

# Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life

## Is subtle bias harmless?

Published October 5, 2010 by Derald Wing Sue, Ph.D. in *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*



Not too long ago, I (Asian American) boarded a small plane with an African American colleague in the early hours of the morning. As there were few passengers, the flight attendant told us to sit anywhere, so we choose seats near the front of the plane and across the aisle from one another.

At the last minute, three White men entered the plane and took seats in front of us. Just before takeoff, the flight attendant, who is White, asked if we would mind moving to the back of the aircraft to better balance the plane's weight. We grudgingly complied but felt singled out as passengers of color in being told to "move to the back of the bus." When we expressed these feelings to the attendant, she indignantly denied the charge, became defensive, stated that her intent was to ensure the flight's safety, and wanted to give us some privacy.

Since we had entered the plane first, I asked why she did not ask the White men to move instead of us. She became indignant, stated that we had misunderstood her intentions, claimed she did not see "color," suggested that we were being "oversensitive," and refused to talk about the matter any further.

Were we being overly sensitive, or was the flight attendant being racist? That is a question that people of color are constantly faced with in their day-to-day interactions with well-intentioned White folks who experience themselves as good, moral and decent human beings.

### **The Common Experience of Racial Microaggressions**

Such incidents have become a common-place experience for many people of color because they seem to occur constantly in our daily lives.

- When a White couple (man and women) passes a Black man on the sidewalk, the woman automatically clutches her purse more tightly, while the White man checks for his wallet in the back pocket. (Hidden Message: Blacks are prone to crime and up to no good.)

- A third generation Asian American is complimented by a taxi cab driver for speaking such good English. (Hidden Message: Asian Americans are perceived as perpetual aliens in their own country and not "real Americans.")
- Police stop a Latino male driver for no apparent reason but to subtly check his driver's license to determine immigration status. (Hidden message: Latinas/os are illegal aliens.)
- American Indian students at the University of Illinois see Native American symbols and mascots - exemplified by Chief Illiniwek dancing and whooping fiercely during football games. (Hidden Message: American Indians are savages, blood-thirsty and their culture and traditions are demeaned.)

In our 8-year research at Teachers College, Columbia University, we have found that these racial microaggressions may on the surface, appear like a compliment or seem quite innocent and harmless, but nevertheless, they contain what we call demeaning meta-communications or hidden messages.

### **What Are Racial Microaggressions?**

The term racial microaggressions, was first coined by psychiatrist Chester Pierce, MD, in the 1970s. But the concept is also rooted in the work of Jack Dovidio, Ph.D. (Yale University) and Samuel Gaertner, Ph.D. (University of Delaware) in their formulation of aversive racism - many well-intentioned Whites consciously believe in and profess equality, but unconsciously act in a racist manner, particularly in ambiguous situations.

Racial microaggressions are the brief and everyday slights, insults, indignities and denigrating messages sent to people of color by well-intentioned White people who are unaware of the hidden messages being communicated. These messages may be sent verbally ("You speak good English."), nonverbally (clutching one's purse more tightly) or environmentally (symbols like the confederate flag or using American Indian mascots). Such communications are usually outside the level of conscious awareness of perpetrators. In the case of the flight attendant, I am sure that she believed she was acting with the best of intentions and probably felt aghast that someone would accuse her of such a horrendous act.

Our research and those of many social psychologists suggest that most people like the flight attendant, harbor unconscious biases and prejudices that leak out in many interpersonal situations and decision points. In other words, the attendant was acting with bias-she just didn't know it. Getting perpetrators to realize that they are acting in a biased manner is a monumental task because (a) on a conscious level they see themselves as fair minded individuals who would never consciously discriminate, (b) they are genuinely not aware of their biases, and (c) their self image of being "a good moral human being" is assailed if they realize and acknowledge that they possess biased thoughts, attitudes and feelings that harm people of color.

To better understand the type and range of these incidents, my research team and other researchers are exploring the manifestation, dynamics and impact of microaggressions. We have begun documenting how African Americans, Asian Americans, American Indians and Latina(o) Americans who receive these everyday psychological slings and arrows experience an erosion of their mental health, job performance, classroom learning, the quality of social experience, and ultimately their standard of living.

## **Classifying Microaggressions**

In my book, *Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender and Sexual Orientation* (John Wiley & Sons, 2010), I summarize research conducted at Teachers College, Columbia University which led us to propose a classification of racial microaggressions. Three types of current racial transgressions were described:

- **Microassaults:** Conscious and intentional discriminatory actions: using racial epithets, displaying White supremacist symbols - swastikas, or preventing one's son or daughter from dating outside of their race.
- **Microinsults:** Verbal, nonverbal, and environmental communications that subtly convey rudeness and insensitivity that demean a person's racial heritage or identity. An example is an employee who asks a co-worker of color how he/she got his/her job, implying he/she may have landed it through an affirmative action or quota system.
- **Microinvalidations:** Communications that subtly exclude, negate or nullify the thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of a person of color. For instance, White people often ask Latinos where they were born, conveying the message that they are perpetual foreigners in their own land.

Our research suggests that microinsults and microinvalidations are potentially more harmful because of their invisibility, which puts people of color in a psychological bind: While people of color may feel insulted, they are often uncertain why, and perpetrators are unaware that anything has happened and are not aware they have been offensive. For people of color, they are caught in a Catch-22. If they question the perpetrator, as in the case of the flight attendant, denials are likely to follow. Indeed, they may be labeled "oversensitive" or even "paranoid." If they choose not to confront perpetrators, the turmoil stews and percolates in the psyche of the person taking a huge emotional toll. In other words, they are damned if they do and damned if they don't.

Note that the denials by perpetrators are usually not conscious attempts to deceive; they honestly believe they have done no wrong. Microaggressions hold their power because they are invisible, and therefore they don't allow Whites to see that their actions and attitudes may be discriminatory. Therein lies the dilemma. The person of color is left to question what actually happened. The result is confusion, anger and an overall draining of energy.

Ironically, some research and testimony from people of color indicate they are better able to handle overt, conscious and deliberate acts of racism than the unconscious, subtle and less obvious forms. That is because there is no guesswork involved in overt forms of racism.

## **Harmful Impact**

Many racial microaggressions are so subtle that neither target nor perpetrator may entirely understand what is happening. The invisibility of racial microaggressions may be more harmful to people of color than hate crimes or the overt and deliberate acts of White supremacists such as the Klan and Skinheads. Studies support the fact that people of color frequently experience microaggressions, that it is a continuing reality in their day-to-day interactions with friends, neighbors, co-workers, teachers, and employers in academic, social and public settings.

They are often made to feel excluded, untrustworthy, second-class citizens, and abnormal. People of color often describe the terrible feeling of being watched suspiciously in stores, that any slipup they make would negatively impact every person of color, that they felt pressured to represent the group in positive ways, and that they feel trapped in a stereotype. The burden of constant vigilance drains and saps psychological and spiritual energies of targets and contributes to chronic fatigue and a feeling of racial frustration and anger.

Space does not allow me to elaborate the harmful impact of racial microaggressions, but I summarize what the research literature reveals. Although they may appear like insignificant slights, or banal and trivial in nature, studies reveal that racial microaggressions have powerful detrimental consequences to people of color. They have been found to: (a) assail the mental health of recipients, (b) create a hostile and invalidating work or campus climate, (c) perpetuate stereotype threat, (d) create physical health problems, (e) saturate the broader society with cues that signal devaluation of social group identities, (f) lower work productivity and problem solving abilities, and (g) be partially responsible for creating inequities in education, employment and health care.

### **Future Blogs**

I realize that I have left many questions unanswered with this posting, but my research team and I plan to continue updating our findings for readers to consider. For readers who desire a more thorough understanding of microaggressions, I recommend two major sources on the topic published this year (2010): *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation and Microaggressions* and *Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics and Impact*. Both can be accessed through the John Wiley & Sons, publisher's website.

Future blogs will deal with questions such as: How do people of color cope with the daily onslaught of racial microaggressions? Are some coping strategies better than others? How do we help perpetrators to become aware of microaggressions? What are the best ways to prevent them at an individual, institutional and societal level? Do other socially marginalized groups like women, LGBTs, those with disabilities, and religious minorities experience microaggressions? In what ways are they similar or different? Is it possible for any of us to be born and raised in the United States without inheriting the racial, gender and sexual orientation biases of our ancestors? Are you personally a racist, sexist, or heterosexist? What is the best way for the average U.S. citizen to overcome these biases?

The first step in eliminating microaggressions is to make the "invisible" visible. I realize how controversial topics of race and racism, gender and sexism and sexual orientation and heterosexism push emotional hot buttons in all of us. I am hopeful that our blogs will stimulate discussion, debate, self reflection, and helpful dialogue directed at increasing mutual respect and understanding of the multiple social identities we all possess.