

# Unmasking Microaggression:A Societal Examination of Everyday Interaction and their Cumulative Impact on Racial and Gender Minorities

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**ABSTRACT:** 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.

**KEYWORDS:** microaggression, society, cumulative, racial, gender, minorities

## I.INTRODUCTION

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." [1,2,3]

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.[4,5,6]

"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.

## II.DISCUSSION

### 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[7,8,9]

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.[10,11,12]

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." [13,14,15]

### III.RESULTS

Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color. Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities. A taxonomy of racial microaggressions in everyday life was created through a review of the social psychological literature on aversive racism, from formulations regarding the manifestation and impact of everyday racism, and from reading numerous personal narratives of counselors (both White and those of color) on their racial/cultural awakening. Microaggressions seem to appear in three forms: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation. Almost all interracial encounters are prone to microaggressions; this article uses the White counselor--client of color counseling dyad to illustrate how they impair the development of a therapeutic alliance.

Microaggressions are actions that negatively target a marginalized group or individual. A microaggression is a form of discrimination that can be intentional or accidental.[16,17,18]

People who engage in microaggressions may mean no harm toward the person or group being targeted. They may not even realize that they are making a microaggressive comment or action.

Regardless, microaggressions can be very hurtful to the people who experience them.

This article looks at what a microaggression is and gives some examples. It also describes how to avoid them and what to do if they happen.

What are they?

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ResearchersTrusted Source define microaggressions as “everyday, subtle put-downs directed towards a marginalized group which may be verbal or nonverbal and are typically automatic.”

Microaggressions may demean a person’s race, gender, sexual orientation, heritage, age, or health status, for example.

Microaggressions convey disparaging messages to people because they belong — or are perceived to belong — to a specific group.

The person sending the message may not realize that it is a microaggression. In some cases, a microaggression can be disguised as a compliment. One example is when a person says how articulate a colleague is or how well they speak English, implying that this is somehow unexpected because of the person’s skin color or nationality.

Denying a person's experience is also a form of microaggression. For instance, saying to a transgender person, "I'm a woman, so I understand what you are going through."

In a more specific example, cisgender women may use microaggressions to diminish the experience of transgender women. For example, a cisgender woman may complain that a transgender woman cannot understand what they are experiencing, implying that transgender women are not "real" women.

#### History of the term -microaggression'

The psychiatrist Dr. Chester M. Pierce first coined the term in the 1970s to describe subtle insults and put-downs that African Americans experience regularly. Psychologists have since expanded its use to include this behavior toward any marginalized group.[19,20]

A marginalized group includes "individuals, groups, or populations outside of 'mainstream society,' living at the margins of those in the center of power, of cultural dominance, and economical and social welfare." Marginalization is not something people choose to experience. Instead, it results from exclusion and discrimination by structures of power and the people within them.

A person may experience marginalization due to their race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation, for example.

It is usually clear when someone's behavior is discriminatory, such as when they use a racial slur. A microaggression, however, may be harder to identify, and the person may not realize that their behavior is harmful.

#### Types of microaggression

Microaggressions can take several forms. They may be:

- Verbal: A verbal microaggression is a comment or question that is hurtful or stigmatizing to a marginalized group or person. For example, saying, "You're so smart for a woman."
- Behavioral: This involves behaving in a way that is discriminatory or otherwise hurtful to a marginalized person or group. For example, when a waiter or bartender ignores a transgender person and instead serves a cisgender person, someone whose biological sex matches their gender identity.
- Environmental: An environmental microaggression is when a subtle discrimination occurs within society, for example, when a college campus only has buildings named after white people.

#### Classifications

Psychologist Dr. Derald Wing Sue and colleagues have defined three classifications of microaggression:

- Microassaults: This is when a person intentionally behaves in a discriminatory way while not intending to be offensive. An example is telling a racist joke, then saying, "I was just joking."

- Microinsults: This is a comment or action that is unintentionally discriminatory. For example, saying to an Indian doctor, “Your people must be so proud.”
- Microinvalidations: This is when a person’s comment invalidates or undermines the experiences of a marginalized group. An example would be a white person telling a Black person that “Racism does not exist in today’s society.”

#### Examples

There are many everyday examples of microaggressions. People may target others with microaggressions because of their race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, class, disability, mental health, weight, or age, among other factors.

In 2018, Kansas State University conducted a study into workplace microaggressions. The researchers found that 73% of women working in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics had experienced at least one form of sexual objectification.[12,13,14]

Some other examples of microaggressions include:

- treating someone as a second-class citizen because of their gender, race, or sexual orientation
- complimenting a person raised in the United States on their English simply because they are not white
- telling a person with obesity that they should eat less
- making assumptions about someone based on their religion, age, or class
- deliberately not using a transgender person’s preferred pronouns
- underrepresenting different races, sexualities, and disabilities in the media
- being unwilling to find stereotypical or derogatory sports team names offensive
- using offensive terminology, such as, “That’s so gay”
- considering certain people to be of more value than others based on their ethnicity, class, or sexuality

#### Racial microaggressions

These microaggressions are an insidious, pervasive form of racism. Some researchers Trusted Source define them as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to People of Color because they belong to a racial minority group.”

This form of everyday racism can have a devastating effect on individuals and communities. Often, the dominant person who uses them is unaware of it or unaware of the effect.

Examples of racial microaggressions include:

- serving a white person right away without checking who was there first
- denying that racism exists
- accusing the other person of being oversensitive when they are harmed by a microaggression

- saying, for example, “The best person should get the job, regardless of race,” as this does not take into account structural or institutional racism
- not speaking up when a colleague is a target of a microaggression

#### Sexist microaggressions

These reflect prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination against a person because of their gender. Usually, they are directed by males toward females.

Examples include:

- the use of sexist language
- denial that sexism exists
- assumptions about gender roles
- an assumption that another gender is inferior
- institutional factors, such as a pay gap or glass ceiling for promotions

In a 2021 study Trusted Source, surgeons and anesthesiologists reported that the most common sexist microaggressions they experienced at work involved overhearing degrading terms and seeing degrading images of females.

Among the 259 female participants in the study, 94% had experienced sexist microaggressions. Those who had were more likely to report burnout, particularly if they were from an underrepresented racial or ethnic group.[15]

#### Misogynistic microaggressions

This is another type of gender-based microaggression directed by males toward females.

These microaggressions reflect an ingrained prejudice toward, dislike of, or contempt for females.

Examples include:

- sexist humor
- action that reflects objectification
- language that reflects objectification, for example, comments and assumptions about clothing and behavior
- assumptions of inferiority
- refusal to take on certain roles, such as caregiving, due to the belief that these are strictly for females

## Heterosexist microaggressions

Heterosexism was one called “homophobia.” The older term is inaccurate because it refers to an irrational fear, rather than the systemic and interpersonal discrimination and marginalization that exist.

Heterosexist microaggressions are sexuality based. They target people with various sexual orientations and are often carried out by cisgender people.

Examples include:

- using derogatory terms
- making assumptions about people’s sexual orientation
- moving away from people or excluding them from discussions
- telling someone that they don’t “look” or “seem” like their identity
- accusing people of being oversensitive
- suggesting that a person is not a “real” man or woman
- saying “I’m not homophobic, but...”
- keeping quiet when a microaggression is directed against someone else[16]

How do microaggressions cause harm?

Microaggressions can be harmful and stressful to the people who experience them.

Researchers studying the effects of racial microaggressions on undergraduate college students found that those who experienced them regularly had lower self-esteem. The researchers also discovered that these racist microaggressions were especially harmful in work and educational settings.

In another study, researchers found that people who experienced ethnic microaggressions had higher levels of depression and trauma. However, the study could not confirm that the microaggressions directly caused the participants’ depression.

One study that looked at 325 “minority” graduate students found that more than 98% had experienced microaggressions. The results showed that microaggressions caused significant distress and increased the risk of depression, regardless of a person’s social status.

What is the link between microaggressions and implicit bias?

Microaggressions are a subtle form of prejudice. They are comments or behaviors that harm members of marginalized communities. The people who engage in microaggressions are often unaware of the negative impact.



Implicit bias means Trusted Source “unconscious prejudice in favor of or against one person or group.” Microaggressions are often an expression of implicit bias.[17,18]

But if a person understands that their comments or actions are microaggressions and continues to behave in the same way, the prejudice they express is no longer implicit. It is explicit bias.

How to avoid committing microaggressions

It can be difficult for a person with learned bias to change how they act toward marginalized groups.

However, some tips can help people review their beliefs and change their behavior. For example:

- Listen to the person receiving the microaggression and empathize with their feelings.
- Try not to be defensive or dismiss the person’s feelings.
- Take responsibility for any underlying bias held toward certain groups.
- Take steps to become more educated and understanding.
- Commit to changing microaggressive behaviors.

What to do if someone commits a microaggression

The American Psychological Association recommends these strategies to people who face microaggressions:

- Respond to the microaggression if it feels safe to do so.
- Discuss the incident briefly, and arrange to discuss it with the person again later. This gives them the chance to reflect and you the chance to consider, and possibly practice, what to say.
- Let the person know how the microaggression made you feel and why it is significant.
- Criticize the microaggression, not the person.
- Take care of yourself by seeking social support and practicing healthy self-care techniques.
- Avoid taking on work related to marginalization — unless it is your choice to do so. Being asked to do so can be a form of microaggression.

Bystanders can help by being allies. This might involve speaking up against the microaggression. But always say how the language or behavior made you feel — not how you assume it made the recipient feel, as this can be unintentionally dehumanizing. No one can ever be sure quite how something makes another person feel.[19,20]

Microaggressions are actions or comments that express prejudice against a marginalized group or person. They can be very stigmatizing and harmful.

Although it can be difficult to admit fault, a person who engages in microaggressions can educate themselves about the impact of harmful language and change their behavior.

## CONCLUSION

There is an insidious form of racism and racial discrimination that has been gaining the attention of psychologists and researchers in recent years: racial microaggression.

Racial microaggressions are everyday insults or derogatory messages directed toward minorities and people of color, often from well-intentioned people who believe they've done nothing offensive.<sup>1</sup> Any minority group can experience microaggressions, which may be based on gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, socioeconomic status, or disability.<sup>2</sup> While a microaggression may seem harmless, a lifetime of microaggressions can be quite devastating to a person's mental health.<sup>3</sup>

"Racism can result in a host of mental health concerns including things like increased anxiety and symptoms of depression," says Dr. Joy Bradford, a licensed psychologist, speaker, and the host of the mental health podcast, *Therapy for Black Girls*. [18]

To understand the range of these incidents, it's important to learn the different forms of microaggressions and how they can play out in everyday life.<sup>4</sup>

Three forms of racial microaggressions:

**Microassaults:** These conscious, deliberate, and explicit racist attacks—both verbal and nonverbal—are meant to denigrate or hurt the victim. Name-calling, using racial slurs, avoiding and/or discouraging interracial interactions and displaying a swastika are all examples of microassaults.

**Microinsults:** While often unconscious and much more subtle, a microinsult demeans and belittles the victim through racial slights or comments that seem innocuous but are insulting to a person of color. For example, a person of color being mistaken for a service worker, or a woman clutching her purse when walking past a person of color, with the message being, "You are a criminal."

**Microinvalidations:** These comments and behaviors can exclude and invalidate people's thoughts, feelings, or experiences in life. For instance, asking an Asian American where they are really from, implies that they are not from the United States and are therefore a foreigner.

How racial microaggressions impact mental health

Research continues to show that racism and discrimination contribute to poor health among minorities and people of color, resulting in increased rates of depression, prolonged stress and trauma, anxiety, even heart disease and type 2 diabetes.<sup>6-8</sup>

One study examined the racial climate and microaggressions at college campuses and found that African American students experienced more depression, self-doubt, frustration, and isolation that impacted their education as a result.<sup>5</sup>

"The experience of having to question whether something happened to you because of your race or constantly being on edge because your environment is hostile can often leave people feeling invisible, silenced, angry, and resentful," says Dr. Bradford.

"Additionally, the increased stress related to things like microaggressions in the workplace and experiences with discrimination can lead to physical concerns like headaches, high blood pressure, and difficulties with sleep, which of course impact our mood as well."

How to respond to microaggressions

According to Dr. Bradford, there are ways to cope with racial microaggressions. Here, she provides the following advice for anyone experiencing microaggressions:

Seek support.

“One of the most important ways to manage our mental health in the face of racism is to make sure that we have supportive people to help us in processing our experiences,” says Dr. Bradford. “This can be in the form of colleagues, a therapist, or family and friends. It’s important to have a space where you can give voice to what’s happening to you.”

Don’t internalize racism.

It can be tempting to want to change something about yourself or your behavior in order to be more accepted, but “it’s important to stay grounded in the fact that you are not the issue, racism is the issue,” adds Dr. Bradford.

Know when it’s time to leave a situation.[19]

Certain situations can and will be challenging, like in the workplace, but it’s important to understand when you need to distance yourself from a toxic situation. “Remaining in a situation where you’re experiencing repeated acts of racism and discrimination can be incredibly taxing and harmful,” says Dr. Bradford. “It’s important to recognize when you’ve hit your limit and need to prioritize yourself.”

How to prevent microaggressive behavior

Preventing racial microaggressions from occurring in the first place begins one person at a time.<sup>2</sup> If you find yourself exhibiting microaggressive behaviors, here's what you should do next:

Examine your beliefs.

Take some time to examine the beliefs you grew up with and ask yourself: Do those beliefs and values still resonate with me? Use this time for self-reflection and assess whether they still ring true for you now, as an adult.

Acknowledge other people’s feelings.

While important to take stock of your own emotions, it’s also our responsibility to acknowledge how others feel by validating the fact that their feelings matter. As you go about your day, practice being more mindful about how what you say and do might affect those around you.

Embrace empathy.

Put yourself in other people’s shoes. Ask yourself how you would feel if you were in their situation. By exploring another person’s perspective, you can glean insight into your behaviors. Just as your experience and feelings are true for you, their experience and feelings are true for them.

Try not to get defensive.

If you’ve been called out for doing or saying something hurtful, resist getting defensive. Instead, embrace curiosity and ask questions that can help you understand a person’s point of view. Try not to downplay the situation, and listen carefully as they share their experience. Remember, they are taking a risk and being vulnerable by sharing this information with you.

We all have a role to play in responding to and preventing microaggressions. By taking the time to learn, ask questions, and be accountable for our actions, real progress against racism, in all its forms, can be made.[20]

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