vulnerable: in addition to apologizing, admit how/where you were wrong.
- After the apology comes the work: do something.
- Be strong for yourself. I don’t want to take care of your tears, anger, and confusion.
- When you are told you caused a racial microaggression, see it as a gift: “Thank you, I’m going to work on that.”
- Give apologies without “but” (avoid “I’m sorry but…”).
- Be as interested in going to the White Privilege Conference as you are in going to [the National Association of Independent Schools’ People of Color Conference].
- Don’t make me feel that I’m crazy [when I give critical feedback].
- Ask, “What can I do to heal this situation and to help us move forward?”
- Know that microaggressions happen daily and that they [white colleagues] enact them.
- Accept it will be uncomfortable for both of us when you [white people] microaggress me.
- If you’re not going to ask ___ of a white person or say ___ to a white person, don’t ask it of or say it to me.
- Respect our expertise.
- Just because I look like I have it all together doesn’t mean I have it all together or feel strong.
- Just because you’re not hearing from your colleagues of color that you caused a microaggression, assume that you have.
- Don’t be dismissive regardless of what you’re feeling. Recognize/acknowledge my feelings.
- Listen to me to understand not to respond.
- Don’t be afraid to get it wrong or let that fear stop you from trying.
WORKSHOP BRAINSTORM:
Bouncing Back: Building Resilience
After Experiencing or Causing Racial Microaggressions

- Don’t ask “Google” questions (do your OWN research).
- Be aware of the entitlement you have and the space you take up.
- Quit stereotyping us.
- Just because we’re friends doesn’t mean you can say whatever you want to say.
- “Go to the gym”: do the work of anti-racism even when you’re not around people of color.
- Don’t assume you don’t have work to do if someone isn’t telling you to do it.
- Recognize your power (even if you think the other person is wrong).
- Stay in your discomfort.
- Focus on the why and not the what.
- Practice processing your previous experiences.
- Don’t intellectualize my marginalized identity
- Live in knowledge, skills, and actions.
- Acknowledge your ignorance and ask GOOD questions: Google first! journal, ask another white person, etc.).
- Stop tokenizing me.
- Build your community of color.
- If you are white and have kids of color, be aware that you can microaggress them. Be careful what you say to them.
- Make the invisible visible.
- Don’t mistake your critique of other white people as a way to make a relationship with a person of color.
- Don’t expect a “best white person” award.
- Don’t be a self-proclaimed ally/accomplice.
- Be authentic, ask permission, and include the community in the conversation.
- When storytelling, don’t be the white savior and/or focus on the one person of color who has overcome adversity.

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www.courageouschange.org

Sandra (Chap) Chapman, Ed.D.
www.chapequity.com
Micro-aggressions and Resistance Ethics

Micro-aggressions are individually 'small', usually unconscious and unintentional, enactments of privilege, bias, or cultural ignorance that the other person experiences as insulting, inconsiderate, alienating, or rude. Most people experience some form of micro-aggression, and must learn to resist internalizing negative ideas about themselves or others like them. People of color experience these, too, and also experience the micro-aggressions of racism.

Examples of micro-aggressions include:
- a white sales clerk looks past a black customer and asks a white customer if he can be of service
- an Asian woman at a nightclub is approached by a white man who tells her that her exotic beauty is a real turn-on
- a staff group is planning a holiday pot-luck and ask their African American colleague if she can contribute “some delicious southern soul dish”
- a white customer in a restaurant speaks to a brown-skinned service worker in Spanish without having established that this is the person’s preferred language

The accumulation of micro-aggressions over time can impact the individual by contributing to his/her experience of feeling disempowered in the context of the dominant cultural group.

Resistance Ethics
- oppose the experience of disempowerment and reinforce the individual’s personal integrity and experience of personal empowerment
- acknowledge the dynamics of oppression and disempowerment and locate them externally – the problem is not with me, but with them/it
- encourage healthy resistance behaviors and contribute to an experience of personal and community empowerment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resistance Ethics</th>
<th>Healthy Resistance Behaviors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>◆ Not believing negative things other people have said about me or about people who are like me</td>
<td>◆ Getting angry and expressing that anger without hurting myself or others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>◆ Knowing that it is ok to be safe, and to define my own meaning of ‘safety’</td>
<td>◆ Crying, laughing, singing, and talking back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>◆ Feeling vulnerable and afraid and soothing myself through the experience</td>
<td>◆ Thinking – taking the time to think things through before acting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>◆ Affirming life</td>
<td>◆ Loving and letting others love me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>◆ Holding on to my humanity</td>
<td>◆ Telling the truth and listening to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>◆ Sustaining hope and knowing that healing is a priority</td>
<td>◆ Questioning assumptions and questioning authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>◆ Looking at others in my situation and finding them beautiful</td>
<td>◆ Being defiant, but with flexibility and willingness to negotiate when appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>◆ Believing that I am loveable</td>
<td>◆ Asking questions and saying ‘no’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>◆ Trusting God, my Higher Power, the Great Spirit, or connecting with my Spiritual Self</td>
<td>◆ Dancing, moving, feeling my body and enjoying the experience</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Lisa V. Blitz, PhD, LCSW
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## Racial Microaggressions in Every Day Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Microaggression</th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 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 experience  
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 waiting 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.” | Assimilate to dominant culture. |
| 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 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: 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 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. |

**Disability Microaggressions in Every Day Life**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Microaggression</th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denial of personal identity: Occurs when any aspect of a person’s identity other than disability is ignored or denied</td>
<td>“I can’t believe you are married.”</td>
<td>There is no part of your life that is normal or like mine. The only thing I see when I look at you is your disability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial of disability experience: Occurs when disability related experiences are minimized or denied</td>
<td>“Come on now, we all have some disability.”</td>
<td>Your thoughts and feelings are probably not real and are certainly not important to me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial of privacy: Occurs when personal information is required about a disability</td>
<td>Someone asks what happened to you.</td>
<td>You are not allowed to maintain disability information privately.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helplessness: Occurs when people frantically try to help PWDs</td>
<td>Someone helps you onto a bus or train, even when you need no help. Someone feels incapable of rescuing you from your disability.</td>
<td>You can’t do anything by yourself because you have a disability. Having a disability is a catastrophe. I would rather be dead than be you.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Secondary gain: Occurs when a person expects to feel good or be praised for doing something for a PWD | “We’re going to raise enough money tonight to get Johnny that new wheelchair.” | I feel good and get recognition for being nice to you. |
| Spread effect: Occurs when other expectations about a person are assumed to be due to one specific disability | “Those deaf people are retarded.” “Your other senses must be better than mine.” | Your disability invalidates you in all areas of life. You must be special in some way. You’re not normal. You have “spidey sense.” |
| Infantilization: Occurs when a PWD is treated like a child | “Let me do that for you.” | You are not really capable. I know better than you how to do this. |
| Patronization: Occurs when a PWD is praised for almost anything | “You people are so inspiring.” | You are so special for living with that. |
| Second-class citizen: Occurs when a PWD’s right to equality is denied because they are considered to be bothersome, expensive, and a waste of time, effort, and resources | People work hard not to make eye contact or to physically avoid a PWD. A person in a wheelchair waits 15 minutes outside a restaurant for access through the kitchen. She then complains to the manager. At a staff meeting, the question is raised about improving accessibility to the restaurant, and the official plan is that changes will be made when more PWDs come to eat. | Those people expect too much and are so difficult to work with. They have no patience. Your rights to equality are not important to me. |
| Desexualization: Occurs when the sexuality and sexual being is denied | “I would never date someone who uses a wheelchair.” | PWDs are not my equal, not attractive, and not worthy of being with me. |

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### Gender Microaggressions in Every Day Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Microaggression</th>
<th>Message</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexual objectification: Occurs when a woman is treated as a sexual object</td>
<td>“[At private school] we had to wear these skirts, and every time we passed by, there would be a bunch of guys cracking jokes, and you know, whistling.” “Some stranger guy tried to pick me up on the subway, and that completely creeped me out… I was trying to shoot him down, but he thought I was, like, playing hard to get or something.”</td>
<td>Women’s value is in their bodies; they are meant to entertain men.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Second-class citizen:</strong> Occurs when a woman is overlooked and/or when men are given preferential treatment</td>
<td>“[It’s like we’re] not as smart or capable and that’s why we are not paid as well for the same work.” A female sports team not getting the same resources or funding as a male sports team</td>
<td>Women's contributions are not as valuable as men's.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assumptions of inferiority: Occurs when a woman is assumed to be less competent than men (e.g., physically or intellectually)</td>
<td>“I mean, my job, I don’t necessarily move heavy boxes or anything like that, but a lot of the times, like, the men... they won’t... they purposely just won’t go ask the girl to do it.” When playing sports, men telling women that they don’t want to play with them</td>
<td>Women are not physically capable.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assumptions of traditional gender roles: Occurs when an individual assumes that a woman should maintain traditional gender roles</td>
<td>“People expect you to be more polite, more dainty, just because, you know, you are a woman. ... Guys they are around in public, they curse, they burp, they do this, they do that, but if a woman were to do that, people would be like, ‘Oh my god, what is she doing? Who does she think she is?’ What is acceptable for a man to do in public is totally different than what a woman is expected to do in public.” Women being expected to cook and clean in the house, while men are not</td>
<td>Women should be feminine. Women should be domesticated.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of sexist language: Occurs when language is used to degrade a woman</td>
<td>“They’re bimbos, they’re stupid, they don’t have brains, women in general.” “You know, if a guy has, like, a lot of girls, and they, like, have sex with all the other girls, they’re not called sluts or anything like that. ... ‘You’re a player,’ or like, ‘Oh! You’re the man!’ Like, they’re cool. And then if a girl does it, it’s all pretty different. It’s like, ‘Oh! You’re a slut. You’re sleeping with how many guys?’”</td>
<td>Women are intellectually inferior. There are different standards for men and women when it comes to sex.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Environmental invalidations: Macrolevel aggressions that occur on systemic and environmental level</td>
<td>A male coworker hanging “pin-up pictures” of women on his wall in the workplace The notion that women do not get paid the same as men for the same type of work The fact that there are so few women in the corporate world</td>
<td>Men have a right to sexualize women. Women are inferior to men. Business is a man’s world.</td>
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### Tool: Recognizing Microaggressions and the Messages They Send

Microaggressions are the everyday, verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership (from *Diversity in the Classroom, UCLA Diversity & Faculty Development, 2014*). The first step in addressing microaggressions is to recognize when a microaggression has occurred and what message it may be sending. The context of the relationship and situation is critical. Below are common themes to which microaggressions attach.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEMES</th>
<th>MICROAGGRESSION EXAMPLES</th>
<th>MESSAGE</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alien in One’s Own Land</strong></td>
<td>• “Where are you from or where were you born?”</td>
<td>You are not a true American.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>When Asian Americans, Latino Americans and others who look different or are named differently from the dominant culture are assumed to be foreign-born.</em></td>
<td>• “You speak English very well.”</td>
<td>You are a perpetual foreigner in your own country.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Denial of Individual Criminal Status</em></td>
<td>• “Wow! How did you become so good in math?”</td>
<td>Your ethnic/racial identity makes you exotic.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>A person of color or a woman based on his/her race/gender</em></td>
<td>• “You must be good in math, can you help me with this problem?”</td>
<td>People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites. All Asians are intelligent and good in math/science. It is unusual for a woman to have strong mathematical skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assigning of Intelligence</strong></td>
<td>• “You are a credit to your race.”</td>
<td>Assimilate to the dominant culture. Denying the significance of a person of color’s racial/ethnic experience and history. Denying the individual as a racial/cultural being.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Assigning intelligence to a person of color or a woman based on his/her race/gender</em></td>
<td>• “There is only one race, the human race.”</td>
<td>People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites. All Asians are intelligent and good in math/science. It is unusual for a woman to have strong mathematical skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Color Blindness</strong></td>
<td>• “I don’t believe in race.”</td>
<td>You are a criminal.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Statements that indicate that a White person does not want to or need to acknowledge race.</em></td>
<td>• “America is a melting pot.”</td>
<td>You are going to steal/you are poor, you do not belong.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Criminality/Assumption of Criminal Status</strong></td>
<td>• A White man or woman clutches his/her purse or checks wallet as a Black or Latino person approaches.</td>
<td>You are dangerous.</td>
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<td><em>A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant based on his/her race.</em></td>
<td>• A store owner following a customer of color around the store.</td>
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<td>• Someone crosses to the other side of the street to avoid a person of color.</td>
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<td>• While walking through the halls of the Chemistry building, a professor approaches a post-doctoral student of color to ask if she/he is lost, making the assumption that the person is trying to break into one of the labs.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Denial of Individual Racism/Sexism/Heterosexism</strong></td>
<td>• “I’m not racist. I have several Black friends.”</td>
<td>I could never be racist 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. Denying the personal experience of individuals who experience bias.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>A statement made when bias is denied.</em></td>
<td>• “As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• To a person of color: “Are you sure you were being followed in the store? I can’t believe it.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Myth of Meritocracy</strong></td>
<td>• “I believe the most qualified person should get the job.”</td>
<td>People of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Statements which assert that race or gender does not play a role in life successes, for example in issues like faculty demographics.</em></td>
<td>• “Of course he’ll get tenure, even though he hasn’t published much—he’s Black!”</td>
<td>The playing field is even so if women cannot make it, the problem is with them. People of color are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• “Men and women have equal opportunities for achievement.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• “Gender plays no part in who we hire.”</td>
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<td>• “America is the land of opportunity.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• “Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• “Affirmative action is racist.”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### Tool: Recognizing Microaggressions and the Messages They Send

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<tr>
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| **Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles**  
The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant/White culture are ideal/"normal". | • To an Asian, Latino or Native American: "Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal." "Speak up more."  
• Asking a Black person: "Why do you have to be so loud/animated? Just calm down."  
• "Why are you always angry?” anytime race is brought up in the classroom discussion.  
• Dismissing an individual who brings up race/culture in work/school setting. | Assimilate to dominant culture.  
Leave your cultural baggage outside.  
There is no room for difference. |
| **Second-Class Citizen**  
Occurs when a target group member receives differential treatment from the power group; for example, being given preferential treatment as a consumer over a person of color. | • Faculty of color mistaken for a service worker.  
• Not wanting to sit by someone because of his/her color.  
• Female doctor mistaken for a nurse.  
• Being ignored at a store counter as attention is given to the White customer.  
• Saying “You people…”  
• An advisor assigns a Black post-doctoral student to escort a visiting scientist of the same race even though there are other non-Black scientists in this person’s specific area of research.  
• An advisor sends an email to another work colleague describing another individual as a “good Black scientist.”  
• Raising your voice or speaking slowly when addressing a blind student.  
• In class, an instructor tends to call on male students more frequently than female ones. | People of color are servants to Whites. They couldn’t possibly occupy high status positions.  
Women occupy nurturing positions.  
Whites are more valued customers than people of color.  
You don’t belong. You are a lesser being. |
| **Sexist/Heterosexist Language**  
Terms that exclude or degrade women and LGBT persons. | • Use of the pronoun “he” to refer to all people.  
• Being constantly reminded by a coworker that "we are only women."  
• Being forced to choose Male or Female when completing basic forms.  
• Two options for relationship status: married or single.  
• A heterosexual man who often hangs out with his female friends more than his male friends is labeled as gay. | Male experience is universal.  
Female experience is invisible.  
LGBT categories are not recognized.  
LGBT partnerships are invisible.  
Men who do not fit male stereotypes are inferior. |
| **Traditional Gender Role Prejudicing and Stereotyping**  
Occurs when expectations of traditional roles or stereotypes are conveyed. | • When a female student asks a male professor for extra help on an engineering assignment, he asks "What do you need to work on this for anyway?”  
• “You’re a girl, you don’t have to be good at math.”  
• A person asks a woman her age and, upon hearing she is 31, looks quickly at her ring finger.  
• An advisor asks a female student if she is planning on having children while in postdoctoral training.  
• Shows surprise when a feminine woman turns out to be a lesbian.  
• Labeling an assertive female committee chair/dean as a “b____,” while describing a male counterpart as a “forceful leader.” | Women are less capable in math and science.  
Women should be married during child-bearing ages because that is their primary purpose.  
Women are out of line when they are aggressive. |

Imagine these scenarios:

You are a member of a faculty search committee hiring an assistant professor in biology. The committee is just starting a face-to-face interview with a candidate named Maria Vasquez. She has dark hair, dark eyes, and a tan complexion. Most committee members assume Dr. Vasquez is Latina. One of your colleagues asks an ice-breaking question, "Where are you from?" Dr. Vasquez responds, "Minneapolis." Your colleague follows-up with, "No, I mean, where do you come from originally?" Dr. Vasquez frowns. "Minneapolis," she repeats with an edge to her voice.

A search committee hiring a department chair in environmental science is meeting to discuss the final list of candidates, which includes two men and one woman. During the discussion, a male committee member says, "I think we should hire one of the men. I won't work for a woman.

Your computer information systems department is hiring a new assistant professor. When committee members are introducing themselves during an on-campus interview with a female candidate, the candidate notices that a female committee member frequently looks at her chest, which makes the candidate very uncomfortable. The committee member seems unaware of her behavior.

During a meeting of the faculty search committee on which you are serving, almost every time a female colleague tries to speak, she is interrupted by a male colleague. No one says anything when this happens. Finally, your female colleague stops trying to offer contributions to the discussion. You wonder what she wanted to say.

An African American man named Alex is a candidate for a tenure-track job in chemistry. During his on-campus interview, the chairperson of the search committee is giving him a tour. As they walk through the department labs, the chairperson makes a point of saying, “We treat everyone equally here. It doesn’t matter who you are or where you come from. We are all the same.” Alex smiles politely and crosses his arms.

Why are these comments and behaviors problematic?

These are examples of “microaggressions.”

Defining Microaggressions

- Microaggressions:
  - are verbal and nonverbal behaviors
  - communicate negative, hostile, and derogatory messages to people rooted in their marginalized group membership (based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.)
  - occur in everyday interactions
  - can be intentional or unintentional
  - are often unacknowledged

Three Forms of Microaggressions:

1. microassaults: “old fashioned” discrimination
   - name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions
   - likely to be conscious and deliberate

2. microinsults: subtle snubs that communicate a covert insulting message
   - convey stereotypes, rudeness, and insensitivity that demean a person's identity
   - are frequently unknown to the person

CONTINUED OTHER SIDE
3. microinvalidations: disconfirming messages
   - exclude, negate, or dismiss the thoughts, feelings, or experiences of certain groups
   - may be most damaging form of the three microaggressions

Types of Gender Microaggressions
1. Sexual objectification
2. Second-class citizenship
3. Use of sexist language
4. Assumption of inferiority
5. Restrictive gender roles
6. Denial of the reality of sexism
7. Denial of individual sexism
8. Invisibility
9. Sexist humor/jokes
10. Environmental invalidations: macrolevel aggressions that happen on systemic and environmental level (unequal pay; glass ceiling; media images)

Microaggressions can also be based on membership in other marginalized groups based on race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, religion, etc.

Detrimental Impact of Gender Microaggressions
1. Negative impact on standard of living
   - Unequal wages
   - Higher levels of poverty
2. Negative impact on physical health
   - Migraines, heart disease, autoimmune disorders
3. Negative impact on psychological health
   - Depression
   - Anxiety
   - Body image dissatisfaction and eating disorders

Moving Forward: How to Overcome Microaggressions
1. Individual Intervention
   - Develop an honest awareness of our own biases, prejudices, and stereotypes
   - Become an ally and activist
2. Organizational Intervention
   - Make sure policies, practices, and procedures allow for equal access and opportunity
   - Create a welcoming communication climate
   - Provide professional development opportunities
   - Make accountability central
3. Societal/Cultural Intervention
   - Critically assess cultural communication (education, mass media, institutions, etc.)
   - Create social policy and law to rectify discrimination and promote equal access
   - Promote multi-cultural education

The Challenges of Responding to Microaggressions
Dilemma #1: The Invisibility of Unintentional Expressions of Bias
- tend to be subtle, indirect, and unintentional
- occurs when other rationales for prejudicial behavior can be offered

Dilemma #2: Perceived Minimal Harm of Microaggressions
- when people say things like “Just let it go,” “You are overreacting,” or “It’s not a big deal”
- the cumulative effect of microaggressions can be more problematic and detrimental than overt acts of prejudice

Dilemma #3: The Catch-22 of Responding to Microaggressions
- “damned if you do and damned if you don’t”
- challenges faced by the victim:
  1. determining that a microaggression has actually occurred
  2. figuring out how to react
     - not responding may have detrimental effects
  3. responding with anger and striking back
     - will likely engender negative consequences

Where should you go at UNH to report microaggressive behavior?
Faculty should report incidents to their department chair and staff should report to their supervisors. Faculty and staff can also report discriminatory behavior to Donna Marie Sorrentino, Director of Affirmative Action and Equity, at affirmation.equity@ unh.edu.

UNH policy and processes for handling complaints resulting from discrimination are available on-line at the UNH Affirmative Action and Equity Office website at: http://unh.edu/affirmativeaction/policies.html

A Sampling of References

Internet Resources
1. The Microaggressions Project: people post examples of microaggressions in their everyday lives http://www.microaggressions.com/
2. U-Tube Video: Derald Wing Sue explaining microaggressions http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJL2P0JsAS4
3. U-Tube video: Derald Wing Sue, invited lecture on microaggressions at the 2012 American Psychological Association Conference in Orlando FL http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sW3tFpThHzI