# MICROAGGRESSIONS AND MARGINALITY

# CHAPTER 1

# Microaggressions, Marginality, and Oppression

## An Introduction

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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 (Sue et al., 2007). In many cases, these hidden messages may invalidate the group identity or experiential reality of target persons, demean them on a personal or group level, communicate they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment. While microaggressions are generally discussed from the perspective of race and racism (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue et al., 2007), any marginalized group in our society may become targets: people of color, women, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered people (LGBTs), those with disabilities, religious minorities, and so on (Sue, 2010).

The most detrimental forms of microaggressions are usually delivered by well-intentioned individuals who are unaware that they have engaged in harmful conduct toward a socially devalued group. These everyday occurrences may on the surface appear quite harmless, trivial, or be described as "small slights," but research indicates they have a powerful impact upon the psychological well-being of marginalized groups (Brondolo et al., 2008; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001; Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, & Meyer, 2008) and affect their standard of living by creating inequities in health care (Sue & Sue, 2008), education (Bell, 2002), and employment (Purdie-Vaughns, Davis, Steele, & Ditlmann, 2008).

Racial, gender, sexual orientation, disability, class, and religious microaggressions deliver hidden demeaning messages that often lie outside the level of conscious awareness of perpetrators. These hidden messages, however, have detrimental impact upon recipients through the contradictory metacommunications they convey. Some sample microaggressions and their hidden meanings are given next (taken from Sue, 2010; Sue & Capodilupo, 2008).

### Racial Microaggressions:

- A White man or woman clutches her purse or checks his wallet as a Black or Latino man approaches or passes them. (Hidden message: You and your group are criminals.)
- An Asian American, born and raised in the United States, is complimented for speaking "good English." (Hidden message: You are not a true American. You are a perpetual foreigner in your own country.)
- A Black couple is seated at a table in the restaurant next to the kitchen despite there being other empty and more desirable tables located at the front. (Hidden message: You are a second-class citizen and undeserving of first-class treatment.)

### Gender Microaggressions:

- An assertive female manager is labeled as a "bitch," while her male counterpart is described as "a forceful leader." (Hidden message: Women should be passive and allow men to be the decision makers.)
- A female physician wearing a stethoscope is mistaken for a nurse. (Hidden message: Women should occupy nurturing and not decision-making roles. Women are less capable than men).
- Whistles or catcalls are heard from men as a woman walks down the street. (Hidden message: Your body/appearance is for the enjoyment of men. You are a sex object.)

### Sexual Orientation Microaggressions:

- Students use the term "gay" to describe a fellow student who is socially ostracized. (Hidden message: People who are weird, strange, deviant, or different are "gay.")
- A lesbian client in therapy reluctantly discloses her sexual orientation to a straight therapist by stating she is "into women." The therapist indicates he is not shocked by the disclosure because he once had a client who was "into dogs." (Hidden message: Same-sex attraction is abnormal and deviant.)

- Two gay men hold hands in public and are told not to flaunt their sexuality. (Hidden message: Homosexual displays of affection are abnormal and offensive. Keep it private and to yourselves.)

As indicated previously, microaggressions can be based upon any group that is marginalized in this society. Religion, disability, and social class may also reflect the manifestation of microaggressions. Some of these examples include the following.

- When bargaining over the price of an item, a store owner says to a customer, "Don't try to Jew me down." (Hidden message: Jews are stingy and moneygrubbing.)
- A blind man reports that people often raise their voices when speaking to him. He responds by saying, "Please don't raise your voice; I can hear you perfectly well." (Hidden message: A person with a disability is defined as lesser in all aspects of physical and mental functioning).
- The outfit worn by a TV reality-show mom is described as "classless and trashy." (Hidden message: Lower-class people are tasteless and unsophisticated.)

## MARGINALITY AND OPPRESSION

Groups that are marginalized in our society exist on the lower or outer limits of social desirability and consciousness. Whether racial/ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, LGBTs, or women, these groups are perceived negatively, given less status in society, and confined to existing on the margins of our social, cultural, political, and economic systems. The result is often exclusion from the mainstream of life in our society, unequal treatment, and social injustice. The inferior status and treatment associated with marginality are constant, continuing, and cumulative experiences of socially devalued groups. Racial, gender, and sexual orientation microaggressions, for example, are active manifestations of marginality and/or a reflection of a worldview of inclusion/exclusion, superiority/inferiority, normality/abnormality, and desirability/undesirability (Sue, 2003). Because most people experience themselves as good, moral, and decent human beings, conscious awareness of their hidden biases, prejudices, and discriminatory behaviors threatens their self-image. Thus, they may engage in defensive maneuvers to deny their biases, to personally avoid talking about topics such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism, and to discourage others from bringing up such topics. On the one hand, these maneuvers serve to preserve the self-image of oppressors, but on the other, they silence the voices of the oppressed. In

other words, keeping oppression from being acknowledged and enforcing a conspiracy of silence allows oppressors to (1) maintain their innocence (guilt-free) and (2) leave inequities from being challenged (Sue, 2004).

Microaggressions reflect the active manifestation of oppressive worldviews that create, foster, and enforce marginalization. To be confined to the margins of existence in mainstream life is to be oppressed, persecuted, and subjugated; denied full rights of citizenship; imprisoned or trapped to a lower standard of living; stripped of one's humanity and dignity; denied equal access and opportunity; invalidated of one's experiential reality; and restricted or limited as to life choices (Freire, 1970; Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, 2000; Sue, 2004). Oppression can occur through imposition or deprivation. In both cases, they span a continuum from its direct/concrete nature to those with more symbolic or psychological manifestations and from being consciously perpetrated to being unintentional, indirect, and subtle.

## IMPOSITION

Oppression by imposition, force, coercion, and duress has been defined by Hanna and colleagues (2000) in the following way: "It is the act of imposing on another or others an object, label, role experience, or set of living conditions that is unwanted, needlessly painful, and detracts from physical or psychological well-being. An imposed object, in this context, can be anything from a bullet, a bludgeon, shackles, or fists, to a penis, unhealthy food, or abusive messages designed to cause or sustain pain, low self-efficacy, reduced self-determination, and so forth. Other examples of oppression by force can be demeaning hard labor, degrading job roles, ridicule, and negative media images and messages that foster and maintain distorted beliefs" (p. 431).

Most of us can immediately recognize the horror and heinous nature of overt and concrete acts of rape (imposition of a penis), torture (imposition of physical and psychological abuse), murder (taking away life), and unjust imprisonment as obvious forms of injustice and unfairness visited upon individuals and groups. Racial hate crimes, for example, are recognized by an overwhelming number of citizens as abhorrent actions that they strongly condemn. They are the actions of White supremacists such as Klan members and Skinheads. Good, moral, and decent folks do not condone such actions. Yet, acts of oppression by imposition or force *through microaggressions* can be many times more harmful to racial/ethnic minorities than hate crimes (Sue, 2010).

The power of microaggressions lies in their invisibility to perpetrators and oftentimes the recipients. The definition of oppression includes imposing "abusive messages" (microaggressions) that both reflect and perpetuate false beliefs about people of color. Those beliefs cause humiliation and pain, reduce

self-determination, confine them to lesser job roles and status in society, and deny them equal access and opportunities in education, employment, and health care. Most of the pain and detrimental impact of racism does not come from that of overt racists but from ordinary, normal, decent people who believe in life, liberty, and the pursuit of justice for all. They are unaware of their racial biases and prejudices but act them out in the form of racial microaggressions.

DEPRIVATION

Oppression can also take a second form—that of deprivation. It can be seen as the flip-side of imposition and involves depriving people of desired jobs, an education, health care, or living conditions necessary for physical and mental well-being. Food, clothing, shelter, love, respect, social support, or self-dignity can be wrested from any marginalized group (Hanna et al., 2000). In our history, we once banned the Sioux nation from practicing their spiritual and religious traditions, deprived them of their lands, and took away their dignity as Indigenous people in their own country. Taking away a group's humanity and integrity through forced compliance is a very common practice directed toward marginalized groups. When African American students are told to "calm down" and to speak objectively and without emotion because "emotion is antagonistic to reason" and when Asian Americans are admonished because they are too quiet and nonparticipative in classroom discussions, we are not only imposing Western standards of communication styles upon them but also depriving them of their cultural communication styles. When nursing home attendants address their elderly residents as "sweetie" and "dear," they are unaware of how these microaggressive terms belittle and infantilize the elderly and how they deprive them of their roles as capable and competent adults. "Elderspeak" has been identified as a very harmful and humiliating form of microaggression and can result in a downward spiral for older persons, low self-esteem, withdrawal, and depression (Leland, 2008).

## FORMS OF MICROAGGRESSIONS

Microaggressions may take three forms: (1) microassault, (2) microinsult, and (3) microinvalidation (Sue et al., 2007). Figure 1.1 briefly defines each, illustrates their relationship to one another, and lists some common hidden messages/denigrating themes under each category that are directed toward people of color. We use racial microaggressions to illustrate more specifically the forms they take when racism is the primary culprit. Please keep in mind that other marginalized groups either may share or may experience different
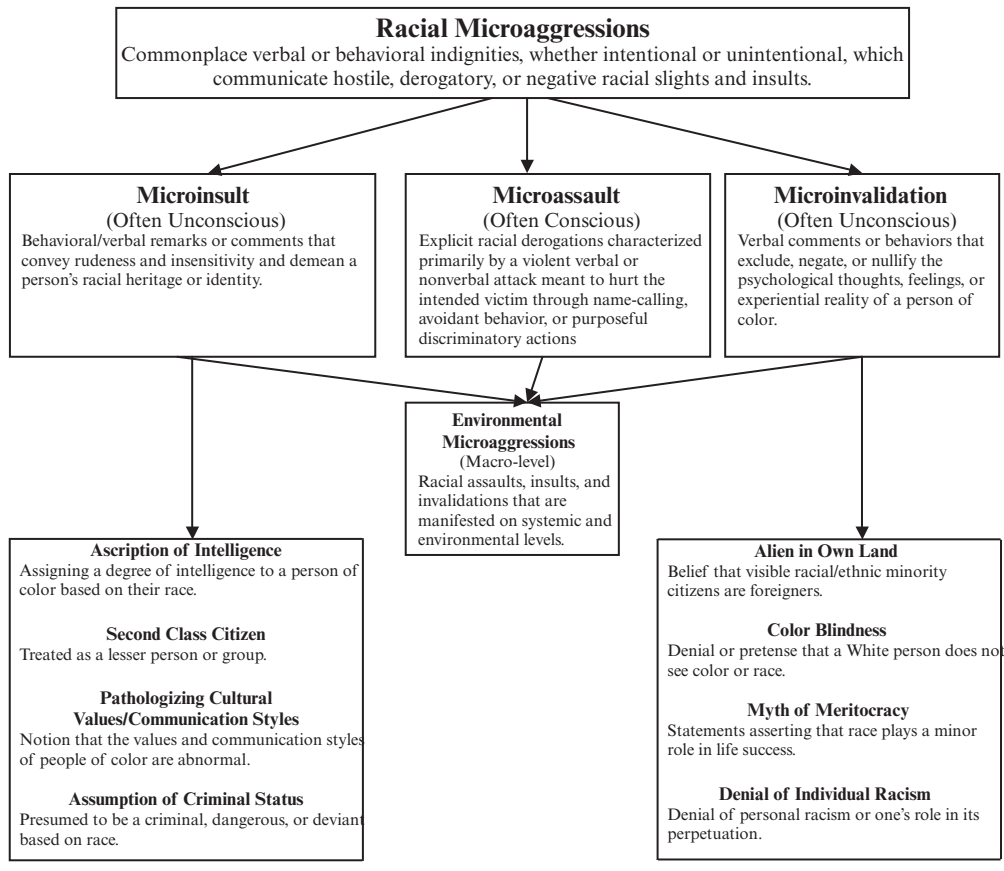
**Figure 1.1**  Categories and Relationship of Racial Microaggressions.  Reproduced from Sue et al. (2007, p. 278).

group-specific themes and hidden messages. Research on gender, sexual orientation, disability, class, and religious microaggressions is needed to identify commonalities and differences that may be directed toward other socially devalued groups.

MICROASSAULTS

Microassaults are conscious biased beliefs or attitudes that are held by individuals and intentionally expressed or acted out overtly or covertly toward a marginalized person or socially devalued group. They differ from the other two forms of microaggressions (to be discussed shortly) in that the perpetrator harbors conscious bias toward an identified and socially devalued group. This bias may be directly and publicly expressed through racist, sexist, or heterosexist statements (using racial epithets or making

catcalls toward women, for example) or acted out in any number of ways (preventing a son and daughter from dating or marrying outside of their race, giving second-class service to a woman, and so on). In extreme forms of microassaults, LGBTs may experience teasing and bullying in schools, isolation, physical violence, hate speech, and anti-LGBT legislation.

The case of Matthew Shepard, a gay University of Wyoming student who was tortured, beaten, and tied to a fence to die by two homophobic men, represents extreme acts of hate. Conscious-deliberate bigots generally possess a strong belief in the inferiority of a devalued group and will discriminate when an opportunity arises. Because of strong public condemnation of such undemocratic beliefs and actions, overt expressions of bigotry are most likely to occur when perpetrators feel safe to express their biases and/or they lose emotional control. Social scientists have referred to these forms of overt bigotry as "old-fashioned racism, sexism, or heterosexism" and believe that they have transformed into more disguised, subtle, and less conscious forms (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Salvatore & Shelton, 2007; Sue, 2010; Swim & Cohen, 1997). Interestingly, some research suggests that socially devalued groups may find it easier to deal with old-fashioned forms of bigotry, because no guesswork is involved in discerning the motives of the perpetrator. Unconscious and unintentional bias, however, is ambiguous, and subtle and prejudicial actions are less obvious. As we will shortly see, they create psychological dilemmas for marginalized group members.

MICROINSULTS

Microinsults are also forms of microaggressions, but they differ significantly from microassaults in that they likely occur outside the level of conscious awareness of the perpetrator. These are either interpersonal interactions (verbal/nonverbal) or environmental cues that communicate rudeness, insensitivity, slights, and insults that demean a person's racial, gender, sexual orientation, or group identity and heritage. Microinsults are subtle snubs often unconsciously disguised as a compliment or positive statement directed toward the target person or group. The contradictory communication starts with what appears to be a positive statement but is undermined with an insulting or negative metacommunication.

For example, an African American student who has done outstanding work in his economics class is told by the professor, "You are a credit to your race." On the conscious level, the professor appears to be complimenting the Black student, while on the other hand, the metacommunication contains an insulting message: "Blacks are generally not as intelligent as Whites. You are an exception to your people." This type of microinsult does several things: (1) it disguises a racial bias or prejudicial worldview of the perpetrator; (2) it

allows the perpetrator to cling to the belief in racial inferiority, albeit uncon-sciously; and (3) it oppresses and denigrates in a guilt-free manner.

Microinsults can take many other forms. For example, they can occur environmentally. Men who display nude pictures of women from *Hustler* or *Playboy* magazines in their places of employment (offices, desks, locker rooms, etc.) may be unknowingly contributing to sexual objectification. The hidden message is that women's bodies are not their own and they exist to service the sexual fantasies of men. The impact is to strip women of their humanity and the totality of their human essence (intelligence, emo-tions, personal attributes, and aspirations) and to relegate them to being only sexual beings. Environmental microaggressions are generally invisible to those in the majority group but quite visible to those groups most disem-powered (Sue, 2010). When a Fortune 400 company displays pictures of its past CEOs and presidents and they are all White males, there is a powerful metamessage being communicated to women and employees of color: "You will not feel comfortable working at this company." "You do not belong here." "People of color and women do not belong in leadership positions." "If you choose to stay, your advancement is limited."

## MICROINVALIDATIONS

Microinvalidations are similar to microinsults in that they generally occur outside the level of conscious awareness of perpetrators. However, this form of microaggression is perhaps the most insidious, damaging, and harmful form, because microinvalidations directly attack or deny the experiential realities of socially devalued groups (Sue, 2010). They accomplish this goal through interpersonal and environmental cues that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and experiences of the target group.

Color blindness, for example, is one of the most frequently delivered microinvalidations directed toward people of color. It can be defined as an unwillingness to acknowledge or admit to seeing race or a person's color. Such an orientation is predicated on the mistaken belief by many Whites that "not seeing color" means they are unbiased and free of racism. As a result, many Whites engage in defensive maneuvers not to appear racist by either pretend-ing not to see color or by actively avoiding any discussions associated with race (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Despite studies indicating that race and gender are two of the most easily identifiable qualities seen by people, color blindness and gender blindness inundate our everyday interactions. "There is only one race: the human race." "When I look at you, I don't see color." "We are all Americans." "Regardless of your gender or race, I believe the most qualified person should get the job." Such

statements and their orientation serve to deny the racial, gender, or sexual orientation reality and experiences of these groups. Sue (2010) has suggested that "the denial of differences is really a denial of power and privilege. The denial of power and privilege is really a denial of personal benefits that accrue to certain privileged groups by virtue of inequities." The ultimate denial is a denial that dominant group members profit from the isms of our society and a denial of personal responsibility to take action.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL DYNAMICS OF MICROAGGRESSIONS

In a previous publication, Sue and colleagues (2007) identified four major psychological dilemmas or dynamics created by microaggressions directed toward racial groups: (1) the clash of realities between the dominant group and socially devalued group members, (2) the invisibility of unintentional bias and discrimination, (3) the perceived minimal harm of microaggressions, and (4) the catch-22 of responding.  The analysis here is being broadened to include a number of different marginalized groups besides that of race.

### CLASH OF REALITIES

Studies reveal that culture and group-based experiences (racial, gender, sexual orientation, religious, and class) shape worldviews and influence the perception of reality of various groups (Babbington, 2008; Hanna et al., 2000; Sue, 2010). For example, the racial reality of people of color has been found to be significantly different from that of White Americans (Astor, 1997). Many Whites seem to believe that racism is no longer a significant problem (à la post-Obama race era), while many Blacks continue to report that their lives are filled with constant and continuing experiences of prejudice and discrimination. Women continue to report that sexism keeps them from rising to top managerial positions, that their contributions are not recognized by their male counterparts in the workplace, that they are not promoted when otherwise qualified, and that they encounter the glass ceiling frequently. Men, however, are fond of saying that "competence will rise to the top" regardless of gender and that "you've come a long way, baby."

Such differences in racial, gender, or sexual orientation realities is most pronounced when a significant power differential exists between groups that hold power and those who are most disempowered (Sue, 2003). Whites hold greater power over people of color. Men hold greater power than women. Straights possess greater power than LGBTs, able-bodied people are more likely to have power over those with disabilities, and those with wealth hold greater power over the poor or less affluent. "True power," however, is in a group's ability to define reality (Guthrie, 1998; Hanna et al., 2000; Keltner &

Robinson, 1996). In general, mainstream groups hold the ability to define reality through the tools of education, mass media, and social institutions. When children are taught by parents, the mass media, and schools that LGBTs are sick or deviant, when people of color are portrayed as dangerous and unintelligent, and when women are stereotyped as the weaker sex and less capable in leadership positions, a system of hierarchy and access to privilege and power is established in our society.

Racial, gender, and sexual orientation microaggressions, especially micro-insults and microinvalidations, operate from an imposed reality that is outside the level of conscious awareness when the beliefs, biases, and false assumptions are defined as truth and normative. Thus, if racism, sexism, and hetero-sexism are believed to no longer be a major problem and if normality is based upon White, male, and "straight" standards, then those who differ from them are defined as abnormal and problematic. We have already indicated that microaggressions are reflections of worldviews of inclusion/exclusion and normality/abnormality. When racial microaggressions are delivered by well-intentioned White brothers and sisters, perpetrators are unlikely to be aware of the biased hidden messages they are sending to people of color. Herein lies a major dilemma. If motives and the insulting messages of perpetrators are outside awareness, how do we make the "invisible" visible? In other words, when a clash of racial realities occurs, whose reality is likely to hold sway? Whose reality will be judged to be the true reality? The answer, unfortunately, is that the group who holds the greatest power has the ability to impose reality on less powerful groups.

Let us try to address these questions from the perspectives of both perpetrators and targets using racial microaggressions as an example. In studies dealing with racial microaggressions in the classroom (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009), it was found that (1) racial micro-aggressions were often instigators to difficult dialogues on race, (2) students of color could identify and define them quite well, (3) White students had difficulties understanding what they had done or said that was racially offensive, and (4) Whites often became defensive and labeled students of color as "oversensitive" and even "paranoid." Additionally, similar findings regarding White professors were found (Sue et al.). They had great difficulty recognizing racial microaggressions committed by White students; more importantly, they were equally baffled in identifying them when they themselves were the perpetrators!

One common racial microaggression delivered by well-intentioned White teachers can be seen in the following example. Black students often report that when they make a particularly insightful or intelligent comment in class, both White students and White professors act surprised. A common reaction by

professors is to compliment the student with a remark such as "That was a most articulate, intelligent, and insightful analysis." On the surface, this is a compliment that many students, regardless of race, should find flattering. Yet, many Black students report being uncomfortable with the remark, and some report being very offended. The hidden racial microaggressive message, they contend, is that it reflects a belief that African Americans generally lack intelligence and are less capable. Thus, when one of them exhibits insight and intellect, it is surprising and unusual. The microaggressive message does two things: (1) it reflects a biased belief that African Americans are less capable than Whites, and (2) it allows the perpetrator to cling to the widespread belief in the inferiority of Blacks, even in the face of contradictory evidence (he or she is an exception).

When targets of microaggressions attempt to point out the offensive nature of remarks and actions from perpetrators, they are told that their perceptions are inaccurate, that they are oversensitive, or that they are paranoid. In other words, they are out of touch with reality. The experiential realities of those in power are imposed upon less powerful groups by denying their perceptions and life experiences. Interestingly, some have asserted or found that those groups who are least empowered have the most accurate assessment of reality (Hanna et al., 2000; Keltner & Robinson, 1996; Sue, 2003). Such a conclusion makes common sense, as those in power do not need to understand disempowered groups to survive or do well, while those without much power must actively discern the mindset and motives of those with power in order to survive. Women in the workforce must understand the thinking of their male counterparts to do well, but the reciprocal is not true for men.

INVISIBILITY OF UNINTENTIONAL BIAS

Research on aversive racism (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002), subtle sexism (Swim et al., 2001), and heterosexism (Herek, 1998)has shown that socialization and cultural conditioning fosters unconscious biases and misinformation about various marginalized groups in our society; some research even suggests that cultural conditioning can actually connect prejudices to emotions in a neurological manner (Abelson, Dasgupta, Park, & Banaji, 1998). Thus, it is highly possible and even probable that most people have unconsciously inherited the cultural biases of their forebears and that of society.

The concept of aversive racism is central to our understanding of micro-aggressions (Dovidio, Gaertner, Penner, Pearson, & Norton, 2009; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). Simply defined, aversive racism is a contemporary form of

bias: It is an insidious and less conspicuous form of racism that hides in the assumptions/beliefs/values of well-intentioned people and is difficult to identify in its motivational manifestations. This is especially true when such biases are invisible to perpetrators and are unintentional in nature. According to Dovidio and colleagues, aversive racists truly believe they are nonprejudiced, consciously hold egalitarian values, and would never deliberately discriminate; yet, they are likely to harbor unconscious biases that may result in discriminatory actions. Studies reveal that training and education may be successful in confronting and lessening conscious biases, stereotypes, and preconceived notions but that implicit biases generally remain untouched and unaffected (Boysen & Vogel, 2008).

Because most people experience themselves as good, moral, and decent human beings, they find it difficult to entertain the notion that they may have acted in a racist, sexist, or heterosexist manner. Thus, in addition to holding hidden biases, getting them to confront their prejudices and discriminatory actions threatens their self-image as someone who stands for equality, justice, and respect for everyone. Two layers of resistance are present: (1) the unawareness and unintentionality of their prejudices and discriminatory actions and (2) the need to preserve their self-image as an unbiased and good person. If one's prejudices are unconscious, if one's discriminatory actions are unintentional, and if one's self-image is locked into a belief of one's inherent goodness, the challenges and questions become: How do we make the invisible visible? How do we reach people so that they can become aware of their biases? How do we make people see the harm perpetrated against socially devalued groups in our society? The last question leads us to the third psychological dilemma posed by microaggressions.

PERCEIVED MINIMAL HARM

Even when people acknowledge that they may have made an innocent offensive remark, it is often described as a small slight and the impact is minimized. The recipients of the insults are usually encouraged to "let it go" and "get over it." Such advice, however, is easier said than done and in itself may constitute a microaggression, because it denies the harmful impact and experiential reality of such biases. Indeed, racial microaggressions are often described as banal and minor offenses and as trivial in nature.

Overwhelming evidence exists, however, that far from being trivial, microaggressions have major consequences for marginalized groups. Their cumulative nature and continuing day-in and day-out experience have been found to (1) contribute to a hostile and invalidating campus and work climate (Dovidio et al., 2009; Rowe, 1990; Solórzano et al., 2000), (2) devalue social group identities (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008), (3) lower work productivity

and educational learning (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007; Sue, 2010), (4) perpetuate stereotype threat (Cardinu, Maas, Rosabianca, & Kiesner, 2005; Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002), (5) create physical health problems (Brondolo, Rieppi, Kelly, & Gerin, 2003; Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999), and (6) assail mental health by creating emotional turmoil, low self-esteem, and psychological energy depletion (Sue, 2010).

Microaggressions are also found to create disparities in health care, education, and employment (Sue, 2010) because they are based upon a biased worldview that is manifested in hiring, retention, and promotion decisions in the workplace; that reduces the quality of education received by students of color, for example; and that may result in lower quality of health care for certain groups. Persons of color, LGBTs, women, people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups are subjected to chronic, continuing, and daily microaggressive stressors from well-intentioned individuals who are unaware of the insults, slights, and demeaning actions they visit upon these groups. Sue (2010) has summarized how microaggressive stress can be manifested through four identifiable pathways:

1. *Biological and physical effects:* Stress has been associated with increased susceptibility to illness and may affect the course of a disease (Keltner & Dowben, 2007; Underwood, 2005). Early studies on the life-change model of stress have found that the accumulation of small changes could be additive and become a potent form of stress equal to the effect of a major catastrophic trauma (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). When these stresses summate and act together, they are strongly correlated with increased illnesses and severity. As we have repeatedly emphasized, race-related, gender-related, and sexual-orientation-related stresses (microaggressions) are anything but insignificant. Women who perceived greater job stress related to bias had higher fibrinogen levels, believed to be correlated with coronary heart disease (Davis, Mathews, Meilahn, & Kiss, 1995); LGBTs who experienced greater levels of microaggressions reported more health-related problems; and it has been shown that race-related stress negatively affects the biological health of persons of color (Brondolo et al., 2008; Clark et al., 1999).

2. *Emotional effects:* Racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of bias directed toward socially devalued groups have been shown to affect their emotional well-being, psychological adjustment, and mental health (Buser, 2009; Moradi, Van den Berg, & Epting, 2009; Utsey & Hook, 2007). Anxiety, feelings of alienation, subjective well-being, and exhaustion may be associated with the experience of group-specific microaggressions (Harrell, 2000; Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pedersen, 2006; Sue, 2010). Depression, for example, has been found to be related to gender (women are more likely to report

these feelings and to exhibit a diagnosable disorder; Strickland, 1992). Gender role conflicts; overt, covert, and subtle sexism; subservient roles to men; and lower sense of self-control have all been suggested as possible causes (Hill & Fischer, 2008; Sue, Sue, & Sue, 2010).

3. *Cognitive effects:* The effects of microaggressions can be classified under three processes: (1) attempts to make meaning of an incident with potential microaggressive overtones, (2) disrupted cognitive processing, and (3) stereotype threat. First, when a microaggressive incident occurs, considerable energy is expended toward attempting to make sense of the situation. (Was this a microaggression? Did what happened really happen? Was this a compliment or a slight? If the latter, how should I respond? If I do, what will be the consequences?) Second, these questions or attempts to understand what has occurred cause cognitive disruption, so the person is unable to focus directly on the task at hand. At work, productivity may be affected, or at school, the student may be less likely to solve problems. Third, stereotype threat may be activated in the mind of the person, leading to lowered performance.

4. *Behavioral effects:* Microaggressions can signal a hostile or invalidating climate that threatens the physical and emotional safety of the devalued group, assails self-esteem, and imposes forced compliance (oppression) upon them. Sue (2010) has summarized five behavioral effects of microaggressions when directed toward marginalized groups: (1) hypervigilance/skepticism (suspiciousness toward the majority group), (2) forced compliance (surviving or being co-opted), (3) rage and anger, (4) fatigue and hopelessness, and (5) strength through adversity. This last behavioral attribute is related to the development of functional survival skills used to negotiate hostile and demeaning microaggressions directed toward the individual or group.

It is clear from an analysis of the harmful and detrimental consequences of microaggressions that marginalized groups in our society suffer biologically, emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally. Microaggressions are far from banal and insignificant slights; they are oppressive and harmful to the well-being of many groups in our society.

THE CATCH-22 OF RESPONDING TO MICROAGGRESSIONS

Microaggressions, especially microinsults and microinvalidations, place socially devalued group members in an unenviable position of (1) trying to ascertain the motivations behind the actions of perpetrators and (2) deciding whether and how to respond. Since many microaggressions are likely to be delivered unintentionally and their real motives are not conscious to the

perpetrator, they are usually filled with double meanings and/or are very ambiguous. On a conscious level, dominant group members who engage in unconscious microaggressions believe they are acting in an unbiased manner, complimenting the target, or making a rationale decision. When a statement such as "I believe the most qualified person should get the job" is made to a female job candidate, the job seeker is caught in a double bind: On the one hand, the statement is valid and reasonable, but on the other hand, experience has shown the woman job hunter that it can be used to justify not hiring women and offering such positions to male candidates. When students of color are seldom called upon by a White professor to answer questions, is this a random act, or is the professor operating from an unconscious assumption that minorities are less likely to have intelligent comments or answers to class problems? The term "attributional ambiguity" has been given to motivational uncertainty in that the motives and meanings of a person's actions are unclear and hazy. Studies suggest that attributional ambiguity depletes psychological energy by diverting attention away from other important tasks (problem solving in classrooms and work productivity in the workplace; Cardinu et al., 2005; Sue, Lin, & Rivera, 2009).

Second, a catch-22 is often induced in the recipient of microaggressions. The conflict involves how to respond to the person when a remark or action conveys a demeaning insult or offense.

In the face of an offensive group-specific comment, the target is placed in a "damned if you do and damned if you don't" situation. That is, if the person does nothing, he or she may suffer from a sense of low self-esteem, a feeling of not being true to the self, and a loss of self-integrity. Yet, to confront the perpetrator or to raise the issue may result in negative consequences. Sue (2010) has observed that most marginalized group members choose or are forced to do nothing. He proposes several reasons for this common reaction.

1. *Attributional ambiguity:* As mentioned, the person is thrown into a very confusing and ambiguous situation, making it difficult to conclude whether an offense has occurred. This is especially true when the perpetrator seems to be a well-intentioned individual.
2. *Response indecision:* Even when a microaggression is obvious to the target, the person may be at a loss as to how best to respond: "If I express anger, the perpetrator will only become defensive." "Should I try a rational approach?" "What is the best way to react and point out its impact upon me?"
3. *Time-limited nature of responding:* In most cases, microaggressions occur quickly and are embedded in the larger context of a communication. The instantaneous nature of microaggressions leaves little time to respond.

By the time a response is considered, the conversation or event may have changed or moved on to something else.

4. *Denying experiential reality:* Many marginalized group members may engage in self-deception and deny that their close neighbor, partner, or friend engaged in an offensive action toward them. In most cases, the person has a need to cling to the belief that the microaggressor does not look down (even unconsciously) upon their race, gender, sexual orientation, and so on.

5. *Impotency of actions:* This is a common reaction—the belief that any action taken will not do any good or will have minimal impact on the microaggressor or situation. Individuals may simply give up or develop a sense of hopelessness. On the other hand, some may simply realize that actions will do little good and desire to conserve their energies and efforts for larger battles.

Ever present in the awareness of marginalized group members is the power differential that generally exists between perpetrators and targets. Should a Latina/o student who is the target of microaggressions from fellow White students or even from the professor raise the issue? In this case, the Latina/o student may be outnumbered in the class by fellow White students who will be unable to see the microaggression; they may become defensive, or they may see the Latina/o student as oversensitive. Additionally, the power differential becomes especially clear if a White professor is involved. Questions and thoughts likely to race through the mind of the student include: "Will the professor be offended?" "Will the professor think less of me?" "Will I get a poor grade in his or her class?" "May be I should just do nothing and let it go."

## THE WAY FORWARD: ABOUT THIS EDITED BOOK

All interpersonal interactions that involve race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, disability, and so forth may be prone to microaggressions. While the concept of racial microaggressions is not new (Pierce et al., 1978), their impact on academic climates (Solórzano et al., 2000), work sites (Sue et al., 2009), mental health (Sue & Capodilupo, 2008), and the development of a working taxonomy (Sue et al., 2007) has gained high visibility in only recent years. As the understanding of the psychological dynamics of racial microaggressions has developed, many other marginalized groups have begun to translate how microaggressions may be tied to group-specific stereotypes,biases, and misinformation. In the book *Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation,* Sue (2010) summarized and offered a conceptual framework to view how three major sociodemographic

groups shared similarities and differences in life experiences related to an ethnocentric, monocultural perspective that socially devalued certain groups in our society.

In this edited book, *Microaggressions and Marginalized Groups in Society*, we attempt to provide a unique cutting-edge text that expands the concepts of microaggressions to include many marginalized groups in our society. It presents the most recent scholarly research and formulations on race, gender, sexual orientation, gender, religion, class, and disability microaggressions. We believe this text will be in high demand for courses in the social sciences, education, and those that are related to topics of marginality, social justice, and prejudice and discrimination.

While much has been written about contemporary forms of racism, sexism, and homophobia, many studies in health care, education, law, employment, mental health, and social settings indicate the difficulty of describing and defining discrimination that occurs via "implicit bias"; it is difficult to identify, quantify, and rectify because of its subtle, nebulous, and unnamed nature. The subtle isms of our society remain relatively invisible and potentially harmful to the well-being, self-esteem, and standard of living of many marginalized groups in society. These daily common experiences of aggression may have significantly more influence on anger, frustration, and self-esteem than traditional overt forms of racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Furthermore, their invisible nature prevents perpetrators from realizing and confronting their own complicity in creating psychological dilemmas for minorities and their role in creating disparities in employment, health care, and education.

The text discusses the manifestation, psychological dynamics, and impact of microaggressions on the well-being of marginalized groups and will elucidate their role in creating disparities in education, employment, and health care. The text is unique because it (1) pulls together in an integrated fashion the relationship of marginality to group-specific microaggressions (race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and religious orientation), (2) contains both conceptual and qualitative research pieces, and (3) allows for comparing and contrasting similarities and differences between and among multiple marginalized groups.

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