
Microaggressions: Conceptual Foundations

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Overview

- Goals:
 - Establish common language and framework
 - Identify resources
 - Pose guiding questions
- Themes:
 - Racial context
 - Definition & characteristics
 - Examples
 - Dilemmas
 - Guiding questions

Racial Context: Racism in U.S.

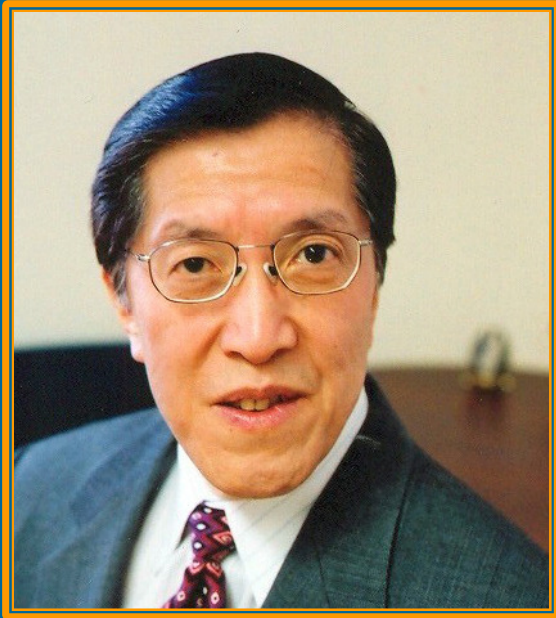
- Changing nature of racism in post-Civil Rights America
 - symbolic racism (Sears, 1988)
 - modern racism (McConahay, 1986)
 - implicit racism (Banaji, Hardin, & Rothman, 1993)
 - aversive racism (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1996)
- Shift from overt, violent, and explicitly state-sanctioned to more covert, subtle, and insidious (though still institutionalized)



Racial Context: Racism in U.S.

- “Microaggression” coined by Chester Pierce in 1970 in his work with Black Americans as “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’”
- “...one must not look for the gross and obvious. The subtle, cumulative miniassault is the substance of today’s racism” (Pierce, 1974, p. 516)
- “In and of itself a microaggression may seem harmless, but the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to diminished mortality, augmented morbidity, and flattened confidence” (Pierce, 1995, p. 281)

Microaggressions: Definition



“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, 2010, p.5)

Microaggressions: Characteristics

- Constantly and continuously experienced
- Often committed unknowingly by well-intentioned people
 - dismissed as innocent or innocuous
 - gaps between our lived experiences
- Microlevel manifestations of enduring institutional and systemic imbalances of privilege and power

Examples

Microaggressions across Identities

■ Sources

- Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* (Wiley, 2010)
- Sue (ed.), *Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics, and Impact* (Wiley, 2010)

■ Examples

- Women mistaken as secretaries or nurses
- Uninvited inquiries into women's marital status
- Assumption that single or childless colleagues have time for additional work-related responsibilities
- Asking a multiracial person "What are you?"
- Avoiding eye contact or physical contact with a person with a disability
- Surprise when meeting the partner of a person with a disability

Bidirectional Microaggressions

- Unidirectional assumption in much of the literature to date
- Multiple identities can lead to bidirectional microaggressions
- Examples: My research on Black male teachers
 - Tensions with female administrators

Four Dilemmas

- Clash of racial (and other) realities
- Invisibility of unintentional expressions of bias
- Perceived minimal harm of racial microaggressions
- The Catch-22 of responding to microaggressions

Guiding Questions

- How are microaggressions experienced by various marginalized constituencies at the University of Rochester?
 - What differences exist within each constituency's collective experiences?
- How can we address microaggressions as or shortly after they occur?
- How can an awareness of microaggressions inform the University's overarching vision around diversity and inclusion?