

Feature

### Unmasking 'racial micro aggressions'

**Some racism is so subtle that neither victim nor perpetrator may entirely understand what is going on—which may be especially toxic for people of color.**

By Tori DeAngelis

2009, Vol 40, No. 2

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Two colleagues—one Asian-American, the other African-American—board a small plane. A flight attendant tells them they can sit anywhere, so they choose seats near the front of the plane and across the aisle from each another so they can talk.

At the last minute, three white men enter the plane and take the seats in front of them. Just before takeoff, the flight attendant, who is white, asks the two colleagues if they would mind moving to the back of the plane to better balance the plane's load. Both react with anger, sharing the same sense that they are being singled out to symbolically "sit at the back of the bus." When they express these feelings to the attendant, she indignantly denies the charge, saying she was merely trying to ensure the flight's safety and give the two some privacy.

Were the colleagues being overly sensitive, or was the flight attendant being racist?

For Teachers College, Columbia University psychologist Derald Wing Sue, PhD—the Asian-American colleague on the plane, incidentally—the onus falls on the flight attendant. In his view, she was guilty of a "racial microaggression"—one of the "everyday insults, indignities and demeaning messages sent to people of color by well-intentioned white people who are unaware of the hidden messages being sent to them," in Sue's definition.

In other words, she was acting with bias—she just didn't know it, he says.

Sue and his team are developing a theory and classification system to describe and measure the phenomenon to help people of color understand what is going on and perhaps to educate white people as well, Sue says.

"It's a monumental task to get white people to realize that they are delivering microaggressions, because it's scary to them," he contends. "It assails their self-image of being good, moral, decent human beings to realize that maybe at an unconscious level they have biased thoughts, attitudes and feelings that harm people of color."

To better understand the type and range of these incidents, Sue and other researchers are also exploring the concept among specific groups and documenting how a regular dose of these psychological slings and arrows may erode people's mental health, job performance and the quality of social experience.

### **Aversive racism**

The term racial microaggressions was first proposed by psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce, MD, in the 1970s, but psychologists have significantly amplified the concept in recent years.

In his landmark work on stereotype threat, for instance, Stanford University psychology professor Claude Steele, PhD, has shown that African-Americans and women perform worse on academic tests when primed with stereotypes about race or gender. Women who were primed with stereotypes about women's poor math performance do worse on math tests. Blacks' intelligence test scores plunge when they're primed with stereotypes about blacks' inferior intelligence.

Meanwhile, social psychologists Jack Dovidio, PhD, of Yale University, and Samuel L. Gaertner, PhD, of the University of Delaware, have demonstrated across several studies that many well-intentioned whites who consciously believe in and profess equality unconsciously act in a racist manner, particularly in ambiguous circumstances. In experimental job interviews, for example, whites tend not to discriminate against black candidates when their qualifications are as strong or as weak as whites'. But when candidates' qualifications are similarly ambiguous, whites tend to favor white over black candidates, the team has found. The team calls this pattern "aversive racism," referring in part to whites' aversion to being seen as prejudiced, given their conscious adherence to egalitarian principles.

Sue adds to these findings by naming, detailing and classifying the actual manifestations of aversive racism. His work illuminates the internal experiences of people affected by microaggressions—a new direction, since past research on prejudice and discrimination has focused on whites' attitudes and behaviors, notes Dovidio.

"The study of microaggressions looks at the impact of these subtle racial expressions from the perspective of the people being victimized, so it adds to our psychological understanding of the whole process of stigmatization and bias," Dovidio says.

Research shows that uncertainty is very distressing to people, Dovidio adds. "It's the uncertainty of microaggressions that can have such a tremendous impact on people of color," including on the job, in academic performance and even in therapy, he and others find.

### **Creating a vocabulary**

Sue first proposed a classification of racial microaggressions in a 2007 article on how they manifest in clinical practice in the *American Psychologist* (Vol. 2, No. 4). There, he notes three types of current racial transgressions:

**Microassaults:** Conscious and intentional actions or slurs, such as using racial epithets, displaying swastikas or deliberately serving a white person before a person of color in a restaurant.

**Microinsults:** Verbal and nonverbal communications that subtly convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity. An example is an employee who asks a colleague of color how she got her job, implying she may have landed it through an affirmative action or quota system.

**Microinvalidations:** Communications that subtly exclude, negate or nullify the thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of a person of color. For instance, white people often ask Asian-Americans where they were born, conveying the message that they are perpetual foreigners in their own land.

Sue focuses on microinsults and microinvalidations because of their less obvious nature, which puts people of color in a psychological bind, he asserts: While the person may feel insulted, she is not sure exactly why, and the perpetrator doesn't acknowledge that anything has happened because he is not aware he has been offensive.

"The person of color is caught in a Catch-22: If she confronts the perpetrator, the perpetrator will deny it," Sue says.

In turn, that leaves the person of color to question what actually happened. The result is confusion, anger and an overall sapping of energy, he says.

### **Refining the concept**

While Sue's 2007 *American Psychologist* article mainly laid out his theory and an initial taxonomy of microaggressions, his team is now examining how these subtle communications vary among different populations. In a qualitative study in the June *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* (Vol. 39, No. 3), Sue and his colleagues conducted focus groups with 13 African-Americans who discussed their perceptions of, reactions to and interpretations of microaggressions, as well as the emotional toll they take. Participants, age 22 to 32, all lived in the New York metropolitan area and were either graduate students or worked in higher education.

Respondents agreed that these backhanded communications can make them feel as if they don't belong, that they are abnormal or that they are untrustworthy. Some described the terrible feeling of being watched suspiciously in stores as if they were about to steal something, for instance. Some

reported anticipating the impact of their race by acting preemptively: One man noted how he deliberately relaxes his body while in close quarters with white women so he doesn't frighten them.

Others cited the pressure to represent their group in a positive way. One woman said she was constantly vigilant about her work performance because she was worried that any slipups would negatively affect every black person who came after her.

A similar study in the January 2007 *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* (Vol. 13, No. 1) found that many Asian-Americans cited the experience of people asking them where they were born or telling them they "spoke good English," which gave them the message that they are "aliens." Others described classroom experiences where teachers or students assumed they were great in math, which led to feelings of being trapped in a stereotype that wasn't necessarily true. Female participants complained that white men interested in dating them assumed they would be subservient sexual partners who would take care of their every need.

"These incidents may appear small, banal and trivial, but we're beginning to find they assail the mental health of recipients," Sue says.

Other researchers are showing the harm of racial microaggressions in a variety of arenas, though research in the area is still sparse, Sue acknowledges. For instance, in a 2007 article in *American Behavioral Scientist* (Vol. 51, No. 4), University of Utah social psychologist William A. Smith, PhD, and colleagues conducted focus groups with 36 black male students on five elite campuses, including Harvard and the University of Michigan.

Participants reported experiencing racial microaggressions in academic, social and public settings. For instance, some participants reported that when they went to their school's computer lab to do schoolwork, white students would call security to make sure they weren't there to cause trouble. When security arrived, they would check the students' IDs, sometimes asking them to provide a second one to prove the first was valid.

In another case, fraternity students who had gathered for practice found themselves surrounded by police vehicles, the result of someone calling in a concern about gang activity, Smith notes.

Meanwhile, in therapy, the more likely black people are to perceive their therapist using racial microaggressions, the weaker the therapeutic bond and the lower their reported satisfaction, finds a 2007 study in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* (Vol. 54, No. 1). Sue and other researchers are beginning to study the impact of racial microaggressions on other groups as well, including people of various ethnic groups, people with disabilities, and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered individuals.

### **Mountain or mole hill?**

Not everyone agrees that microaggressions are as rampant or destructive as Sue says they are. In rebuttal letters to the 2007 *American Psychologist* article, respondents accuse Sue of blowing the phenomenon out of proportion and advancing an unnecessarily negative agenda.

"Implementing his theory would restrict rather than promote candid interaction between members of different racial groups," maintains Kenneth R. Thomas, PhD, of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, one of the critics. In the therapy relationship, for example, having to watch every word "potentially discourages therapist genuineness and spontaneity," says Thomas, who is white.

Likewise, aspects of Sue's theory enforce a victim mentality by creating problems where none exist, Thomas asserts. "The theory, in general, characterizes people of color as weak and vulnerable, and reinforces a culture of victimization instead of a culture of opportunity," he says.

Kenneth Sole, PhD, whose consulting firm Sole & Associates Inc., trains employees on team communication, agrees with Sue that microaggressions are pervasive and potentially damaging. Indeed, clients talk about them all of the time, he says. But instead of encouraging their anger, he works with them on ways to frame the incidents so they feel empowered rather than victimized, he notes.

"My own view is that we don't serve ourselves well in the hundreds of ambiguous situations we experience by latching onto the definition of the experience that gives us the greatest pain"—particularly in one-time encounters where one can't take more systemic action, he says.

For instance, if a white person makes a potentially offensive remark to a person of color, the person could choose either to get angry and see the person as a bigot or to perceive the person as ignorant and move on, he says.

For Sue's part, he believes it's important to keep shining a light on the harm these encounters can inflict, no matter how the person of color decides to handle a given encounter.

"My hope is to make the invisible visible," he says. "Microaggressions hold their power because they are invisible, and therefore they don't allow us to see that our actions and attitudes may be discriminatory."

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