

Racial Microaggressions in the Life Experience of Black Americans

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Racial microaggressions cause considerable psychological distress among Black Americans and are manifested in nearly all interracial encounters. They set in motion energy-depleting attempts to determine whether incidents were racially motivated. Reactions can be classified into 4 major themes: healthy paranoia, sanity check, empowering and validating self, and rescuing offenders. Microaggressions result in high degrees of stress for Blacks because of denigrating messages: “You do not belong,” “You are abnormal,” “You are intellectually inferior,” “You cannot be trusted,” and “You are all the same.” Feelings of powerlessness, invisibility, forced compliance and loss of integrity, and pressure to represent one’s group are some of the consequences.

Keywords: racial microaggression, microinsult, microinvalidation, healthy paranoia, sanity check

Racism can be defined as a complex ideology composed of beliefs in racial superiority and inferiority and is enacted through individual behaviors and institutional and societal policies and practices (Jones, 1997). Racism devalues, demeans, and disadvantages Black Americans by treating them as lesser beings and by denying equal access and opportunity (Sue, 2003). Over the years, however, social scientists have noted that racism in American society has shifted from overt acts and messages to subtle and implicit expressions (DeVos & Banaji, 2005; Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002). These manifestations have been labeled *aversive racism*, *implicit racism*, and *modern racism* and reside in well-intentioned individuals who are not consciously aware that their beliefs, attitudes, and actions often discriminate against Black Americans (Nelson, 2006). Some researchers prefer the term *racial microaggressions* to describe the brief, commonplace, and daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental slights and

indignities directed toward Black Americans, often automatically and unintentionally (Constantine, 2007; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007). Racial microaggressions are similar to unconscious racism, but they are broader, describe a dynamic interplay between perpetrator and recipient, and focus primarily on their everyday active manifestations (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007).

In a recent taxonomy of racial microaggressions, Sue, Capodilupo, et al. (2007) identified two of three forms relevant to this study: *microinsults* and *microinvalidations*. Both tend to be expressed unconsciously by the perpetrator, yet communicate a hidden demeaning message to the person of color. Microinsults are described as behavioral and verbal expressions that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean an individual’s racial heritage or identity. When professors, for example, comment to Black students with tones of surprise that they are very articulate, the underlying message is that Blacks as a group are unintelligent. Microinvalidations invalidate, negate, or diminish the psychological thoughts, feelings, and racial reality of Black Americans. When Blacks are told that “people are people” and that “we are all human beings,” the inherent message is that their experiences as racial cultural beings are not valid (Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000).

Both forms are difficult and problematic to both perpetrator and victim because of their unconscious, subtle, and covert nature. These manifestations are often dismissed as innocent acts by the perpetrator with minimal psychological harm to Black Americans (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). From the perspective of the perpetrator, microaggressive slights may appear banal and trivial (micro), but they have serious detrimental effects on the target person or group. Microaggressions can induce enormous stress and anger, ultimately generating feelings of invisibility and marginalization in Blacks (Franklin, 1999; Pierce, 1988). The fact that microaggressions may represent “small acts” does not take into account their cumulative nature or the power of the demeaning message. Although a minor event might not be sufficient to constitute a serious stressor, it has been found that the cumulative impact of many events is traumatic (T. H. Holmes & Rahe, 1967)

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and detrimental to the mental and physical well-being of the recipient (T. S. Holmes & T. H. Holmes, 1970).

Microaggressions are implicated in creating inequities for Black Americans in education (Steele, 2003), employment (Miller & Travers, 2005), and health care (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Microaggressions, for example, may partially explain why Black Americans underutilize traditional mental health services and prematurely terminate sessions with their White therapists (Burkard & Knox, 2004). In one study, microaggressions against Black clients were predictive of weaker therapeutic alliances, lower ratings of cultural competence, and less counseling satisfaction in cross-racial dyads with White counselors (Constantine, 2007). Racial microaggressions also detrimentally affect White supervisor-Black trainee relationships and, indirectly, Black clients (Constantine & Sue, 2007). In the world of work, microaggressions contribute to the glass ceiling effect for Black employees by sending messages of exclusion and expectations of failure and by sapping their psychological and spiritual energies in the workplace (Miller & Travers, 2005). In the classroom, Black students report microaggressive behaviors by White teachers that negate their contributions, communicate low expectations, and exclude their participation in school activities (Solórzano et al., 2000). These experiences have left Black students with feelings of self-doubt and low self-esteem, as well as a constant feeling of being emotionally drained and exhausted, resulting in lower classroom performance.

The study of racial microaggressions is important for several reasons. First, the confusing and disorienting nature of microaggressions can cause psychological turmoil for Black Americans who must constantly question the intention and message of perpetrators (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). Although some studies have explored the psychological and emotional effects of racial microaggressions, there are few studies to date that have examined in a systematic manner how one perceives, interprets, and reacts to these experiences (Solórzano et al., 2000). Being able to understand the internal psychological dynamics of racial microaggressions may better arm Blacks with the tools to understand their own reactions and dilemmas, thereby moderating their harmful effects. Second, it is important to identify the paradox associated with describing microaggressions as unintentional, subtle, covert, and innocuous, when these events can be experienced as jarring, overt, and harmful. Blacks often describe quite intense psychological and physical reactions when confronted with microaggressions (Pierce, 1988). Perpetrators, however, often minimize their importance or impact by describing them as "little things" and encouraging Blacks to let go of their anger and suspicions. If microaggressions, however, are constant and continuing experiences of Black Americans, we submit that their cumulative nature can sap the spiritual and psychological energies of recipients even when they represent minor transgressions (T. S. Holmes & T. H. Holmes, 1970).

Method

We used focus group interviews to probe Black Americans' perceptions, reactions, and interpretations of microaggressions, as well as the immediate and cumulative consequences of these experiences. Focus groups have been shown to be effective in obtaining in-depth information about a relatively unexplored concept like microaggressions (Krueger, 1994; Seal, Bogart, & Ehrhardt, 1998). We chose this method of investigation to gain

deeper understanding of the participants' experiences by allowing the social context to facilitate the development of meaning and to encourage rich interactions among the group members (Krueger, 1998). The selection of a focus group design versus individual interviews was based on the assumption that participants could share, confirm, and add multiple perspectives to microaggressive incidents raised by any one member (Krueger, 1998). Analysis of the data involved recommended qualitative processes of describing, comparing, contrasting, cataloguing, and classifying racial microaggressions (Ponterotto, 2005; Silverstein, Auerbach, & Levant, 2006), which are outlined in the sections that follow.

Participants

Participants were solicited through posted fliers, classroom invitations, word of mouth, and a Web site asking for volunteers at a graduate school of education and psychology. Purposive criteria were used to select a sample that would assure the presence of the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 1990). All participants had to self-identify as either Black or African American, agree that subtle racism and discrimination exist in the United States, and be able to personally identify racist incidents that they had experienced or witnessed. Two focus groups were formed, with a combined total of 13 volunteers: 7 self-identified as Black, 3 as Black/African American, and 3 as African American; 4 were men and 9 were women; their ages ranged from 23 to 33 years. Nine participants were graduate students in counseling psychology, 4 worked in higher education, and all resided in the New York City metropolitan area. None of the students had previous relationships with any of the active investigators.

Researchers

Because qualitative procedures (a) rely primarily on the researcher(s) as active data collectors, (b) involve entering the informants' world through ongoing interactions, and (c) seek the informants' perspectives and meaning, it is imperative that researchers identify personal values, assumptions, and biases at the onset of the study (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). This allows for control of potential biases and assures that the contributions to the research setting, methodology, analysis, and interpretation can be useful rather than detrimental (Krueger, 1998; Ponterotto, 2005). The research team consisted of 10 graduate students in a seminar who expressed a profound interest in the topic of racism. The members consisted of 3 Black Americans, 2 Asian Americans, 2 Latinos, and 3 White Americans. The Asian American instructor has over 30 years of research related to topics of diversity, multiculturalism, racism, and antiracism. As this was a 2-year seminar, we believed that the advanced cognitive and experiential understanding of racism by students would prove to be assets to the formulation of the study. It was clear, however, that we also would bring certain biases to the study that might affect its formulation and interpretation.

When the study was first conceptualized, the members discussed in detail their assumptions and biases, the similarities and differences between qualitative and quantitative approaches, and how biases and assumptions might affect the study. In terms of biases, we collectively believed that participants would have experiences of microaggressions and that these experiences would affect par-

ticipants. We further surmised that participants might not always label such incidents as racially motivated. To this end, we kept a vigilant check on our biases by encouraging seminar members to continually question their assumptions throughout the entire process. The senior author and other seminar members (external to the core team of judges) also acted as auditors to provide checks and balances to the process (Hill et al., 1997).

Measure

Data collection consisted of a brief demographic questionnaire aimed at obtaining basic information related to racial/ethnic self-identification, gender, age, and education, and a semistructured interview protocol. The protocol was developed from a review of the literature on microaggressions (Pierce, 1978; Solórzano et al., 2000), aversive racism (Dovidio et al., 2002), and Black American experiences of racism (Burkard & Knox, 2004; Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999). All questions were open-ended and aimed at eliciting real-life examples of subtle racism. The eight questions were designed to generate a variety of microaggressive examples, explore the effect they had on participants, construe meaning from the interaction, and outline how participants responded. Transition and ending questions were also developed to aid in moving from one topic to another and to bring closure to the focus group activity. The moderator gave sufficient time for all the participants to share their views. A copy of the questions is available on request.

Procedure

Participants in the groups were given basic information about the study on subtle racism and encouraged to share their own personal experiences. No financial compensation was offered. Each focus group lasted 90 min and was conducted by a two-person team (i.e., the facilitator and observer). Both the facilitator and observer were Black Americans and part of a smaller subset of the seminar (research team). Because the topic dealt with subtle racism against Blacks, we believed that facilitators of the same race would minimize hesitancy or reluctance to disclose negative sentiment about interactions with those outside of their own group. The role of the facilitator was to lead the discussion, while the observer made notes related to nonverbal behavior and group dynamics (Krueger, 1998).

Prior to the interview, both researchers went through a brief behavioral rehearsal related to moderating the focus group discussion and anticipating and overcoming possible resistances to the flow of the discussion. Immediately after the interview and after the focus group was dismissed, the two researchers held a debriefing session related to their own reactions, observations, major themes that arose, climate in the room, and discussion of problematic issues. The session usually lasted an additional 30 min. The debriefing between the two researchers was also audiotaped. The tapes were transcribed verbatim, making sure that the identities of participants were removed. The transcripts were subsequently checked for accuracy by the two researchers before they were presented to individuals on the team for qualitative analysis.

Development of domains. In keeping with focus group analysis (Krueger, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Seal, Bogart, & Ehrhardt, 1998), each member of the research team separately

evaluated both transcripts. They individually identified topic areas or domains used to conceptually organize the overwhelming amount of data generated from the group discussions. When completed, all judges met to reach consensus on the final list of domains. The procedure used in the consensus process was a modified version of consensual qualitative research (CQR; Hill et al., 1997, 2005). The defining feature of CQR is (a) arriving at consensus through a systematic set of procedures applied to transcript analysis and (b) ensuring adequate checks and balances between judges and auditors. It is generally used in individual interviews, but its basic procedures have been successfully employed in focus group analysis as well (Hill et al., 2005; Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007). The overarching goal of the team was to use both the transcripts and the recollections of the moderator and observer to frame the experiences of microaggressions from the narratives of the Black participants, identify characteristics of microaggressive incidents, discover how the participants construed meaning from their experiences, and categorize the types of reactions (i.e., behavioral, cognitive, and affective) they had in response to these events. The final five domains were (a) microaggressive incident, (b) perception, (c) reaction, (d) interpretation, and (e) consequence.

Extracting core ideas. Once agreement was reached in the large group, the team members were asked to individually extract core ideas from the domains. *Core ideas* are defined as a summary or abstract derived from the domains that integrate the data in a holistic fashion linked to the context of the phenomenon under study. Once accomplished, the members of the team presented their individual analysis to one another, reached consensus about their contributions in a group meeting, and presented it to the auditors. The auditors, in turn, provided feedback and helped finalize the themes in a group working session. The results of both focus groups were combined at this point.

Audit. The auditors served to check that raw data were suitably categorized by domain and that core ideas were extracted from the domains appropriately. The auditors provided feedback to the original judges, who considered the feedback and reached consensus on all changes to enhance "trustworthiness" of the interpretations. The role of auditors in handling disagreements and moving the team toward consensus is thoroughly described in CQR.

Results

The final five domains (incident, perception, reaction, interpretation, and consequence) represent the way in which participants spoke about microaggressions, although not necessarily in sequential order. Usually, a participant would relay a microaggressive event (incident) and then discuss the content from domains relating to a specific incident, although not every participant consistently mentioned identifiable aspects of all five domains. Also, sometimes participants would share their own perceptions, reactions, and interpretations to another participant's microaggressive event. In the following sections, descriptions of the domains and core ideas within each category are provided.

Incident Domain

Incidents are verbal, behavioral, or environmental situations reported by participants to have potential derogatory racial under-

tones. Three core ideas were identified in incidents the participants experienced.

Verbal. Verbal incidents are direct or indirect comments to the participant. For example, a participant reported being questioned by her boss about her hair:

It was kind of like, “You’re wearing a turban” or something regarding it. He didn’t—not like he was saying it in a negative way, but you could still feel that hint of like there’s some kind of negative connotation.

Nonverbal/behavioral. Nonverbal incidents are experiences that include the use of body language or more direct physical actions. For example, one participant reported, “So when I walk into a hospital and I say I’m here to fix your machine, I get a double-take,” or

The way that my money is given back to me when I go shopping. I put money in someone’s hand and they won’t put the money back in my hand. They’ll make sure that they put the money on the counter.

Environmental. Often, the physical surroundings represent the microaggressive event. For example, a participant reported,

And you notice that, all right, yeah . . . there’s a lot of minorities. But what positions are they in? Entry-level. Maybe middle management. And then they thin out, you know, if you’re talking about execs and, you know, managing directors.

In this participant’s case, the office environment in which only White people were in top-level positions conveyed that people of color do not belong in those positions.

Perception Domain

Perception refers to the participants’ belief about whether an incident was racially motivated. For example, a participant relayed her perception of a coworker’s racial joke: “‘Clearly, I’m [the coworker] just, you know, I’m not trying to offend you, we’re just joking around.’ But it was so clearly racist.” Although this domain refers to “yes—racially motivated” and “no—not racially motivated,” a core idea, “questioning,” emerged. *Questioning* refers to participants who were questioning whether or not their reported incident was racially motivated. For example, one participant wrestled with an incident in which a White person told her an answer was “very smart”: “Like it feels like a compliment but not really. It leaves you feeling like, did you just compliment me or what?” Another participant had a similar struggle when a White woman changed seats on the train from sitting next to her:

Maybe it just so happened that the person that she decided to sit next to wasn’t Black, and she wasn’t Black. I can’t say that’s why she moved, but maybe she wanted to be close to the window. I don’t know.

Reaction Domain

This domain refers to the participant’s immediate response that went beyond a simple “yes,” “no,” or “ambiguous” perception. It represents an inner struggling process that evoked strong cognitive, behavioral, and emotional reactions. Several core ideas emerged from this domain.

Healthy paranoia. Many participants spoke about a sense of paranoia that ensued right before or after an incident. Generally, this suspiciousness was discussed as a necessary reaction to the overwhelming number of microaggressive incidents that take place in the course of any given day. The following is an excerpt of a conversation about one male participant’s paranoia:

Well, to me it’s almost one of those things where you actually have to admit to a level of paranoia. I mean you have to sort of somehow—to begin to examine, well, was that racist? That’s sort of the fine line you have to walk around, letting things go by and then also taking them on, because I’m telling you, you could find a thousand offenses in any moment of the day.

Sanity check. Participants reported using other Black/African American friends, family members, and coworkers as a way to check on their perceptions of incidents as racism. One participant stated,

As opposed to being paranoid—I have people in my sphere of influence that I can call up and share my authentic feelings with, so that there’s sort of this healing, there’s just this healing circle that I have around myself, and these are people who I don’t have to be rational with if I’m battling racism.

Another participant speaking about connecting with other Black coworkers noted, “I mean, you see it in their eyes, like a connection across the room . . . and they tell you all the things that have been going on in their office that’s been driving them crazy.”

Empowering and validating self. Participants discussed the notion that microaggressive incidents are the fault of the aggressor, and so they described reactions that reflect this belief. Participants reported this type of reaction as “empowering” and “shielding” because it locates blame and fault in the White aggressor and not in themselves. As a male participant said, “I don’t blame it on myself; it’s not like, what’s wrong with me? It’s like, oh, that’s that White unconsciousness that they’re so well trained in.” The following excerpts illustrate that several participants shared the same sentiment:

Male: I feel good in that, you know, ‘cause I won’t want to go home anymore trying to figure out what happened, and it does take a certain amount of courage for me to say, you know, I’m going to stop asking myself this question, I’m going to ask it to you.

Female: I find that is keeping your voice. . . . If I decide I want to do an intervention, I’m not necessarily doing it for them. I’m doing it for me.

Rescuing offenders. Several participants reported reacting to microaggressive events by feeling a pull to take care of the White person in the situation, despite a belief that the person had committed an offense. *Taking care* refers to considering the White person’s feelings in the situation before one’s own. For example, a male participant was offended in his workplace by a White person who stood to potentially donate hundreds of thousands of dollars to the organization. He asked, “This is someone who we value, that can do something for us, so now I have to debate the value of keeping them close and keeping them happy, versus the whole self-respect thing, then what’s the bigger thing?” Another participant reported changing his physical behavior in the presence of White women: “Inside an elevator, a closed space, being very

conscious if there is a White woman, whether or not she's afraid, or just sort of noticing me, trying to relax myself around her so she's not afraid."

Interpretation Domain

Interpretation refers to the meaning the participants make of the microaggression. Included in this interpretation may be why they think the microaggression occurred, its significance, the intentions of the aggressor, and any social patterns related to it. Several core ideas or themes were abstracted from this domain.

You do not belong. Several participants interpreted the underlying message of microaggressions to indicate they do not belong in a particular situation or to society as a whole. For example, a participant who was in a convenience store shared, "They just don't want to deal with me, or don't want me in there, I don't belong in there or whatever, just want me out of there as fast as possible." Another participant relayed an incident in which he walked into an office building and was directed toward the entrance for messengers, instead of the general entrance for people using the building. He shared, "I took it as I was Black, he saw me, I didn't really belong going where the rest of the people were going, you know, so I was sent that way."

You are abnormal. Participants interpreted incidents to mean that the "White way is the right way," and that aspects associated with being Black or African American are seen as abnormal. This theme was particularly salient in both groups around issues of hair and dress. For example, a participant talked about conversations that occurred among her White coworkers when she changed her hairstyle: "You're being made to feel like a novelty, and it's insulting to you because you're like, well, where do you come from that there's no one else like me? Because what I look like is normal, you know?" A male participant spoke about his traditional African dress: "I mean, that's my traditional way of dressing, you know, why should I have to explain it? It makes me feel like I am being questioned. Something is wrong with me, or what?"

You are intellectually inferior. Many participants attributed incidents to the aggressor's belief that they are intellectually inferior. Participants felt that they are assumed to be incompetent by virtue of their skin color. For example, a participant reported, "Their face drops, like, surely you couldn't be the manager. But you're a young Black female! Why would you be the manager?" Another participant shared a similar feeling:

So when I walk into a hospital and say I'm here to fix your machine, I either get a double-take initially. . . . they're not too sure of the skills level. They ask me a lot of questions. . . . It's subtle, it's more like they want to find out what I know and who I am before they trust me with it.

Several participants had experiences on the job or in interviews when they felt this keenly: "You know, 'You articulate so well.' Shouldn't that be something you expect all your applicants to do? I have a bachelor's degree. Do you think I didn't pass seventh grade English?"

You are not trustworthy. Participants reported many incidents that involved being followed in stores, being asked to identify themselves, and generally being questioned as to their purpose or intentions. These incidents were generally interpreted by participants as an inherent mistrust on the part of White people. There

was a sense that being Black or African American is associated with criminality. For example, a participant reported,

I go to [department stores], especially as a Black man, I mean every time I go into that place, somebody's watching me, somebody's walking behind me, trying to monitor me or whatever. I'm there to steal, or I'm there to rob someone, right?

Participants also spoke about how environmental settings could send the message that Black people cannot be trusted. For example,

[In the music store], the hip hop and rap section has the protective case over it, but the rest of the music didn't. Why does it have this huge white frame around it. . . . You can't look at the songs on the back, and the rest don't have that, so it kind of speaks to the idea that they are afraid these CDs will get stolen.

You are all the same. Participants felt that some incidents conveyed that all Black people are the same, and that as Black or African American individuals, they should be able to represent or speak for all Black people. Underlying these incidents is the assumption that individual differences do not exist for Black people and that the Black experience is universal. For example, a participant relayed an incident in which his boss constantly came to him to check on the pronunciation of names he deduced were Black:

The same manager in the same job, he came to me, and he was like, "Do I say African American or Black?" Don't assume that because I'm Black I know how everyone in my race wants to be called.

Another participant stated,

[White people] are asking this information not too much to learn about you, but because they're trying to obtain some information about Black people. . . . Maybe I don't know what other Black people do 50% or more of the time. It just puts you in an awkward situation where you have to feel like you have to define yourself to them because they decide you're Black, so you're going to have a lot more information.

Consequence Domain

Consequence refers to the psychological effects of microaggressions on the recipient. This domain covers how the microaggression affected the individual's behavioral patterns, coping strategies, cognitive reasoning, psychological well-being, and worldview over time.

Powerlessness. Participants reported a sense of powerlessness that derived from feeling like White people constantly define their racial reality. The sense of being trapped, having little control over stopping the continuing onslaught of microaggressions, and being forced to accept the White offender's definition of the incident can lead to a sense of hopelessness and futility. Some participants described a sort of catch-22 in which questioning every microaggressive event would lead them to be labeled as "hypersensitive" or "angry." For example, a participant shared,

If you were to address every microaggression, it's like all, "Oh, there you go again, you people" . . . so it's like, you sort of are conditioned to not say anything, thereby becoming oblivious to it. Not oblivious,

but you know—if you're hypersensitive about it, then they're like, "See, we told you."

Another participant stated,

It is how your context gets translated through someone else's lens. I think that's another way that the very essence of your life is up for definition, based on any particular lens that a White person is wearing on any particular day in any particular moment.

Even for participants who reported feeling in control of the decision of when to confront microaggressive experiences, there was a sense of powerlessness:

It's just humiliation. Episode after episode of humiliation or attempts at humiliation. I get to decide, but episode after episode. The way my children get treated, you know, seeing it through the eyes of a parent, and having to listen after my children, as they experience the same thing I experience.

Invisibility. Several participants reported a resultant feeling of being invisible because of cumulative microaggressive experiences. These participants felt that their contribution and presence was deemed to be both less valuable and visible than a White person's. They described a feeling of not being noticed or acknowledged, as well as a consequential feeling of having to "impress" people to gain recognition. For example, a participant stated, "You deal with that as a Black person, there's a certain real invisibility, or where White people just can't recognize your face, your distinction, something like that, unless you really impress upon them in a relationship." The idea that Black women are not sexual or are less desirable than White women also results in feelings of invisibility for some participants. One participant recalled an event with White male coworkers who were "ranking" fellow White female employees:

It's more like, wow, I'm not even seen as, you know, not as a person, but just like not even seen, invisible. So it made me feel like, okay, you have to do something above and beyond in order to be noticed.

Forced compliance and loss of integrity. Many participants reported feeling like they had to navigate two worlds on a daily basis: their own world and the White world. This dual navigation created feelings of uneasiness and disingenuousness for participants and often caused them to feel like they could not be their authentic selves. A level of self-sacrifice seemed required for participants to be able to conform to White standards on the job. For most participants, this feeling of having to be superficial was most true in their workplace. One participant described the consequences of having to deal with microaggressive events on a daily basis, combined with working in a White office setting:

There's a part of me that always feels like I'm pretending at my job. . . . I always feel like it's a mask . . . you can't really say what's on your mind, or you have to filter it through so many lenses 'til it comes out sounding acceptable to whoever's listening.

Pressure to represent one's group. Some participants reported feeling an increased pressure to represent their race well. For example, one participant relayed her feeling that any mistakes she makes will affect Black women who come after her in the job: "If I screw up, every Black woman after me, or every Black person after me, is going to have to take it, because I screwed up . . . so

I carry that pressure with me." Some participants felt an increased pressure to act or perform in a certain way so as to not confirm particular stereotypes about their group. For example, "as a Black woman, you have to put in that extra because maybe their expectations of you are going to be lower."

Discussion

As with any qualitative study, considerable caution must be exercised in interpreting the findings. Our study consisted of a small sample of non-gender-balanced participants, all with higher education experience, residing in New York City, and included only informants who agreed that subtle discrimination in the form of racial microaggressions exists. It is entirely possible that Black men would report many more incidents of mistrust and "criminal status" than Black women or community members (vs. college-educated individuals), and those residing in a different part of the country would report a wider range or different types of microaggressions. We are also cognizant that 10 participants self-identified as Black (racial category), whereas 3 self-identified as African American (ethnic category). Although we do not believe combining racial and ethnic designations affected our findings in this case, it is a potential limitation. Furthermore, the free flow of the focus group process did not allow an analysis of how many members actually experienced the microaggressions they described nor how many agreed with the themes reported. The time-limited nature of the focus groups and small numbers of participants suggest that we did not sample the entire and complex universe of microaggressions. Finally, our study identified only Black-White microaggressions to the exclusion of intraracial (Black on Black) or racial/ethnic minority groups toward one another.

Nevertheless, our qualitative study does provide some tentative answers to the reasons undertaken for the investigation. First, we were interested in describing the psychological processes of how Blacks perceive and interpret their experiences of racial microaggressions. In that respect, our study revealed five domains in the operation of microaggressions that logically could be ordered in a sequential fashion: incident → perception → reaction → interpretation → consequence. These domains did not arise sequentially, and it is highly probable that they may occur in a different interactive order, but if we use a linear analysis, we might surmise that a potential microaggressive incident sets in motion a perceptual questioning aimed at trying to determine whether it was racially motivated. During this process, considerable psychic energy is expended. If the event is deemed to be a racial microaggression, the reactions involve cognitive, emotive, and behavioral expressions.

Our informants reacted in a number of ways, but when classified according to themes, four major ones emerged: healthy paranoia, sanity check, empowering and validating self, and rescuing offenders. We surmise that many other reactions are possible other than those identified in our focus groups. It is clear that these reactions are influenced by the hidden meanings (interpretation) construed by recipients. In that respect, racial microaggressions fell into five message categories: "You do not belong," "You are abnormal," "You are intellectually inferior," "You are untrustworthy," and "You are all the same." Other microaggressive themes have been identified in a sample of Asian Americans (Sue, Bucceri, et al.,

2007), but they may be population specific, and further study is needed to clarify their applicability to Blacks.

Our study makes it clear that the ambiguous nature of many microaggressions places Blacks in an unenviable position of trying to ascertain the meaning of the communication, whether the incident was intentional or unintentional, and the quandary of deciding an appropriate response. Microaggressions inevitably produce a clash of racial realities where the experiences of racism by Blacks are pitted against the views of Whites who hold the power to define the situation in nonracial terms. The power to define reality is not supported at the individual level alone but at the institutional and societal levels as well (Sue, 2003). Our study suggests that the worldview of Black Americans is constantly assailed in this country. Finding ways to validate the worldview of Black Americans and to immunize them against the constant onslaught of microaggressions are major challenges. Interestingly, our study provides clues as to how this may be accomplished in the reaction domain: Redefining perceptual vigilance as *healthy paranoia*; engaging in *sanity checks* through family members, Black friends, and colleagues; and *empowering and validating self*.

Our second objective was to address the perception of minimal harm. The experiences of the participants leave little doubt about the short- and long-term detrimental consequences of chronic and perpetual microaggressive messages. Although it is well documented that general and more obvious forms of discrimination negatively affect physiological responses, quality of life, self-esteem, and identity (Brondolo, Rieppi, Kelly, & Gerin, 2003; Thompson & Neville, 1999; Utsey, Chae, Brown, & Kelly, 2002), the types of stress induced through microaggressions come from their invisibility and the catch-22 of responding (damned if you do [being accused of being paranoid] or damned if you don't [having to suffer in silence or deny your own racial reality]; Sue, 2004; Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007). Furthermore, the double messages from racial microaggressions (conflict between explicit and implicit message) "create stressful confusions about how to resist oppressions versus when, where, and how to accommodate to it" (Pierce, 1988, p. 27). The last confusion is directly related to the turmoil reported by African American men in Franklin's (1999) research that examined invisibility syndrome and racial identity development. These men reported feeling powerless to question subtle acts of discrimination without facing the imminent consequence of being labeled as "hostile" or the "angry Black man." Our findings from the consequence domain (feelings of powerlessness, invisibility, forced compliance and loss of integrity, and pressure to represent one's group) strongly support these observations. Racial microaggressions may be innocuous, but they have a cumulative, powerful, and dramatic impact on the lives of Black Americans.

It is clear that much more research needs to be done on racial microaggressions to tease out important mental health and equity implications. We believe that Black Americans who understand the psychological impact and dynamics of racial microaggressions are better prepared to cope with dilemmas they must endure in their daily lives. One cannot overstate the importance of demystifying microaggressions for Black Americans in producing clarity of vision and a sense of liberation in being able to define their own racial experiences. Future research would benefit by identifying common coping strategies used in the face of chronic microaggressions and responses that are considered functional or dysfunctional. Finally, if we believe racial microaggressions stem from

covert and unconscious assumptions of Black inferiority and White superiority that are ingrained in nearly all aspects of society, and given that racial microaggressions are delivered by well-intentioned individuals who are unaware of their racist actions, how do we make the "invisible" visible and stop the endless cycle of oppression and pain inflicted on Black Americans (Jones, 1997; Sue, 2004)?

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Clarification Notice

We wish to clarify the relationship between “Racial Microaggressions in the Life Experience of Black Americans” by Derald W. Sue, Christina M. Capodilupo, and Aisha M. B. Holder (*Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 2008, Vol. 39, No. 3, pp. 329–336) and “Racial Microaggressions Against Black Americans: Implications for Counseling” by Derald W. Sue, Kevin L. Nadal, et al. (*Journal of Counseling and Development*, 2008, Vol. 86, No. 3 pp. 330–338). These two articles are based on the same sample of subjects and set of interviews; however, separate qualitative analyses by different teams of researchers were performed on the transcripts of the interviews. The first study investigated racial microaggressive dynamics, processes, and their detrimental consequences for African Americans, whereas the second study explored the universe of hidden demeaning racial microaggressive themes. In the second article, which did not mention the sample overlap, a few descriptive sentences from the first article, primarily in the Method-section, were repeated verbatim and without citation from the earlier study. We apologize for these oversights.

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