

Microaggressions: How They are Committed and Contained

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Abstract

The term microaggression is defined and demonstrated from the viewpoint of graduate-level students. Using a classroom assignment, the students describe their personal experiences of being the recipient of a microaggression. The students describe the type of microaggression, theme, psychological dilemma, and recall how they reacted to the encounter. The physical and psychological impact of microaggressions on diverse populations is explained to provide insight on the outcomes. Implications are discussed as well as how the counselor or helping professional can use the client's experience as a tool for empowerment.

Introduction

Microaggressions- those inadvertent and subtle messages that demean, insult, and invalidate a person- are routine occurrences for people of color, women, LGBT individuals, those with physical or intellectual disabilities, older Americans, and non-Christian individuals. Microaggression is a term coined by Harvard psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce¹ in his study of racism in the media. Derald W. Sue and David Sue² extended the definition adding "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to a target group." Microaggressions are communicated verbally or nonverbally, and intentionally or unintentionally. Microaggressions tend to occur when the person committing them claims to be unaware of cultural differences, thus denying any intended bias. Because the counseling relationship is a snapshot of our racial realities, microaggressions can occur within the counseling relationship. Greene and Blitz³ found that microaggressions against people of color and LGBT individuals seeking mental health services result in clients being subjected to more scrutiny in the counseling setting, being misdiagnosed, receiving ineffective treatment, and being misunderstood- thus having their needs unfulfilled.

Types, Themes, and Dilemmas

Derald W. Sue⁴ categorized three subtypes of microaggressions: *microassaults*, *microinsults*, and *microinvalidations*. Microassaults are blatant, deliberate, verbal and nonverbal attacks intended to express discrimination. Microinsults are rude, unintentional actions or comments that demean a person's racial/ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, age, ability, or religious identity. Microinvalidations are comments or behaviors that discount, question, or diminish the thoughts, beliefs, feelings, or worldview/reality of the recipient.

¹ Chester Pierce, J. Carew, D. Pierce-Gonzalez, and D. Willis. An experiment in racism: TV commercials. In *Television and education*, edited by Chester Pierce, 62-88. Beverly Hills: Sage, 1978.

² Derald Wing Sue, and David Sue. *Counseling the culturally diverse: Theory and practice*. 6th ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2012).

³ Mary Greene, and Lisa Blitz. The elephant is not pink: Talking about White, Black, and Brown to achieve excellence in clinical practice. *Clinical Social Work* doi: 10.1007/s10615-011-0357-y.

⁴ Sue and Sue, *Counseling the culturally diverse*.

Sue⁵ developed 16 distinct categories of microaggression themes and designated the subtle (or blatant) message being conveyed by the implications including *Second Class Citizen*, *Traditional Gender Role Prejudice and Stereotyping*, *Criminality/ Assumption of Criminal Status*, and *Pathologizing Cultural Values/ Communication Styles*. Sue demonstrated the impact that microaggressions inflict on marginalized groups by developing four psychological dilemmas. Dilemma one is *Clash of Sociodemographic Realities* that demonstrates the clash of realities of Whites who deny being racist and being capable of discrimination; and minorities who believe Whites are racist and enjoy their position of power and superiority. Dilemma two is the *Invisibility of Unintentional Expression of Bias* that describes how the majority group can inflict a microaggression and be oblivious of its impact on the targeted individual. Dilemma three is the *Perceived Minimal Harm of Microaggressions* that refers to the reaction from the person in power being confronted with the microaggression. The person in power may feel that the recipient is acting “too sensitive” or touchy. They do not understand why their statements are perceived as harmful. They may even believe the communication was innocent and the recipient should “get over it” or “just let it go.” The fourth dilemma is the *Catch-22 of Responding to Microaggressions* that involves the action/reaction of the recipient of the microaggression. The recipient of the microaggression may question the situation: Did that really happen? Can I prove that happened? Should I say anything? Will anything happen if I respond?” The receiver considers whether their actions will be negatively interpreted or stereotyped (e.g., being viewed as the “angry Black man”). Self-questioning can be exhausting and can take an emotional and physical toll on the individual. However, by not addressing the microaggression, the receiver carries the weight of the experience on his/her shoulders, which also contributes to mental health complications.

Personal Narratives

In my Social and Cultural Diversity in Counseling class, I asked my students to provide personal narratives of either being the recipient of a microaggression, or delivering a microaggression to another person. I selected a few of their personal narratives to demonstrate the psychological and physical impact of receiving microaggressive remarks from another person, and how the microaggressive types, themes, and dilemmas are played out in their everyday lives. Although the students gave their permission, initials are being used.

LG is an African American female who experienced a microinsult with the theme of Assumption of Criminality. This illustrates the Catch 22 Dilemma of responding to a microaggression.

I was insulted while shopping at a department store. I was not particularly dressed for shopping. I was going to purchase an outfit to wear for an evening event taking place that night. I found several items that I needed to try on, so I asked for the young lady that normally assists me. I was told it was her (day of). I was also told I could only carry a limited number of items into the fitting room. I have shopped in this store since they opened and have never been told that before.

I picked out approximately 25 items to try on. I took four or five items in to the fitting room at a time. When I finished with the first set of items, I then asked her to bring the next set of items that she was holding at the register for me until I completed trying on all the items that I had selected. This took about 90 minutes. I knew she was working on commission and she could have taken care of others. I let her ring all those items up and just before giving her my credit card, I informed her that I would come back to the store when the other sales clerk would be there to make my purchases.

I did get angry but I've learned not to be the victim, but to be the victor. I refused to let her have that much power over me. I possessed the power. This could have had a negative effect on me but I am confident in who I am at all time [sic]. I demand to be

⁵ Ibid.

treated with dignity and respect, especially when your income depends on me spending my money at your store.

R.C. is an African American female who experienced a microassault with the theme of Second Class Citizen. She also demonstrates the Catch-22 Dilemma of Responding to a Microaggression:

I am a patient care technician at (a hospital in central Alabama). I assist the nurses, handle vital signs, draw blood, give baths, help patients, etc. One night while at work I was asked to handle a patient's blood work. I gathered everything I needed and went into my patient's room to draw his blood. The patient was a white, middle age male. When I entered his room, I told him what I had come to do and his exact words were, "Get this nigger bitch out of my room now!" I could not believe what he had said to me! My first reaction was to remain calm and proceed to doing my job, but in my head, I wanted to choke him. After I attempted to continue my work, he got louder saying, "Get this bitch out of my room." One of the White, male nurses heard all of the fuss and came in. The patient continued to scream as I stayed quiet and drew his blood. When I finished the nurse said, "See she's good at her job, she got it on her first stick." To me, when the patient saw the white male nurse being respectful and nice towards me he calmed down. I guess the patient needed to see how another White person treated me? I did let the patient know that it wasn't nice to be so disrespectful to another human (being), and when he asked could I hand him something I simply reminded him that I was a "nigger bitch" and closed his door.

So many different thoughts ran through my head when this happened to me. I didn't know if I should've walked out of the room, cursed him out, stuck him on purpose, or ignored him. I decided to take the high road and ignore him. I completed my task in a hurry, but before I left the room I reminded the patient of what he said to me. I believe I did the responsible thing to ignore him because I know that I'm not a "nigger bitch." I will never forget this day.

J.B. is a White female who experienced a microinsult and microinvalidation (theme- Traditional Gender Role Prejudicing and Stereotyping). Her reflection illustrates dilemma two- The Invisibility of Unintentional Expressions of Bias:

Serving as an officer in the United States Army was an honor and one of the highlights of my life. During my service, I certainly experienced a lot of sexism as a female in a traditionally male occupation. For instance, I was constantly being asked if I was a nurse. In the early days of women serving in the military, most were nurses, so I was often assumed to be a nurse. What I did not expect was to experience sexism regarding my status as a military veteran.

I am a disabled veteran. After visiting my doctor at the local VA clinic, I had to get a same-day prescription from one of two local pharmacies. I went to the closer of the two and presented my prescription to the male pharmacy technician. He asked, "Does HE need it today?" I said, "I need it today." He replied, "Well, there is no way you can get it before 11:30a.m. tomorrow." I just took the script back and went to the second pharmacy on the list. In the second pharmacy, the female pharmacy technician did not ask me if "HE" needed it filled that day.

In retrospect, I do not think that I would have handled the situation any differently. I did not feel like confronting the man about his microaggression. I might have written a letter to the pharmacy explaining that assumptions such as the one this man made were often harmful to others. In short, the man's assumption "added insult to injury." I have learned to "pick my battles" as I have gotten older, and the most important thing in this situation was getting my medication to stop the pain I was in at the time.

L.T. is an African American female who has a disability. She experienced a microinsult and microinvalidation (theme of Assumption of Abnormality/Brokenness). She illustrates the dilemma of The Invisibility of Unintentional Expressions of Bias:

Here's an experience I had with someone because of my disability. Having a disability, I have had people who see me in public and assume that I am mentally slow based on my physical appearance. One time when I was in undergraduate and at the beauty shop getting my hair done, this woman was also there getting her hair done. I was talking to my stylist and the woman said something to me. When she spoke to me she would get in my face and talk like I had a problem with my hearing [sic]. People think that just because my body is different that means I'm also different mentality. I have had someone to ask me if I have MS (Multiple Sclerosis) because my body shakes. I have heard people say, "Aww look at her," like they feel sorry for me and I just want to say, "If you only knew me."

J.W. is an African American male who indirectly experienced a microinsult while reading at the library. The theme detailed was Second Class Citizen, and the dilemmas demonstrated Perceived Minimal Harm of Microaggressions are Catch-22 Dilemma of Responding to a Microaggression:

An instance where I experienced a microaggression happened last semester while studying in the library. I had just gotten to the tenth floor to find a quiet spot to read, when I noticed a group of white students having what seemed to be a group study session in the middle of the floor. I walked past these individuals and found a spot nearby on a couch and began to read. While reading, I began to hear chatter about their feelings towards the poor and minorities in our country. Though I did not like some of their comments, I blocked them out and continued to read. About half way through my reading, I heard one of the girls say in a joking way, "Why is it that all the little poor black kids on commercials have such big bellies, and have you noticed that they're usually really dark, like so dark they are Purple." After making this statement she began to laugh and her friends chimed in with comments of their own. I was not sure if they had forgotten I was sitting so close or if it was just that they didn't care that I was. At this point I found myself becoming uneasy and irritable. I hopped up from my seat and walked back to the elevator, purposely stepping over one of the individuals laying in the floor. By the time I had reached the elevator I heard one of the young ladies chuckle and whisper, "He's been back there the whole time." One girl apologized and said, "Sorry if we were being too loud." I sarcastically replied, "Oh y'all are fine, but y'all should be more aware of your surroundings, and yea I know some White folks who are so pale they look ill [sic]." After seeing the shocked look on their faces, I boarded the elevator and went along my way.

My reply was a bit harsh because I was frustrated with the situation and wanted to embarrass them. (The purpose of) my remark was to make them experience some of what I was experiencing while sitting and listening to their conversation. I honestly can say that I probably could have handled the situation differently. Given a second chance, I probably would do the same or worse. This may be an area I need to work on, but tolerance for ignorance has never been a strong suit of mine.

The Impact of Microaggressions on Diverse Populations

The use of microaggressions on individuals from diverse backgrounds can leave a negative impact on the recipient. “The cumulative effects of microaggressions foster inequalities, impair relationships, create emotional turmoil, and decrease mental and physical health.⁶ Clearly, microaggressions potentially have a deleterious impact on the victim.”⁷ Nadal⁸ found that psychological stress, high blood pressure, depression, sleeping problems, substance abuse, eating disorders, and posttraumatic stress disorders can result from racial microaggressions. While some researchers suggested that interpersonal racism (e.g., lynching, cross-burning, and racial assaults) has decreased over the past few decades because of the socially-unacceptable nature of overt acts, biases and prejudices are manifested in more subtle forms.

The counselor’s use of microaggressions on individuals from different backgrounds can lead to adverse consequences⁹. Fifty percent of minority clients are more likely to prematurely terminate counseling and therapy after their initial meeting with a counselor or mental health practitioner. It is important that counselors are knowledgeable and understand the physical and psychological impact of committing a microaggression during their sessions.¹⁰ Nadal, Griffin, Young, Hamit, and Rasmus¹¹ found that the frequency of microaggression events encountered by clients correlated with depressive symptoms and negative affect. After analyzing the results from the *Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REM)*¹² and the *Mental Health Inventory (MHI)*¹³, Nadal et al. (2012)¹⁴ concluded that a significant, negative relationship exists between racial microaggressions and mental health. Depression, anxiety, and having a negative worldview were among the mental health symptoms Nadal et al. found among research participants who experienced racial microaggressions.

Many people of color refrain from discussions of race with their White counterparts because they feel there will not be an open dialog regarding racial discrimination and oppression, they feel their White counterparts cannot be trusted, and they feel that because they regularly experience White racism and oppression, it is only a matter of time before their counterpart will also commit a racist or oppressive act

⁶ Sue, Derald Wing, Christina Capodilupo, Gina Torino, Jennifer Bucceri, Aisha Holder, Kevin Nadal, and Marta Esquilin. Racial microaggressions in everyday life. *American psychologist*, 62.4 (2007): 271-286.

⁷ Schoulte, Joleen., Jessica Schultz, and Elizabeth Altmaier,. Forgiveness in response to cultural microaggressions. *Counseling Psychology Quarterly* 24.1 (2011): 291-300.

⁸ Nadal, Kevin. The Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS): Construction, reliability, and validity. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*. doi: 10.1037/a0025193.

⁹ Sue and Sue, *Counseling the culturally diverse*.

¹⁰ Sue et al. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life.

¹¹ Nadal, Kevin, Katie Griffin, Yinglee Wong, Sahran Hamit, and Morgan Rasmus. The impact of racial microaggressions on mental health: Counseling implications for clients of color. *Journal of Counseling & Development* doi: 10.1002/j.1556-6676.2014.00130.x.

¹² Nadal, Kevin. The Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS): Construction, reliability, and validity. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*. doi: 10.1037/a0025193.

¹³ Veit, Clairice. T., and John E. Ware, Jr. The structure of psychological distress and well-being in general populations. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*. 51.5 (1983): 730-42.

¹⁴ Nadal. The impact of racial microaggressions on mental health

towards them. Ross-Sheriff (2012)¹⁵ noted that helping professionals can empower clients who experienced microaggressions by examining their own use of microaggressions against a marginalized group and understanding the debilitating effects of microaggression on a client. Professionals can also acknowledge the microaggression event their client presents in session and assist the client in developing strategies to challenge the perpetrator of, and mitigate the effects of the microaggression. In addition, counselors can establish a trusting relationship by validating the experiences of clients of color and assisting them in coping and confronting microaggressions when they occur. In assisting clients who have experienced microaggressions, the counselor can empower the client to address, advocate, or establish strategies to combat microaggressions at the workplace, in academic institutions, or in their social environment.

Conclusion

With an increasingly diverse population in the United States, microaggressions are becoming an everyday occurrence. Cultural awareness and introspection are two tools that can help counselors in being cognizant of microaggressions and addressing slights that may occur in the counseling relationship. It takes a lot for clients to seek counseling services and disclose their personal problems to us. We, in turn, must make the effort to be educated regarding cultural diversity and not pay lip-service to cultural competency requirements. It is important that we build our awareness about the detrimental effects of bias towards marginalized groups, play a vital role in validating the client's experience of microaggressive events, refrain from minimizing the client's account of a microaggressive experience and perception of reality, and refrain from becoming defensive when our client points out that we have committed a microaggression.

We all make mistakes, even the most competent counselors. Aside from becoming defensive, a professional counselor should apologize and take the opportunity to be open to their clients about exploring issues concerning diversity. Openness, not closeness, is the key to correcting microaggressive errors in the counseling relationship.

¹⁵ Ross-Sheriff, Fariyal. Microaggressions, women, and social work. *Journal of Women and Social Work*. doi: 10.1177/0886109912454366

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