

SECTION ONE

**Psychological  
Manifestation and  
Dynamics of  
Microaggressions**

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# The Manifestation of Racial, Gender, and Sexual-Orientation Microaggressions

*Standing before his classroom, Charles Richardson, a White professor, asked for questions from the class. He had just finished a lecture on Greco-Roman contributions to the history of psychology. An African American male student raised his hand.*

*When called upon, the student spoke in a frustrated manner, noting that the history of psychology was “ethnocentric and Eurocentric” and that it left out the contributions of other societies and cultures. The student seemed to challenge the professor by noting that the contributions of African, Latin American, and Asian psychologies were never covered.*

*The professor responded, “Robert, I want you to calm down. We are studying American psychology in this course and we will eventually address how it has influenced and been adapted to Asian and other societies. I plan to also talk about how systems and theories of psychology contain universal applications.”*

*Rather than defusing the situation, however, Professor Richardson sensed that his response had raised the level of tension among several students of color. Another Black male student then stated, “Perhaps we are looking at this issue from different perspectives or worldviews. Just as language affects how we define problems, maybe we all need to evaluate our assumptions and beliefs. Maybe we are ethnocentric. Maybe*

*there are aspects of psychology that apply across all populations. Maybe we need to dialogue more and be open to alternative interpretations."*

*Throughout the semester, the professor had sensed increasing resentment among his students of color over the course content (he could not understand the reasons) and he welcomed the opportunity to say something positive about their classroom contributions. He responded, "Justin [who is a Black student], I appreciate your exceptionally thoughtful and intelligent observation. You are a most articulate young man with good conceptual and analytical skills. This is the type of nonjudgmental analysis and objectivity needed for good dialogues. We need to address these issues in a calm, unemotional, and reasoned manner."*

*To the professor's surprise, Justin and several other students of color seemed offended and insulted by the praise.*

*Kathleen, a graduating MBA business major, was conservatively dressed in her black blazer and matching skirt as she rode the number 1 subway train from Columbia University to downtown Manhattan. This would be her second job interview with a major brokerage firm and she was excited, sensing that her first interview with a midlevel manager had gone very well. She had been asked to return to be interviewed by the department vice president. Kathleen knew she was one of three finalists, but also sensed her advantage in having specialized and unique training that was of interest to the company.*

*During the train ride, Kathleen endured the usual smattering of admiring glances, as well as a few more lecherous stares. As she exited a very crowded subway train at Times Square, she attempted to squeeze out between the streams of commuters entering the train car. One man, seeing her dilemma, firmly placed his hand on her lower back to escort her out onto the platform. With his left arm, he steered her toward the exit and they walked briskly toward the stairs, where the crowd thinned. Upon separating, the man smiled and nodded, obviously believing he had acted in a chivalrous manner. Kathleen didn't appreciate being touched without her permission, but thanked him anyway.*

*During the interview, the vice president seemed very casual and relaxed. She noted, however, that he referred to male employees as "Mr. X" and to female employees by their first names. Several times he called her "Kathy." She thought about telling him that she preferred "Kathleen," but didn't want to alienate her potential employer. She very much wanted the job. When she inquired about the criteria the company would use to hire for the position, the vice president joked, "What do you need a job for, anyway? You can always find a good man."*

*When Kathleen did not laugh and remained serious, the vice president quickly said, "I believe the most qualified person should be offered the position. We treat all men*

*and women equally. In fact, I don't even think about employees as men or women. People are people and everyone has an equal opportunity to be hired and succeed."*

*Kathleen felt very uncomfortable with the response. She left the interview knowing she would not be offered the position.*

What do these incidents have in common?

In both case vignettes, racial and gender microaggressions were being unconsciously delivered—in the classroom by a well-intentioned professor, in the subway station by a fellow commuter, and in the job interview by a vice president. The term “racial microaggressions” was first coined by Chester Pierce in the 1970s to refer to the everyday subtle and often automatic “put-downs” and insults directed toward Black Americans (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978). While his theorizing focused solely on racial microaggressions, it is clear that microaggressions can be expressed toward any marginalized group in our society; they can be gender-based, sexual orientation-based, class-based, or disability-based (Sue & Capodilupo, 2008). In this book I have decided to concentrate on three forms of microaggressions—race, gender, and sexual orientation—to illustrate the hidden and damaging consequences of the more subtle forms of bias and discrimination that harm persons of color, women, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered persons (LGBTs).

Microaggressions are the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). Perpetrators are usually unaware that they have engaged in an exchange that demeans the recipient of the communication. During the 2008 presidential campaign, for example, Republican Senator John McCain appeared at a political rally taking questions from his supporters. One elderly White woman, speaking into a handheld microphone, haltingly stated, “I don’t trust Obama. He’s an Arab.”

McCain shook his head, quickly took the microphone, and said, “No ma’am. He’s a decent family man, a citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with. He’s not!”

At first glance, John McCain’s defense of then-candidate Barak Obama appeared admirable. After all, he was correcting misinformation and defending a political rival. Upon reflection, however, his response, while well-intentioned, represented a major microaggression. Let us briefly analyze the interaction, the words used, and their hidden meanings.

First, it was obvious that the elderly woman believed that there was something bad or wrong with being an Arab. Equating mistrust with a person's nationality or religion, especially being Muslim or of Middle Eastern heritage, has resurged since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Similarly, during World War II Japanese Americans were interned because they were suspected as being more loyal to Japan, a threat to national security, and potential spies. Throughout history and to the present time, people of color continue to evoke fears and biases in White people who view them as potential criminals, less trustworthy, and undesirable (Feagin, 2001; Jones, 1997; Sue, 2003).

Second, McCain's denial that Obama was an Arab, and rather that he was a "decent family man," seems to indicate that, at some level, he too has bought into the perception that Middle Easterners and Muslims were somewhat less than decent human beings.

Third, the hidden message of this microaggression (communicated by the woman and probably shared at an unconscious level by McCain) was that Arabs cannot be trusted because they are potential terrorists. Being a Middle Easterner was akin to being a potential threat to national security, and to the safety of "true Americans."

Last, the question we ask is this: "Can't Middle Eastern men be good, moral, and decent family men as well?" According to former Secretary of Defense Collin Powell, who appeared on a Sunday news program following the televised exchange, the more appropriate response would have been: "No ma'am, he's not an Arab. But what would be wrong if he were?"

Critics have accused researchers of exaggerating the detrimental impact of microaggressions by making a "mountain out of a molehill" (Schacht, 2008; Thomas, 2008). After all, the example given above may seem minor and trivial. What great harm was done? This is certainly a worthwhile question to ask. As we will shortly see, microaggressions are constant and continuing experiences of marginalized groups in our society; they assail the self-esteem of recipients, produce anger and frustration, deplete psychic energy, lower feelings of subjective well-being and worthiness, produce physical health problems, shorten life expectancy, and deny minority populations equal access and opportunity in education, employment, and health care (Brondolo et al., 2008; Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Franklin, 1999; King, 2005; Noh & Kaspar, 2003; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Wei, Ku, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Liao, 2008; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003; Yoo & Lee, 2008).

Any one microaggression alone may be minimally impactful, but when they occur continuously throughout a lifespan, their cumulative nature can have major detrimental consequences (Holmes & Holmes, 1970; Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Meyer, 1995, 2003; Utsey, Giesbrecht, Hook, & Stanard, 2008; Utsey & Ponterotto, 1999). Many Whites, for example, fail to realize that people of color from the moment of birth are subjected to multiple racial microaggressions from the media, peers, neighbors, friends, teachers, and even in the educational process and/or curriculum itself. These insults and indignities are so pervasive that they are often unrecognized. Let's discuss the two case vignettes that open this chapter in terms of the origin, manifestation, and impact of microaggressions on two sociodemographic dimensions: race and gender.

## RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

*Racism* may be defined as any attitude, action, institutional structure, or social policy that subordinates persons or groups because of their color (Jones, 1997; Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pederson, 2006). The subordination of people of color is manifested in inferior housing, education, employment, and health services (Sue, 2003). The complex manifestation of racism can occur at three different levels: individual, institutional, and cultural (Jones, 1997).

Individual racism is best known to the American public as overt, conscious, and deliberate individual acts intended to harm, place at a disadvantage, or discriminate against racial minorities. Serving Black patrons last, using racial epithets, preventing a White son or daughter from dating or marrying a person of color, or not showing clients of color housing in affluent White neighborhoods are all examples. At the other end of the spectrum, hate crimes against people of color and other marginalized groups represent extreme forms of overt individual racism. In two incidents occurring in 1998, Matthew Shepard, a student at the University of Wyoming, was tortured and murdered because he was a homosexual, and James Byrd was killed by being beaten, chained, and dragged naked behind a pick-up truck until beheaded, solely because he was Black.

*Institutional racism* is any policy, practice, procedure, or structure in business, industry, government, courts, churches, municipalities, schools, and so forth, by which decisions and actions are made that unfairly subordinate persons of color while allowing other groups to profit from the outcomes. Examples of

these include racial profiling, segregated churches and neighborhoods, discriminatory hiring and promotion practices, and educational curricula that ignore and distort the history of minorities. Institutional bias is often masked in the policies of standard operating procedures (SOPs) that are applied equally to everyone, but which have outcomes that disadvantage certain groups while advantaging others.

*Cultural racism* is perhaps the most insidious and damaging form of racism because it serves as an overarching umbrella under which individual and institutional racism thrives. It is defined as the individual and institutional expression of the superiority of one group's cultural heritage (arts/crafts, history, traditions, language, and values) over another group's, and the power to impose those standards upon other groups (Sue, 2004). For example, Native Americans have at times been forbidden to practice their religions ("We are a Christian people") or to speak in their native tongues ("English is superior"), and in contemporary textbooks the histories or contributions of people of color have been neglected or distorted ("Western history and civilization are superior"). These are all examples of cultural racism.

As awareness of overt racism has increased, however, people have become more sophisticated in recognizing the overt expressions of individual, institutional, and cultural bigotry and discrimination. Because of our belief in equality and democracy, and because of the Civil Rights movement, we as a nation now strongly condemn racist, sexist, and heterosexist acts because they are antithetical to our stated values of fairness, justice, and nondiscrimination (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002; Sears, 1988). Unfortunately, this statement may apply only at the conscious level.

### *The Changing Face of Racism*

Although overt expressions of racism (hate crimes, physical assaults, use of racial epithets, and blatant discriminatory acts) may have declined, some argue that its expression has morphed into a more contemporary and insidious form that hides in our cultural assumptions/beliefs/values, in our institutional policies and practices, and in the deeper psychological recesses of our individual psyches (DeVos & Banaji, 2005; Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson 2002; Nelson, 2006; Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, & Torino, 2008). In other words, race experts believe that racism has become invisible, subtle, and more indirect, operating below the level of conscious awareness, and continuing to oppress in unseen ways. This contemporary manifestation has various names: symbolic



racism (Sears, 1988), modern racism (McConahay, 1986), implicit racism (Banaji, Hardin, & Rothman, 1993), and aversive racism (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1996).

Aversive racism is closely related to the concept of racial microaggressions. Dovidio and Gaertner (1996) believe that most White people experience themselves as good, moral, and decent human beings who would never intentionally discriminate against others on the basis of race. Their studies reveal, however, that it is difficult for anyone born and raised in the United States to be immune from inheriting racial biases. In fact, many Whites who may be classified as well-educated liberals appear to be aversive racists. Aversive racists truly believe they are nonprejudiced, espouse egalitarian values, and would never consciously discriminate, but they, nevertheless, harbor unconscious biased attitudes that may result in discriminatory actions. Dovidio & Gaertner (1991, 1993, 1996, 2000) have produced many studies in support of this conclusion

Racial microaggressions are most similar to aversive racism in that they generally occur below the level of awareness of well-intentioned people (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007; Sue & Capodilupo, 2008), but researchers of microaggressions focus primarily on describing the dynamic interplay between perpetrator and recipient, classifying everyday manifestations, deconstructing hidden messages, and exploring internal (psychological) and external (disparities in education, employment, and health care) consequences. Let us return to our opening chapter example to illustrate the dynamic interplay of racial microaggressions between the professor and the Black students.

The Black students in the class suffered a series of racial microaggressions that were unconsciously and unintentionally delivered by Professor Richardson. Rather than thinking he was insulting or invalidating students of color, the professor believed he was teaching the “real” history of psychology, teaching students to think and communicate in an objective fashion, and giving praise to a Black student. While that might have been his conscious intent, the hidden messages being received by students of color via racial microaggressions were perceived as invalidating and demeaning.

First, the professor seems to not even entertain the notion that the history of psychology and the curriculum comes from a primarily White Eurocentric perspective that alienates and/or fails to capture the experiential reality of students of color (cultural racism). Racial microaggressions, in this case, can be environmental in that the readings, lectures, and content of the course come from only one perspective and do not present the historical totality of all groups in our society or global community. Robert Guthrie (1998), an

African American psychologist, in the late 1970s produced the first edition of his now classic book *Even the Rat Was White*, which took psychology to task for being primarily a White Eurocentric field, neglecting the contributions of people of color in historical storytelling, and for unintentionally elevating the contributions of one group (primarily White males), while denigrating Asian, African, and Latin American contributors through “benign neglect.” The hidden message to students of color was that American psychology is superior (other psychologies are inferior), that it is universal, and that students of color should accept this “reality.” White students are affirmed in this curriculum, but students of color feel that their identities are constantly assailed in the classroom. Black students are likely to expend considerable emotional energy protecting their own integrity while at the same time being distracted from fully engaging in the learning process (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009).

Second, Professor Richardson seems to equate rational discourse with approaching topics in a calm and objective manner. When he tells the Black student to “calm down” or implies that they are “too emotional,” the Professor may unintentionally be delivering another racial microaggression with multiple hidden fears, assumptions, and biased values: (a) Blacks are prone to emotional outbursts, can get out of control, and may become violent; (b) emotion is antagonistic to reason and conversations should be unemotional and objective in the classroom; and (c) the communication style of many Blacks is dysfunctional and should be discouraged (Sue & Sue, 2008). Pathologizing Black communication and learning styles has been identified as a common microaggression directed toward African Americans (Constantine & Sue, 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, et al., 2008). Studies suggest that communication and learning styles of Black Americans may differ from those of Whites (DePaulo, 1992; Kochman, 1981); for example, affect, emotion, and passion are considered positive attributes of the communication process because they indicate sincere interest and seriousness toward the material or subject matter, while objectivity and unemotional responses indicate insincerity and lack of connection.

Third, Professor Richardson’s compliment toward Justin’s intelligent analysis of both perspectives and his ability to articulate the issues well was found to be offensive by some of the Black students. Why? To answer this question requires an understanding of historical racial stereotypes and their interactional dynamics. This situation is very similar to what occurred in the 2007 to 2008 democratic presidential primaries when both Senators Joe

Biden (White) and Barak Obama (Black) announced their candidacies. After announcing his presidential run, Mr. Biden was asked by a reporter about the public's wild enthusiasm for a Black candidate, Barak Obama. Joe Biden responded, "I mean, you got the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy. I mean, that's a story-book, man."

There was an immediate uproar from many in the Black community who considered the statement insulting and offensive. To them, it represented a racial microaggression. Senator Biden, for his part, could not understand why a positive comment toward a fellow Democrat would evoke anger from Black Americans. It is important for us to understand that messages oftentimes contain multiple meanings. While on the surface the comment by Biden can be interpreted as praise, the metacommunication (hidden message) communicated to Blacks is "Obama is an exception. Most Blacks are unintelligent, inarticulate, dirty, and unattractive." Such a racial microaggression allows the perpetrator to acknowledge and praise a person of color, but also allows him or her to express group stereotypes. In other words, while praising the Black student might have come from the professor's best intentions, the comment was experienced as a microaggression because it seemed to indicate that the professor was surprised that a Black student could be capable of such insightful and intelligent observations.

## GENDER MICROAGGRESSIONS

Like racism, sexism can operate at an overt conscious level or at a covert and less conscious one (Swim & Cohen, 1997). Blatant, unfair, and unequal treatment toward women can be manifested in sexual harassment, physical abuse, discriminatory hiring practices, or in women being subjected to a hostile, predominantly male work environment. Like overt racism and hate crimes, such sexist acts are strongly condemned by our society and many men have become increasingly sensitive to their sexist actions (Sue & Sue, 2008). As our society has become more aware of what constitutes sexism and its harmful impact on women, the conscious, intentional, and deliberate forms of gender bias have seemingly decreased, but also continue in the form of subtle and unintentional expressions (Butler & Geis, 1990; Fiske, 1993; Swim & Cohen, 1997). These subtle forms of sexism are similar to aversive racism in that they come from well-intentioned men who believe in gender equality and would never deliberately discriminate against women. Yet, they unknowingly engage

in behaviors that place women at a disadvantage, infantilize or stereotype them, and treat them in such a manner as to deny them equal access and opportunity (Benokraitis, 1997; Fiske & Stevens, 1993; Swim, Aiken, Hall, & Hunter, 1995).

According to women, gender microaggressions occur frequently and they devalue their contributions, objectify them as sex objects, dismiss their accomplishments, and limit their effectiveness in social, educational, employment, and professional settings (Banaji & Greenwald, 1995; Benokraitis, 1997; Morrison & Morrison, 2002). In the world of work, for example, many women describe a pattern of being overlooked, disrespected, and dismissed by their male colleagues. During team meetings in which a female employee may contribute an idea, the male CEO may not respond to it or seemingly not hear the idea. However, when a male coworker makes the identical statement, he may be recognized and praised by the executive and fellow colleagues. It has been observed that in classrooms, male students are more frequently called upon to speak or answer questions by their teachers than are female students. The hidden messages in these microaggressions are that women's ideas and contributions are less worthy than their male counterparts.

In the second vignette involving Kathleen's job interview, several common gender microaggressions were delivered to her by well-intentioned fellow male commuters and the interviewer.

First, it is not unusual for attractive young women to get admiring glances from men. Upon entering the subway train, Kathleen noted the looks that she received from male passengers, seemed to enjoy being noticed, but also experienced a few stares as "lecherous." This is a double-edged sword that some women seem to face: wanting to be attractive and desired, but also feeling objectified and treated as sex objects. The overt expression of sexual objectification is often communicated in forms ranging from whistles and catcalls to more subtle ones such as "stares" that make a woman feel as if she were being undressed in public.

Second, while one of the male commuters meant well and saw a "damsel in distress," the liberty he took in placing his hand on Kathleen's back to guide her to the exit is an intrusion of personal space. For a stranger to place one's hand on the small of a woman's back or more boldly on her hips while passing and without her permission may be seen as a violation of her body. The messages in sexual objectification microaggressions are many: (a) a woman's appearance is for the pleasure of a man; (b) women are weak, dependent, and need help; and (c) a woman's body is not her own. Some women are offended

by these actions, as they appear demeaning. Yet, the man who tried to help Kathleen probably acted with the best of intentions.

Third, calling female employees by their first names and even calling Kathleen “Kathy” would not seem “disrespectful” if the interviewer did likewise with male employees. Yet, he consistently referred to men more formally by adding “Mr.” to their last names. And by implying that she did not need a job but rather a “good man” to take care of her (even jokingly), the vice president sends a microaggressive message that women should be married, their place is in the home, they should be taken care of by a man, and that Kathleen was potentially taking a job away from a man who has a family to support. This sequence of spontaneous and quick exchanges between the vice president and Kathleen trivializes her desire to find a job, treats her as a child, and does not take her seriously as a candidate.

Fourth, when the vice president is asked how candidates will be evaluated for the position, he responds by saying that the “most qualified person would be offered the job,” that everyone is treated the same, that he did not see gender differences, that all have an equal chance to be hired, and that “people are people.” Interestingly enough, from that interaction alone, Kathleen concluded she would not be offered the job. While it is entirely possible that it was an erroneous conclusion, we should inquire as to how Kathleen arrived at such a firm belief. As we discuss in Chapter 2, the response of the vice president reflects a worldview regarding the place of women in our society. Many women who hear the phrase “I believe the most qualified person should get the job” in the context of a job interview recognize this as a gender microaggression that communicates “women are not as qualified as men, so when a male candidate is selected, it has nothing to do with bias but concerns his qualifications.” Implicit in the interviewer’s statements is that he is incapable of gender prejudice, because he is gender-blind. The same phenomenon is reported by people of color regarding the myth of color-blindness. The vice president is unaware that denial of gender differences is a microaggression that denies the experiential reality of women, and allows men to deny their own privileged positions.

## MICROAGGRESSIONS, MARGINALITY, AND HARMFUL IMPACT

Earlier it was stated that microaggressions can be directed at any marginalized group. Groups that are marginalized by our society exist on the margins

(lower or outer limits) of social desirability and consciousness. We may view them in negative ways (undesirable) and/or be oblivious to their existence and their life experiences. Many sociodemographic groups in the United States are defined by sexual orientation (gay/lesbian/bisexual), disability, class (poverty), and religion (Islam and Judaism); are confined to the edge of a system (cultural, social, political, and economic); and may experience exclusion, inequality, and social injustice. When microaggressions make their appearance in interpersonal encounters or environmental symbols, they are reflections of marginality and/or a worldview of inclusion/exclusion, superiority/inferiority, desirability/undesirability, or normality/abnormality (Sue, 2003).

Like racial and gender microaggressions, for these groups microaggressions are a common and continuing experience in their lives. Microaggressions against these groups are plentiful as indicated by the examples below.

- A lesbian client in therapy reluctantly disclosed her sexual orientation to a straight male therapist by stating that she was “into women.” The therapist indicated he was not shocked by this disclosure because he once had a client who was “into dogs.” (Hidden message: Homosexuality is abnormal and akin to bestiality.)
- A gay adolescent was frequently made to feel uncomfortable when fellow classmates would describe silly or stupid behavior by saying “that’s gay.” (Hidden message: Homosexuality is deviant.)
- A blind man reports that, when people speak to him, they often raise their voices. A well-meaning nurse was actually “yelling at him” when giving him directions on taking his medication. He replied to her: “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 functioning.)
- During a parent-teacher conference, a teacher suggested to a mother that her son, 16-year-old Jesus Fernandez, had learning problems. He was inattentive in class, unmotivated, late with homework, and frequently napped at his desk. The teacher was unaware that Jesus worked 4 to 5 hours after school to help support the family. (Hidden message: Lack of consciousness about how dealing with poverty can sap the energies of people.)
- In referring to an outfit worn by a woman on TV, the viewer described it as “trashy” and “classless.” (Hidden message: Lower class is associated with being lesser and undesirable.)

- A friendly neighbor wished a Jewish mother “Merry Christmas.” (Hidden message: Everyone is Christian.)
- While a customer was bargaining over the price of an item, the store owner commented “Don’t try to Jew me down.” (Hidden message: Jews are stingy.)

Countless examples of microaggressions are delivered daily without the awareness of perpetrators. And while these actions may appear harmless or innocent in nature, they are nevertheless detrimental to recipients because they result in harmful psychological consequences and create disparities. Microaggressions sap the spiritual energies of recipients (Pierce, 1995), lead to low self-esteem (Franklin, 2004), and deplete or divert energy for adaptive functioning and problem solving (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). The following adapted passage, for example, indicates how microaggressions affect Don Locke, an African American.

**I am tired of —**

Watching mediocre White people continue to rise to positions of authority and responsibility.

Wondering if the White woman who quickly exited the elevator when I got on was really at her destination.

Being told I do not sound Black.

Being told by White people that they “don’t see color” when they interact with me.

The deadening silence that occurs when the conversation turns to race.

Having to explain why I wish to be called “African American.”

Wondering if things will get better.

Wondering if the taxi driver really did not see me trying to hail a ride.

Being told that I should not criticize racially segregated country clubs because I wouldn’t enjoy associating with people who belong to them anyway.

Being followed in department stores by the security force and pestered by sales clerks who refuse to allow me to browse because they suspect I am a shoplifter.

Never being able to let my racial guard down.

Listening to reports about people of color who failed as justification for the absence of other people of color in positions of authority.

Being told that “we are just not ready for a Black person in that position.”

Having to explain that my sexual fantasies do not center on White women.

Feeling racially threatened when approached by a White law enforcement officer.

Explaining that not all African Americans are employed to meet some quota.

Being told that I need to openly distance myself from another African American whose words have offended someone.

Having people tell me that I have it made and then telling me that I have “sold out” in order to have what I have.

Explaining why I am tired.

Being tired. (Adapted from Locke, 1994, p. 30)

But it is important to note that microaggressions are not only confined to their individual psychological effects. They affect the quality of life and standard of living for marginalized groups in our society. Microaggressions have the secondary but devastating effect of denying equal access and opportunity in education, employment, and health care. While seemingly minimal in nature, the harm they produce operates on a systemic and macro level.

If we return to our earlier case vignettes, we can conclude that the students of color in Professor Richardson’s class are being subjected to a hostile and invalidating educational climate. They expend energy in defending an assault on their racial/cultural identity and integrity (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). They are placed in a situation of learning material from an ethnocentric perspective when they know a different history. They must comply and accept what they perceive as partial truths (and oftentimes mistruths) or fight to see themselves and their groups represented realistically in the curriculum. If they fight, they are likely to be labeled troublemakers and to be given lower grades. Even if they are exposed to relevant materials, they may lack the energy to be fully engaged in the learning process (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007; Steele, 1997). If, however, they decide to accept the reality espoused by the professor, they may feel that they have “sold out.” Regardless of the actions they take, the students of color will be placed at an educational disadvantage that is often reflected in lower grades, lowered chances to be admitted to institutions of higher education, less education, and years spent in lower levels of employment.

Even when educational achievements are outstanding, as in the case of Kathleen, gender microaggressions may severely limit her ability to be



hired, retained, or promoted in the company (Hinton, 2004; Pierce, 1988). While the brokerage firm interviewer might on a conscious level believe that the company would offer the job to the most qualified applicant, his microaggressive behaviors reflect strong unconscious gender biases. Thus, he can in good conscience offer the position to a man and at the same time maintain his innocence or the belief that he chose a candidate without bias. Few employers realize that the high unemployment rates, and the “glass ceiling” encountered by women and employees of color, are reflected in the many microaggressions delivered by well-intentioned coworkers and upper managers (Sue, Lin, & Rivera, 2009). The inequities in employment and education are not so much the result of overt racism, sexism, or bigotry, but the unintentional, subtle, and invisible microaggressions that place marginalized groups at a disadvantage. Ironically, hate crimes are illegal, but microaggressions are not (Sue, 2008)!

## The Way Forward

### Making the “Invisible” Visible

On July 16, 2009, a renowned African American scholar and professor at Harvard University, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., was arrested for disorderly conduct by a White Boston police officer, Sergeant James M. Crowley, because Gates “exhibited loud and tumultuous behavior.” What was said between the two is in dispute, but what we do know are the following facts. Gates had just returned from China where he was filming a PBS documentary, *Faces of America*, and was being driven back to his Cambridge home. For some reason the door to his home was jammed, and he asked the driver, a dark-skinned Moroccan, to help force it open. A 911 caller reported two men suspiciously forcing open the door to a house. Sergeant Crowley was the first to arrive and saw Gates in the foyer of his home. He asked Gates for identification; that is when the encounter seems to have escalated. Both give different versions of the event. Gates reports that he asked Crowley several times for his name and badge number and Crowley reports that it took some time before Gates complied with his request to show identification. Within a short period of time, the street was clogged by six other

(Continued)

officers who arrived at the scene. When he was asked to step out of the house, Gates is reported to not have initially complied. When he finally did, Gates was arrested, handcuffed, and taken to jail. The charges, however, were subsequently dropped.

Within a short period of time, the incident made national headlines as an example of police profiling of Black men, and news programs and talk shows debated whether race had anything to do with the outcome. During a news conference held by President Obama, he described the arrest of Gates as “stupid,” and his remark brought on a huge outcry from primarily White citizens who came to the defense of the police. The outcry resulted in the President expressing regret at not “calibrating” his words more carefully. He subsequently called both Gates and Crowley to invite them to the White House to bridge misunderstandings over a glass of beer.

The Henry Louis Gates, Jr., incident is a prime example of the central thesis of this book, microaggressions (racial, in this case).

- First, reports that Sergeant Crowley was a sensitive White officer, level-headed, a role model to younger officers, and a man who devoted time to training others on diversity and how not to racially profile are documented by fellow officers. Gates is well known at Harvard and nationally as someone who has worked for improved race relations, is good at putting people at ease, cool and calm under fire, and devoted to social justice. In other words, both men could be described as good, moral, and decent human beings who believed in equality between the races. Yet, as our future chapters indicate, no one is immune from inheriting the racial biases of their forebears. While I cannot definitively conclude that Crowley engaged in a series of microaggressions outside his level of awareness, the arrest of Gates clearly reveals insensitivity to what it must be like for a Black man (the resident of the home he was suspected of breaking into) to be confronted with police officers. Even when he showed pieces of identification that confirmed he was the legal resident of the home, Crowley persisted in asking him to step out of the house and onto the porch.
- This brings us to the second point. Both men are operating from different racial realities. For Gates, his life has probably been filled with many incidents of racial microaggressions (suspected of being a criminal, less trustworthy, likely to be dangerous, etc.) that have been continuous and cumulative. To be considered a criminal in his own home was the

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ultimate indignity and insult. Showing reluctance at stepping out of his home as requested by Crowley may have evoked images of the shooting of Amadou Diallo, a Black man. In that event, police officers rushed toward an entryway to question a man whom they believed to be acting suspiciously. When Diallo reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet, he was shot and killed because the officers thought he was reaching for a weapon. Even if unstated, Gates's belief that he was viewed more suspiciously than a White resident would not be unfounded or without merit. Yet Sergeant Crowley probably believed that he acted within legal guidelines, that his actions were free of racial bias, and that he was not racially profiling. His racial reality and the inability to understand that of people of color are major barriers to racial harmony.

- The Henry Louis Gates, Jr., incident does represent an opportunity to open a dialogue about race in the United States. As some have said, it represents a teachable moment. How do we begin to understand the racial realities of one another? The fact that many White Americans are unable to bridge their worldviews with those of people of color represents a major challenge to our society. The subtext to this incident involves the observation that a national dialogue on race is much needed, but it brings on so many fears, defenses, and antagonisms that even President Obama retreated from taking it on.

As long as microaggressions remain hidden, invisible, unspoken, and excused as innocent slights with minimal harm, we will continue to insult, demean, alienate, and oppress marginalized groups. In the realm of racial microaggressions, for example, studies indicate that

- Racial microaggressions are oftentimes triggers to difficult dialogues on race in the classroom (Sue, Lin, Torino, et al., 2009).
- White students and professors are confused and uncertain about what is transpiring (Sue, Torino, Capodilupo, Rivera, & Lin, 2009).
- White students and professors are very "hung up" about clarifying these racial interactions for fear of appearing racist (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008).

When critical consciousness and awareness is lacking, when one is fearful about clarifying the meaning of tension-filled interactions, and when one actively avoids pursuing an understanding of these dynamics, the offenses remain invisible (Goodman, 1995; Henry, Cobbs-Roberts, Dorn,

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Exum, Keller, & Shircliffe, 2007). Indeed, avoidance of race topics has been likened to “a conspiracy of silence” (Sue, 2005).

Making the “invisible” visible is the first step toward combating unconscious and unintentional racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of bigotry. That is the primary purpose and goal of this book:

- to describe and make visible microaggressions
- to describe the dynamic psychological interplay between perpetrator and recipient
- to describe the individual and societal consequences of microaggressions
- to reveal how microaggressions create maximal harm
- to recommend individual, institutional, and societal strategies that will ameliorate the harms aimed toward marginalized groups in this nation