MICROAGGRESSIONS
IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Race, Gender, and
Sexual Orientation

DERALD WING SUE

Taxonomy of Microaggressions

Michael Richards (aka Kramer) of Seinfeld fame went on an insane racial tirade after being heckled by Black patrons while performing at a comedy club. During the interaction, Richards shouted, "Shut up! Fifty years ago we'd have you upside-down with a fucking fork up your ass [reference to lynching]! He's a nigger! He's a nigger! He's a nigger! A nigger! Look, there's a nigger!" The following night, Richards appeared with Jerry Seinfeld on an evening program to apologize.

On the set of the popular program Grey's Anatomy it was reported that African American actor Isaiah Washington used gay epithets toward fellow actors while arguing over a difference of opinion. There were reports that Washington taunted fellow actor Patrick Dempsey (Dr. Derek Shepherd or "Dr. McDreamy") by saying, "I'm not your little faggot like [name redacted]," referring to a fellow cast member. Washington later apologized, stating he was not homophobic, but unfortunately several other similar incidents seemed to contradict his claim. He was subsequently fired from the show.

When arrested while driving under the influence, Mel Gibson made highly anti-Semitic statements toward a Jewish officer: "Fucking Jews are responsible for all the wars in the world." At the police station, he is alleged to have used the term "sugar tits" to refer to female officers. Several days later, Gibson apologized and issued several statements. He claimed that he was neither anti-Semitic nor sexist and that "it was the alcohol talking."

Do these three examples indicate that Richards is a racist, Isaiah Washington is heterosexist (anti-gay), and that Mel Gibson is both anti-Semitic and sexist? Prior to these incidents, all three were seen as respected actors and well liked by the American public. Few would have suggested that they were bigots and/or that they would use or make such blatantly inflammatory language. These outbursts were roundly condemned by the public and a debate ensued over whether the language they used was a true reflection of personal bigotry; Richards blamed it on the hecklers, Washington blamed it on the "heat of the moment," and Gibson blamed it on the alcohol.

Were these three individuals bigots, skilled in disguising their biases (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008), or were they generally decent people unaware of the racism, sexism, and heterosexism they harbored until they lost control (Conley, Calhoun, Evett, & Devine, 2001; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009)? More importantly, are we capable of such outbursts? Have we, ourselves, ever lost control and used racial epithets? What about telling or laughing at racist jokes? If so, does it make us bigots?

Scholars suggest that it is nearly impossible for any of us not to inherit the racial, gender, and sexual-orientation biases of our forebears (Baker & Fishbein, 1998; Banaji & Greenwald, 1995; Barrett & Logan, 2002; Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002; Fiske & Stevens, 1993; Sue, 2003). Such prejudices, however, may exist consciously, unconsciously, or on the margins of consciousness (Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pedersen, 2006; Nelson, 2006; Sue, 2003). One could make a strong argument, for example, that Richards, Washington, and Gibson (1) were aware of their biases but were generally successful in concealing them, (2) were only minimally (marginally) aware, or (3) were completely unaware until their outbursts. To understand racism means to realize that our prejudices, stereotypes, and biases exist on a continuum of conscious awareness. The avowed racist, for example, will use racial epithets freely, consciously believes in the inferiority of persons of color, and will deliberately discriminate. Those who are less aware, however, are likely to unintentionally behave in subtle discriminatory patterns against people of color, women, and LGBTs outside their level of conscious awareness.

CONSCIOUS AND DELIBERATE BIGOTRY VERSUS UNCONSCIOUS AND UNINTENTIONAL BIAS

People who are aware of their racial, gender, and sexual-orientation biases, believe in the inferiority of these groups, and will discriminate when the

opportunity arises have been labeled conscious-deliberate bigots (Sue, 2003). In the area of racism, for example, they vary from people who privately harbor racial animosity but do a good job of concealing it, to those who are more overt and publicly demonstrable, and finally to those who might be labeled White supremacists. In most cases, these individuals are held in check from overt discrimination by legal, moral, and social constraints. These individuals form probably a small number, although they have great public impact. It is believed, for example, that fewer than 15% of White Americans can be classified as overtly racist (Pettigrew, 1981). Many multicultural scholars believe it is easier for people of color and women to deal with the overt and deliberate forms of bigotry than the subtle and unintentional forms, because no guesswork is involved (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Salvatore & Shelton, 2007; Sue, 2003; Swim & Cohen, 1997). It is the unconscious and unintentional forms of bias that create the overwhelming problems for marginalized groups in our society (Sue, 2003; 2005).

The Changing Face of Racism, Sexism, and Heterosexism

Bias, prejudice, and discrimination in North America have undergone a transformation, especially in the post–civil rights era when the democratic belief in the equality of marginalized groups (racial minorities, women, and gays/lesbians) directly clashes with their long history of oppression in society (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Hylton, 2005; Satcher & Leggett, 2007; Swim, Mallett, & Stangor, 2004). In the case of racism, its manifestation has been found to be more disguised and covert rather than overtly expressed in the form of racial hatred and bigotry (Sue, 2003). Research also indicates that sexism and heterosexism have not decreased, but instead have become more ambiguous and nebulous, making them more difficult to identify and acknowledge (Hylton, 2005; Morrison & Morrison, 2002; Swim & Cohen, 1997).

While hate crimes and racial, gender, and sexual-orientation harassment continue to be committed by overt racists, sexists, and heterosexists/homophobes, the greatest harm to persons of color, women, and homosexuals does not come from these conscious perpetrators. It is not the White supremacists, Klansmen, or Skinheads, for example, who pose the greatest threat to people of color, but rather well-intentioned people, who are strongly motivated by egalitarian values, who believe in their own morality, and who experience themselves as fair-minded and decent people who would never consciously discriminate (Sue, 2005). These individuals have been labeled unconscious-unintentional oppressors or bigots (Sue, 2003). Because no one is immune from inheriting the

biases of the society, all citizens are exposed to a social conditioning process that imbues within them prejudices, stereotypes, and beliefs that lie outside their level of awareness. On a conscious level they may endorse egalitarian values, but on an unconscious level, they harbor either promajority feelings (Dovidio et al., 2002) or antiminority feelings (Sue, 2003).

Although much has been written about contemporary forms of racism, sexism, and heterosexism, many studies in health care, education, law, employment, mental health, and social settings indicate the difficulty of describing and defining racial, gender, and sexual-orientation discrimination that occurs via "implicit bias"; they are difficult to identify, quantify, and rectify because of their subtle, nebulous, and unnamed nature (Johnson, 1988; Nadal, Rivera, & Corpus, in press; Rowe, 1990; Sue, Nadal, et al., 2008). Subtle racism, sexism, and heterosexism remain relatively invisible and potentially harmful to the well-being, self-esteem, and standard of living of many marginalized groups in society. These daily common experiences of aggression may have significantly more influence on anger, frustration, and self-esteem than traditional overt forms of racism, sexism, and heterosexism (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). Furthermore, their invisible nature prevents perpetrators from realizing and confronting their own complicity in creating psychological dilemmas for minorities and their role in creating disparities in employment, health care, and education (Coleman, 2004; Dovidio et al., 2002; Rowe, 1990).

Racial, Gender, and Sexual-Orientation Microaggressions

In reviewing the literature on subtle and contemporary forms of bias, the term "microaggressions" seems to best describe the phenomenon in its everyday occurrence. Simply stated, microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership (people of color, women, or LGBTs). The term was first coined by Pierce in 1970 in his work with Black Americans where he defined it as "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges which are 'put-downs'" (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978, p. 66). They have also been described as "subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously" (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

In the world of business, the term "microinequities" is used to describe the pattern of being overlooked, underrespected, and devalued because of one's race or gender (Hinton, 2004). They are often unconsciously delivered

as subtle snubs or dismissive looks, gestures, and tones (Rowe, 1990). These exchanges are so pervasive and automatic in daily conversations and interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocent and innocuous. Yet, as indicated previously, microaggressions are detrimental to persons of color because they impair performance in a multitude of settings by sapping the psychic and spiritual energy of recipients and by creating inequities (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007).

ENVIRONMENTAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

The mechanisms by which microaggressions can be delivered may be verbal, nonverbal, or environmental. Because we will spend most of our time dealing with verbal and nonverbal manifestations, it seems important to indicate that microaggressions may be equally disturbing and may be even more harmful when they intentionally or unintentionally make their appearance environmentally. The term "environmental microaggression" refers to the numerous demeaning and threatening social, educational, political, or economic cues that are communicated individually, institutionally, or societally to marginalized groups. Environmental microaggressions may be delivered visually (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978) or from a stated philosophy such as "color blindness" (Purdie-Vaughns, Davis, Steele, & Ditlmann, 2008; Stevens, Plaut, & Sanches-Burks, 2008). When people refer to the "campus climate" as hostile and invalidating, or when workers of color refer to a threatening work environment, they are probably alluding to the existence of environmental microaggressions (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). It is important to note that these cues do not necessarily involve interpersonal interactions.

Several years ago I was asked by an Ivy League institution to conduct diversity training related to making the university a more welcoming place for students, staff, and faculty of color. Apparently, many students of color had complained over the years that the campus climate was alienating, hostile, and invalidating to students of color. As a means to address this observation, the university held a one-week event with many diversity activities. My part was to conduct a half-day training session with all the deans of the respective colleges.

As I was being introduced by the coordinator, I looked around the audience and was struck by the fact that not a single dean or representative of the office was a person of color. I also noted that most were men and that women

were also underrepresented. As I stood before the group, I made the following observation: "As I look around the room and at the sea of faces before me, I am struck by the fact that not a single one of you seems to be a visible racial ethnic minority. Do you know the message you are sending to me and people of color on this campus?" Several participants shifted in their seats, looked at one another, but remained silent.

Microaggressions hold their power because they often send hidden, invalidating, demeaning, or insulting messages (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). From the perspective of students and faculty of color, the absence of administrators of color sent a series of loud and clear messages:

1. "You and your kind are not welcome here."
2. "If you choose to come to our campus, you will not feel comfortable here."
3. "If you choose to stay, there is only so far you can advance. You may not graduate (students of color) or get tenured/promoted (faculty of color)."

When people of color see an institution or organization that is primarily White or when they see that people at the upper levels of the administration or management team are primarily White and male, the message taken away by people of color and women is quite unmistakable and profound; the chances of doing well at this institution are stacked against them (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Inzlicht & Good, 2006). When women in the workplace enter a conference room where portraits of all the past male CEOs or directors are displayed, the microaggressive message is that women are not capable of doing well in leadership positions and the "glass ceiling" is powerful. When a male colleague's office wall is filled with nude pictures of women or when *Playboy* magazines are present on desks at a place of employment, women employees may feel demeaned, insulted, and unwelcomed.

Environmental microaggressions often are packaged in symbols and even mascots. From 1926 to February 21, 2007, Chief Illiniwek was the mascot and official symbol of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign sports teams. During university sporting events, Chief Illiniwek would perform a dancing routine before fans during games, at halftimes, and after victories. For two decades, Native American groups and allies deplored the choice of mascot as being demeaning, hostile, and abusive toward them, their culture, and their lifestyle. They claimed that the symbol/mascot of Chief Illiniwek misappropriated their indigenous figures and rituals and that it perpetuated harmful racial and ethnic stereotypes (Wikipedia, 2009).

In general, Chief Illiniwek, portrayed by a White student in Sioux regalia, was said to create a hostile environment toward diversity, hinder development of a positive learning community, promote an inaccurate image of Native Americans, and assail the integrity of indigenous peoples. Numerous organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Education Association, Amnesty International, and the National Congress of American Indians supported the retirement of Chief Illiniwek (Wikipedia, 2009).

For years the university, the majority of the student body, and even the Illinois state legislature supported the mascot because it was meant to honor Native Americans and was a beloved symbol of the spirit of a great university. Native Americans, however, often asked, "Why don't we feel honored?" In February 2007, after decades of controversy, Chief Illiniwek was retired. This example not only points to how microaggressions may be delivered environmentally, but it points out a strong dilemma that Chapter 3 covers: the clash of realities between Whites and people of color, men and women, and straights and gays. As an epilogue, it is sad to note that, although not in the role of an official mascot, Chief Illiniwek has nevertheless reappeared on the University of Illinois campus in 2008 under the banner of "free speech."

Environmental microaggressions are powerful and can be transmitted through numerical imbalance of one's own group (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008), mascots or symbols, and inaccurate media portrayals of marginalized groups in films, television, radio, print media, and educational curriculum (books, course content, films, etc.). The sheer exclusion of decorations, literature, and ethnic aesthetic-cultural forms like music, art, language, and food can also assail the racial, gender, or sexual identity of various groups.

In a revealing study, researchers found that "diversity cues" (number of minority members at a worksite, diversity philosophy communicated through company brochures, etc.) in corporate America directly affected the perception of threat or safety experienced by Black American job applicants (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008). The researchers explored the institutional cues rather than interpersonal ones that signaled either safety or threat to African Americans. Environmental conditions directly impacted how marginalized groups perceive whether they will be valued or demeaned in mainstream settings. The term "social identity contingencies" refers to how individuals from stigmatized groups anticipate whether their group membership will be threatened (devalued or perceived negatively) or valued in corporate America. When the cues signal threat, lack of trust ensues, feelings of safety diminish,

and vulnerability increases. This in turn has a major detrimental impact on the group identity of the worker and potentially lowered productivity.

FORMS OF MICROAGGRESSIONS

D. W. Sue and colleagues (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007; Sue & Capodilupo, 2008) have proposed a taxonomy of racial, gender, and sexual-orientation microaggressions that fall into three major categories: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. All three forms may vary on the dimension of awareness and intentionality by the perpetrator, but they all communicate either an overt, covert, or hidden offensive message or meaning to recipients. Figure 2.1 presents the categorization and relationship of microaggressions to one another, using race as the example. Chapters 8 and 9 discuss specific microaggressions and their taxonomy related to gender and sexual orientation.

Microassaults

Microassaults are conscious, deliberate, and either subtle or explicit racial, gender, or sexual-orientation biased attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors that are communicated to marginalized groups through environmental cues, verbalizations, or behaviors. They are meant to attack the group identity of the person or to hurt/harm the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions (Miller & Garran, 2008; Nelson, 2006). Displaying a Klan hood, Nazi swastika, noose, or Confederate flag; burning a cross; and hanging Playboy bunny pictures in a male manager's office may all constitute environmental microassaults. The intent of these messages is to threaten, intimidate, and make the individuals or groups feel unwanted and unsafe because they are inferior, subhuman, and lesser beings that do not belong on the same levels as others in this society.

Verbal microassaults include the use of racial epithets: referring to African Americans as "niggers," Chinese Americans as "chinks," Japanese Americans as "Japs," women as "bitches" or "cunts," and gays as "fags." Again, the intent is to assail one's racial, gender, or sexual identity and to communicate to the recipient that they are "lesser human beings." Telling ethnic, racial, gender, or sexual-orientation jokes and laughing at them also fall into this category. With respect to behavior, forbidding a son or daughter from marrying outside of one's race, ignoring a group of women who are requesting a table at a restaurant, and promoting a less-qualified heterosexual employee over a gay one are a few examples. Again, such actions communicate to the recipient that

RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

Commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to people of color.

Verbal Manifestations   Nonverbal Manifestations   Environmental Manifestations

Microinsult
(often unconscious)

Communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage.

Microassault
(often conscious)

Explicit racial derogations characterized primarily by a violent verbal, nonverbal, or environmental attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions.

Microinvalidation
(often unconscious)

Communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color.

THEMES

Ascription of Intelligence

Assigning a degree of intelligence to a person of color based on their race.

Second-Class Citizen

Treated as a lesser person or group.

Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles

Notion that the values and communication styles of people of color are abnormal.

Assumption of Criminal Status

Presumed to be a criminal, dangerous, or deviant based on race.

THEMES

Alien in Own Land

Belief that visible racial/ethnic minority citizens are foreigners.

Color-Blindness

Denial or pretense that a White person does not see color or race.

Myth of Meritocracy

Statements that assert that race plays a minor role in life success.

Denial of Individual Racism

Denial of personal racism or one's role in its perpetuation.

Figure 2.1   Categories of and Relationships among Racial Microaggressions

they are unworthy to be served and/or that they are not the "right kind of people" and do not belong.

Microassaults are most similar to what has been called "old fashioned" racism, sexism, or heterosexism conducted on an individual level. They are likely to be conscious and deliberate acts. However, because of strong public condemnation of such behaviors, microassaults are most likely to be expressed under three conditions that afford the perpetrator some form of protection (Sue & Capodilupo, 2008).

First, when perpetrators feel some degree of anonymity and are assured that their roles or actions can be concealed, they may feel freer to engage in

microassaults (scrawling anti-Semitic graffiti in public restrooms or hanging a noose surreptitiously on the door of a Black colleague).

Second, perpetrators may engage in a microassault when they feel relatively safe, such as being in the presence of people who share their beliefs and attitudes or knowing that they can get away with their offensive words and deeds. Safety often relies on the inaction of others in the face of biased actions. In fact, studies reveal that people often overpredict whether they would take action against a biased action (hearing a racist comment). While they may condemn and say they would take appropriate action, when faced with the real situation they remain silent or inactive (Kawakami, Dunn, Karmali, & Dovidio, 2009). The following example is representative of this condition.

> At a fraternity sports party, a group of White males were sitting around their living room during a late Sunday afternoon, chugging down beer after beer tapped from a keg. They had just finished watching the first half of a football game and were obviously quite inebriated. Excitedly talking about the last play from scrimmage that resulted in an incomplete pass, one of the boys exclaimed, "them niggers can't play quarterback!" This brought out a howl of laughter, and another member said, "That's because they're just jungle bunnies!" More laughter erupted in the room and others produced a flurry of racial slurs: "monkey," "coon," "burr head," "oreo," and "Uncle Tom"! Each slur brought on laughter and renewed attempts to outdo one another in finding the most degrading reference to Blacks. As they exhausted their list, the game became a form of free association with blackness. "Black pussy, black sheep, criminal, rapist, castration, welfare family, cattle prod," and so on, they shouted. It was clear that some of those in the group were quite uncomfortable with the game, but said nothing and chuckled at the responses anyway. (Sue, 2003, p. 88)

Third, many people who privately hold notions of minority inferiority will only display their biased attitudes when they lose control. Our opening examples of actors Michael Richards and Mel Gibson represent this condition. Neither had publicly displayed any attitudes/behaviors of racism, anti-Semitism, or sexism until they were caught in situations where conscious concealment and judgment broke down. In the case of Richards, the heckling by Black patrons so infuriated him that he simply "lost it" and exploded with anger expressed through racial epithets. In the case of Gibson, alcoholic intoxication so lowered his inhibitions and defenses that he made statements that have haunted him since.

Microassaults are most similar to "old-fashioned" racism. They are the type the public generally associates with "true racism": direct, deliberate, obvious,

and explicit. There is no guesswork involved in their intent, which is to harm, humiliate, or degrade people of color, women, and LGBTs.

In many respects, microassaults or blatant racism are easier to deal with by marginalized groups because their intent is clear and the psychological energies of people of color, for example, are not diluted by ambiguity. In fact, there are indications that people of color are better prepared to deal with overt microassaults (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007) than unintentional biased behavior that reside outside the level of awareness of perpetrators—microinsults and microinvalidations. It is these invisible and unintentional forms of microaggressions that are the main subject of this book. Table 2.1 provides examples of common microaggression themes with examples and their hidden demeaning messages directed toward people of color, women, and LGBTs.

Please note that a more thorough coverage of group specific themes is presented in separate chapters for people of color (Chapter 7), women (Chapter 8), and LGBTs (Chapter 9). Many microaggressions are common and universal to the three groups, but there are differences in types, hidden messages, and impact. For example, it appears that LGBTs may experience more overt forms of microaggressions (microassaults) than the other two groups; that even with the category of racial microaggressions, Asian Americans and Latinos are more likely to experience "alien in one's own land" messages more than African Americans who are more likely to be seen as "criminals"; and women may experience a unique microaggression such as "sexual objectification" that is not present for racial minorities. Research and work in the area of similarities and differences in microaggressive manifestation and impact is in an infancy stage (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007).

Microinsults

Microinsults are characterized by interpersonal or environmental communications that convey stereotypes, rudeness, and insensitivity and that demean a person's racial, gender, or sexual orientation, heritage, or identity. Microinsults represent subtle snubs, frequently outside the conscious awareness of the perpetrator, but they convey an oftentimes hidden insulting message to the recipient of these three groups.

MICROAGGRESSIVE THEMES

In the original racial microaggression taxonomy proposed by Sue & colleagues (2007) and later refined to include gender and sexual-orientation themes

Table 2.1 Examples of Racial, Gender, and Sexual-Orientation Microaggressions

THEMES	MICROAGGRESSION	MESSAGE
Alien in One's Own Land When Asian Americans and Latino Americans are assumed to be foreign-born.	"Where are you from?" "Where were you born?"	You are not American.
	"You speak English very well."	
	A person asking an Asian American to teach them words in their native language.	You are a foreigner.
Ascription of Intelligence Assigning intelligence to a person of color or woman based on their race/gender.	"You are a credit to your race."	People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites.
	"Wow! How did you become so good in math?"	It is unusual for a woman to be smart in math.
	Asking an Asian person to help with a math or science problem.	All Asians are intelligent and good in math/sciences.
Color Blindness Statements that indicate that a White person does not want to acknowledge race.	"When I look at you, I don't see color."	Denying a person of color's racial/ethnic experiences.
	"America is a melting pot."	Assimilate/acculturate to dominant culture.
	"There is only one race, the human race."	Denying the individual as a racial/cultural being.
Criminality/Assumption of Criminal Status A person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant based on their race.	A White man or woman clutches their purse or checks their wallet as a Black or Latino approaches or passes.	You are a criminal.
	A store owner following a customer of color around the store.	You are going to steal/ You are poor/You do not belong.
	A White person waits to ride the next elevator when a person of color is on it.	You are dangerous.
Use of Sexist/ Heterosexist Language Terms that exclude or degrade women and LGBT persons.	Use of the pronoun "he" to refer to all people.	Male experience is universal. Female experience is meaningless.

Table 2.1   (*Continued*)

THEMES	MICROAGGRESSION	MESSAGE
	Two options for relationship status: married or single.	LGB partnerships do not matter/are meaningless.
	An assertive woman is labeled a "bitch."	Women should be passive.
	A heterosexual man who often hangs out with his female friends more than his male friends is labeled a "faggot."	Men who act like women are inferior (women are inferior)/gay men are inferior.
Denial of Individual Racism/Sexism/ Heterosexism A statement made when bias is denied.	"I'm not racist. I have several Black friends."	I am immune to racism because I have friends of color.
	"As an employer, I always treat men and women equally."	I am incapable of sexism.
Myth of Meritocracy Statements which assert that race or gender does not play a role in life successes.	"I believe the most qualified person should get the job."	People of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race.
	"Men and women have equal opportunities for achievement."	The playing field is even so if women cannot make it, the problem is with them.
Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant/White culture are ideal.	Asking a Black person: "Why do you have to be so loud/animated?" "Just calm down."	Assimilate to dominant culture.
	To an Asian or Latino person: "Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal." "Speak up more."	
	Dismissing an individual who brings up race/culture in work/school setting.	Leave your cultural baggage outside.
Second-Class Citizen Occurs when a target group member receives differential treatment from the power group.	Person of color mistaken for a service worker.	People of color are servants to Whites. They couldn't possibly occupy high status positions.
	Female doctor mistaken for a nurse.	Women occupy nurturing roles.

Table 2.1   *(Continued)*

THEMES	MICROAGGRESSION	MESSAGE
	Having a taxi cab pass a person of color and pick up a White passenger.	You are likely to cause trouble and/or travel to a dangerous neighborhood.
	Being ignored at a store counter as attention is given to the White customer behind a person of color.	Whites are more valued customers than people of color.
	A lesbian woman is not invited out with a group of girlfriends because they thought she would be bored if they were talking to men.	You don't belong.
Traditional Gender Role Prejudicing and Stereotyping Occurs when expectations of traditional roles or stereotypes are conveyed.	When a female student asked a male professor for extra help on a chemistry assignment, he asks "What do you need to work on this for anyway?"	Women are less capable in math and science.
	A person asks a woman her age and, upon hearing she is 31, looks quickly at her ring finger.	Women should be married during child-bearing ages because that is their primary purpose.
	A woman is assumed to be a lesbian because she does not put a lot of effort into her appearance.	Lesbians do not care about being attractive to others.
Sexual Objectification Occurs when women are treated as though they were objects at men's disposal.	A male stranger puts his hands on a woman's hips or on the swell of her back to pass by her.	Your body is not yours.
	Whistles and catcalls as a woman walks down the street.	Your body/appearance is for men's enjoyment and pleasure.
Assumption of Abnormality Occurs when it is implied that there is something wrong with being LGB.	Two men holding hands in public are stared at by strangers.	You should keep your displays of affection private because they are offensive.
	Students use the term "gay" to describe a fellow student who is socially ostracized at school.	People who are weird and different are "gay."

Source: Taken from Sue & Capodilupo, 2008, p. 114–117.

(Sue & Capodilupo, 2008), some of the more common themes with their hidden messages are described below.

- *Ascription of Intelligence*—This microinsult is usually related to aspects of intellect, competence, and capabilities. Saying "You are a credit to your race" contains an insulting metacommunication ("People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites."). The example in Chapter 1 in which Senator Joe Biden's compliment of Barack Obama was found offensive by some African Americans represents such an insult. The belief that African Americans are intellectually inferior is quite a common microaggression (Jones, 1997; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). When a male teacher expresses surprise at the math skills of a female student ("Wow, how did you get so good in math?") or when White students ask Asian Americans for help on their math/science problems (Asians are naturally good at math), ascription of intelligence may be in operation.
- *Second-Class Citizen*—This microinsult contains an unconscious message that certain groups are less worthy, less important, and less deserving, and are inferior beings that deserve discriminatory treatment. While they may be conscious, most are delivered by well-intentioned people who would never knowingly discriminate (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). As a result, people of color, women, and LGBTs are accorded lesser treatment than Whites, men, and straights. A lesbian woman is ignored, left out, and not invited with a group of female coworkers because she "is not like one of us." Black patrons at a restaurant are seated at a smaller table near the kitchen door where waiters and waitresses constantly walk in and out. A female physician at an emergency room is mistaken by male patients as a nurse.
- *Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles*—The theme of this microinsult has two components: a belief that the cultural values/ communication styles of White, male, and straight groups are normative and that those of people of color, females, and LGBTs are somehow abnormal. Telling Latino students to "leave your cultural baggage outside the classroom," and asking a Black person "Why do you have to be so loud, emotional, and animated?" are two examples. In the first case, the Latino students are being asked to assimilate and acculturate and are being told that their cultural values are dysfunctional and should be given up because they will interfere with their learning. In the latter case, the style of communication by many Blacks is being pathologized because appropriate communication is dispassionate and objective (Kochman, 1981).

But there is something more sinister and insidious in the reaction that fosters fear that Blacks will become violent and out of control. This is related to the next microinsult.

- *Criminality/Assumption of Criminal Status*—The theme of this microinsult appears to be very race specific and relates to beliefs that a person of color is presumed to be dangerous, potentially a criminal, likely to break the law, or antisocial. Women and LGBTs are unlikely to encounter this form of microinsult. Numerous examples of this apply to African Americans and Latinos. A White woman who clutches her purse more tightly in the presence of Latinos, a White man checking for his wallet while passing a group of African Americans on the sidewalk, and a sales clerk requesting more pieces of identification to cash a check from a Black than from a White customer are examples. Interestingly, our studies suggest that assumption of criminal status is seldom attributed to Asian Americans. Indeed, they are often viewed as law abiding, conforming, unlikely to rock the boat, and less prone to violence (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008).

- *Sexual Objectification*—Sexual objectification is the process by which women are transformed into "objects" or property at the sexual disposal or benefit of men. There is a dehumanizing quality in this process because women are stripped of their humanity and the totality of their human essence (personal attributes, intelligence, emotions, hopes, etc.). *Playboy* and *Hustler* magazine pictures of nude women, topless and bottomless entertainment clubs, using scantily clad attractive female models in commercials to sell goods or services, and countless other examples communicate that women's bodies are not their own, and that they exist to service the sexual fantasies and desires of men (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The interaction of race and gender and sexual objectification can be quite complex (Lott, Aquith, & Doyon, 2001). In one study it was found, for example, that Asian American females often experienced microinsults related to exoticization (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007). Participants complained of continual subjugation to the roles of sexual objects, domestic servants, and exotic images such as Geishas. They felt their identities were equated to that of passive companions to White men. Interestingly, some speculated that White men are often attracted to Asian American women, who are perceived as feminine and submissive, primarily as a backlash to feminist values and the feminist movement.

- *Assumption of Abnormality*—This theme is related to the perception that something about the person's race, gender, or sexual orientation is abnormal, deviant, and pathological. LGBT groups experience these microinsults frequently, especially in the area of sexual behavior that is equated with abnormality (Herek, 1998; Satcher & Leggett, 2007). When a gay man during a physical exam is suspected by a physician to have HIV/AIDS on the first visit, when students use the term "gay" to describe the odd or nonconformist behavior of a fellow classmate, and when someone expresses surprise that a lesbian is in a monogamous relationship, an assumption of abnormality is present. Examples of assumptions could be *"LBGT people are promiscuous and engage in deviant sexual behavior"* or *"People who are weird and different are gay."*

Microinvalidation

Microinvalidations are characterized by communications or environmental cues that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of certain groups, such as people of color, women, and LGBTs. In many ways, microinvalidations may potentially represent the most damaging form of the three microaggressions because they directly and insidiously deny the racial, gender, or sexual-orientation reality of these groups. As we shall see in the next chapter, the power to impose reality upon marginalized groups represents the ultimate form of oppression. Several examples of microinvalidation themes are given below.

- *Alien in One's Own Land*—This theme involves being perceived as a perpetual foreigner or being an alien in one's own country. Of all the groups toward which such microinvalidations are directed, Asian Americans and Latino Americans are most likely to experience them. When Asian Americans are complimented for speaking "good English," and persistently asked where they were born, the metacommunication is that *"You are not American"* or *"You are a foreigner."* When Latino Americans are told, *"If you don't like it here, go back to Mexico,"* there is an implied assumption that one's allegiance resides in another country. Interestingly, studies reveal that African Americans are perceived by the public as "more American" than either Asian or Latino Americans (Devos & Banaji, 2005). While highly speculative, it may be that the enslavement of Blacks in the United States is so tightly

bound up in American history that such an association is partially reflected in the consciousness of White America.

- *Color, Gender, and Sexual-Orientation Blindness*—Being color, gender, or sexual-orientation blind, simply stated, is the unwillingness to acknowledge or admit to seeing race, gender, or sexual orientation. Color blindness is one of the most frequently delivered microinvalidations toward people of color. Statements such as *"When I look at you I don't see color," "There is only one race, the human race," "We are all Americans,"* or *"We are a melting pot,"* contain multiple and complex hidden messages. At one level they are messages asking the receiver not to bring the topic of race into the discussion or interaction. They are also messages that indicate people of color should assimilate and acculturate. But they are also on one hand intended as defensive maneuvers not to appear racist (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008), and on the other hand as a denial of the racial experiences of people of color (Bonilla-Silva, 2005). Sue (2005) posits that denial of color is really a denial of differences. The denial of differences is really a denial of power and privilege. The denial of power and privilege is really a denial of personal benefits that accrue to certain privileged groups by virtue of inequities. The denial that we profit from racism is really a denial of responsibility for our racism. Lastly, the denial of our racism is really a denial of the necessity to take action against racism.

- *Denial of Individual Racism/Sexism/Heterosexism*—Related to the theme above is another form of denial. This involves an individual denial of personal racism, personal sexism, or personal heterosexism. Statements such as *"I'm not homophobic, I have a gay friend," "I have nothing against interracial marriages, but I worry about the children,"* and *"As an employer I treat all men and women equally"* may possess the following hidden messages: *"I am immune to heterosexism," "The only reason I have hesitations about interracial relationships is concern about the offspring and it has nothing to do with personal bias,"* and *"I never discriminate against women."* When such statements are made to a person of color, for example, they deny the racial reality of the individual (an experience that personal racial bias resides in everyone).

- *Myth of Meritocracy*—The myth of meritocracy is a theme that asserts that race, gender, and sexual orientation do not play a role in life successes. It assumes that all groups have an equal opportunity to succeed, and that we operate on a level playing field. Thus, success and failure are attributed to individual attributes like intelligence, hard work, motivation,

and family values. When people do well, they are considered to have achieved their success through individual effort. The flip side of the coin is those who do not succeed are also seen as possessing deficiencies (lazy, low intellect, etc.) (Jones, 1997). In the case of persons of color, there is little recognition that higher unemployment rates, lower educational achievement, and poverty may be the result of systemic forces (individual, institutional, and societal racism). Blaming the victim is the outcome of the myth of meritocracy. Statements made to marginalized groups may be reflected in these comments: *"Everyone has an equal chance in this society," "The cream of the crop rises to the top," "Everyone can succeed if they work hard enough,"* and *"Affirmative action is reverse racism."* All these statements potentially imply that racism, sexism, and heterosexism is of little importance in a group's or individual's success.

Microaggressions, whether they fall into the category of microassaults, microinsults, or microinvalidations are detrimental to the well-being and standard of living for marginalized groups in our society. In the next chapter, we turn to a discussion and analysis of the psychological dilemmas created by microaggressions and attempt to describe the psychological and internal processes of both recipients and unintentional perpetrators.

The Way Forward

Defining, Recognizing, and Deconstructing Hidden Messages in Microaggressions

Microaggressions are a constant and continuing reality for people of color, women, and LGBTs in our society. They hold their power over both perpetrators and targets because of their everyday invisible nature. In many respects, all of us have been both perpetrators and targets. With respect to the former, we have been guilty of having delivered microaggressions, whether they are racial, gender, sexual-orientation, ability, religious, or class based. Microaggressions are harmful to marginalized groups because they cause psychological distress and create disparities in health care, employment, and education. The first steps in overcoming racial, gender, and sexual microaggressions involve the following.

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1. *Defining microaggressions.* Microaggressions can be overt or covert but they are most damaging when they occur outside the level of the conscious awareness of well-intentioned perpetrators. Most of us can recognize and define overt forms of bias and discrimination and will actively condemn such actions. However, the "invisible" manifestations are not under conscious awareness and control, so they occur spontaneously without any checks and balances in personal, social, and work-related interactions. They can occur among and between family members, neighbors, and coworkers, and in teacher–student, healthcare provider–patient, therapist–client, and employer–employee relationships. They are numerous, continuous, and have a detrimental impact upon targets. Being able to define microaggressions and to know the various forms they take must begin with a cognitive and intellectual understanding of their manifestations and impact. The taxonomy described in this chapter will, hopefully, provide readers with a template that will facilitate understanding of their concrete characteristics and qualities.

2. *Recognizing microaggressions.* Being able to define racial, gender, and sexual-orientation microaggressions is not enough. Recognizing microaggressions when they make their appearance is more than an intellectual exercise in definitions. Their manifestations are dynamic, with very real personal consequences that can only be ameliorated when recognized in their interactional or environmental forms. Appropriate intervention can only occur when microaggressions are recognized in the here and now. Recognition may involve two different situations: (1) when they are observed as occurring between external parties (delivered by others), and (2) when you are one of the actors involved (perpetrator or recipient). When you observe a microaggression being delivered by someone else, the possibility of intervention may present a personal or professional dilemma: *"Should I or shouldn't I intervene? If I do, what is the most appropriate way to do so? What are the consequences if I choose to take action?"* The second situation involves you as either the target or perpetrator. We will spend considerable time in future chapters analyzing target impact and response issues. More importantly, however, is your recognition that perhaps you have or are personally engaging in the delivery of microaggressions. Self-monitoring, being open to exploring the possibility that you have acted in a biased fashion, and controlling defensiveness are crucial to recognizing when you have been guilty of a microaggression.

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3. *Deconstructing the hidden meaning of microaggressions.* Microaggressions are reflections of worldviews that are filled with ethnocentric values, biases, assumptions, and stereotypes that have been strongly culturally inculcated into our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Microaggressions usually send double messages that are often contradictory to one another. A common microaggression directed toward people of color and women is symbolized in this statement: *"I believe the most qualified person should be offered the job."* While few of us would disagree with this statement, in certain contexts, when made to a devalued group member by a majority person, there may be a hidden message: *"Minorities and women are generally not qualified, so don't blame me of bias when it is offered to a White male."*

Being able to define and recognize microaggressions and being able to deconstruct the metacommunications are very challenging goals. They are the necessary preconditions to effective interventions, whether in personal or professional settings. Only when awareness is present can action be taken in education, training, or remediation to overcome racial, gender, and sexual-orientation microaggressions.