UNDERSTANDING “MICRO”AGGRESSIONS AND RACIAL TRAUMA

INTERSECTIONS WITH MENTAL HEALTH
Objectives

- Learn about what are racial abuses/acts of exclusion/microaggressions and how to identify them
- How to confront these acts as a bystander, target, or perpetrator
- Understand the harm caused by these acts
- Explore signs and symptoms of race-based traumatic stress (RBTS)
- Understand the term and redefine the name
- Understand ethical implications of one's own speech and actions in the context of these acts
ONLINE MEETING NORMS

1. HAVE YOUR CAMERA ON AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE

2. USE CHAT FOR ON TOPIC CONVERSATIONS AND QUESTIONS

3. KEEP YOURSELF ON MUTE UNTIL YOU ARE READY TO SPEAK

4. UPDATE YOUR NAME, LABEL, AND PRONOUNS
“Micro”aggressions

- Racial Abuse, Acts of Exclusion
“Micro”aggressions what are they?

The term was first introduced by Chester Pierce and later redefined by psychologist Derald Sue and colleagues.

“Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target a person based solely on their marginalized group membership” (Sue et al., 2007)
We set the bar low for ourselves and high for others (Jana, Baran 2020)

- Most people believe they are well intentioned, good people who don’t go around causing harm.
- We think to ourselves, “I had good intentions,” or “I’m not prejudiced”
- We believe that others might be uncaring, selfish, or even intentionally mean when they violated our boundaries...We may set the relations low for ourselves and high for others”
“Come on it was just a joke”

Microaggressions have two parts:

One is the conscious communication of the initiator (which is sometimes intended to be a surface level compliment)

Two is the unconscious metacommunication, which is the message the microaggression sends.
Thoughts?

Have you encountered or witnessed “micro”aggressions?

Can you recall a time you may have ever perpetrated a “micro”aggression?

Are standards for your own behaviors, different than your standards for the behaviors of others (do you set the bar lower for yourself)?
Taxonomy of Microaggressions

“You’re too pretty to be a lesbian”
Racial Microaggressions
Commonplace verbal or behavioral indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults.

Microinsult
(Often Unconscious)
Behavioral/verbal remarks or comments that convey rudeness, insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity.

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

Microinvalidation
(Often Unconscious)
Verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color.

Environmental Microaggressions
(Macro-level)
Racial assaults, insults and invalidations which are manifested on systemic and environmental levels.

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.

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 which 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.
9 Common Themes of Microaggressions
1) **Alien-One's Own Land** - Belief that visible racial/ethnic minority citizens are foreigners

2) **Ascription of Intelligence** – Assigning a degree of intelligence to a person based on their race and ethnicity

3) **Color Blindness** - Denial or pretense that a White person does not see color or race

4) **Assumption of Criminality** - Presumed to be criminal, dangerous, or deviant based on race
5) **Denial of racism** - Denial or racism or one’s own role in its perpetuation

6) **Myth of meritocracy** - Myth that one can achieve upward social mobility through one’s own merits regardless of one’s social position

7) **Pathologizing cultural norms** - Notion that values, and communication styles of marginalized people are abnormal

8) **Second-class citizenship** - Treated as a lesser person or group

9) **Environmental invalidation** - Insults and invalidations that are manifested on systemic and environmental levels
“insidious, damaging, harmful forms of racism [that] are everyday, unintentional, and unconscious are perpetrated by ordinary citizens who believe they are doing right”

2005 Derald Wing Sue. President of the Society of Counseling Psychology
There is empirical evidence that microaggressions cause physical, mental, and emotional harm.
Redefining the term “Microaggressions”
Those targeted by racist behavior of any sort are deeply impacted and the term microaggression serves to minimize the experience of those targeted. - Ibram Kendi
Subtle Acts of Exclusion

They are subtle.

Confusing, hard to identify, and challenging to speak about. It’s important to recognize that we’re not just talking about one thing, but a whole range of interactions that can vary in seriousness and in obviousness.

Feed into “attributional ambiguity”—the sense of anxiety created when someone with a marginalized identity is unable to discern whether something happened because of said identity or some other random factors. (Jana, Baran 2020)
They are Acts.

They are things that people say and do. We don’t know what someone’s intention was in the moment, and so the term does not make assumptions about that or focus attention on that.

SAE as acts, the term also attempts to avoid people feeling as if their character is being judged when they initiate an SAE.
Finally, the term itself names the problem — that the subtle acts create exclusion rather than inclusion.

They serve to Exclude.
Other types of exclusion may include explicit, intentional acts of exclusion and structural exclusion / inequality.
Make the Invisible, Visible

Often the perpetrator is unaware of that they have been demeaning or offensive, and it is important to make that visible to the perpetrator.

Educate the Perpetrator

Shift the focus from what the perpetrator intended to the impact. Often when you point out an SAE, a common response might be “That wasn’t my intention, why are you so sensitive?” The argument is lost when you focus on intention, because you cannot prove intent. Focusing on the impact as influenced by the significance, gets the perpetrator to understand what has happened and how might pain have been caused.

Disarm the Act

Steer the conversation away from the problematic comment, behavior, or joke if other people are present to communicate that it is inappropriate. Then have later have a conversation with the person about why the comment, behavior, or joke was in inappropriate.
Examples

“Can I pet your hair?”
‘I am not racist. I have a black friend’

**Why it’s offensive:** The statement equates racism with prejudice. Prejudice is an attitude based on stereotypes. Racism entails policies and practices that uphold ideas of white people as superior and black people as inferior. One might not be racially prejudice but knowing black people does keep someone from engaging in discriminatory behavior or failing to challenge racist practices.

**What to say:** “Saying “I can’t be racist” is denying the larger social context in which all of us are living. It is not about your individual intentions or biases. It’s about our collective work. So even if we have the best of intentions, as long as we are supporting racist policies and ideas that undergird those policies, all of us can be racist.”
‘Don’t blame me. I never owned slaves.’

**Why its offensive:** The statement assumes that as the US Civil War concluded, so did racism, when it has really continued and is taking additional new insidious forms. White people are still benefiting from discrimination.

**What to say:** “People are not asking you to accept blame. People are asking you to see how we are all connected in society. One person’s disadvantage is, on the other side, one person’s advantage unfairly earned. So, it’s important to understand how the system is disadvantaged and take more responsibility for working for a more just society for all.”
‘You’re so articulate’ or ‘You don’t sound black’

**Why it’s offensive:** When a white person says that statement, it usually implies that they don’t expect to hear intelligence from a black person. The black person did not fit the white person’s offensive stereotype, so in actuality the white person is complimenting the individual for surprising them.

**What to say:** “I know you meant that as a compliment, but unfortunately that connects to a larger history of people being surprised that black people can speak so well”
‘Can I touch your hair?’

**Why it’s offensive:** Curiosity is normal, but crossing personal boundaries is not. It can make a person feel that they are on display.

**What to say:** Inform them it is an invasion of personal space. It also taps into the history of black people being treated as curiosities and animals. They can learn about such differences online. They can also compliment the person instead.
White allies observing can also step up the plate to confront these statements and behaviors.

If our words are destructive, even unknowingly, we need to be able to change and learn how to speak new words that can build people up and help people, feel strong, included and embraced. Our words have consequences in the life and death of our fellow human beings.

**When/If Perpetrating:**

If someone tells you that a remark you made was harmful, be open to criticism and feedback. Thank them for bringing it up and apologize. Know the person is not trying to shame you, but the correction is coming from a place of encouragement to grow. Receive it with gratitude. You can ask what went wrong on your part and why. (THE CNN-WIRE, 2020).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Column A</th>
<th>Column B Possible Interpretations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You don’t fit the stereotypes of your group.</td>
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<tr>
<td>[To a woman with a headscarf] “What are you hiding in there?”</td>
<td>You have no self-control.</td>
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<td>“It’s almost like you’re not Black.”</td>
<td>All Muslims are terrorists.</td>
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<td>“Everyone take out your smartphones. Let’s take a poll.”</td>
<td>Everyone has enough money for common items.</td>
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<tr>
<td>[To a female graduate student] “You sure are opinionated.”</td>
<td>You should conform to your expected role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[To a larger woman] “Should you be eating that?”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column A Statements</td>
<td>Column B Possible Interpretations</td>
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<td>“That’s retarded.”</td>
<td>People with disabilities are less important, likeable, or competent.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I don’t see color.”</td>
<td>Everyone from your group acts the same.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“How did your mom react when she found out you were a lesbian?”</td>
<td>Women have inferior abilities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“You don’t even seem Black.”</td>
<td>Being a lesbian is not normal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[To a girl] “Math is hard, isn’t it?”</td>
<td>Your experiences are a minority are invalid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column A Statements</td>
<td>Column B Possible Interpretations</td>
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<tr>
<td>[Professor to Latina student during class] “What do Latinas think about this situation?”</td>
<td>Feminine traits are undesirable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Don’t be a sissy.”</td>
<td>You are not American.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You speak English very well.”</td>
<td>Blacks are all criminals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[A White person to others] “I have lots of Black friends.”</td>
<td>Your experiences are interchangeable with anyone else in your racial group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Store manager to employees] “Keep an eye on the Black shoppers.”</td>
<td>I am not racist.</td>
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</table>
1. Alvin Poussaint refers to the cumulative impact of experiencing microaggressions as “death by a thousand nicks.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain your answer.

2. When people discuss microaggressions, a common response is that they are “innocent acts” and that the person who experiences them should “let go of the incident” and “not make a big deal out of it.” Do you agree or disagree with this point of view? Explain your reasoning.

3. If a person from a marginalized group pointed out to you that one of your comments was a microaggression, how would you respond at the time? Would it change the likelihood of your making a similar comment in the future? Why or why not?

4. Derald Wing Sue has argued that the impact of subtle prejudice, such as microaggressions, is more harmful than the impact of blatant discrimination. Do you agree or disagree with this proposition? Explain your answer.

5. Choose a microaggression from Column A. What do you think the possible intent was of the speaker? Does the intent change the impact of the statement for the person who experiences the microaggressions?
The Ethical Implications of Racial Abuse/SAE’s Harm, Health and Risk
“Research suggest that experiencing microaggressions can lead to elevated levels of trauma and depression” (Smith, 2019).
Ethical Implications of SAEs/Racial Abuse

- Compromised Patient Care
- Racial Trauma
- Accelerated Aging
- Health Disparities
- Increased Suicide Risk
- Increased Health Risk
RISK FACTORS AND DISPARITIES

RISK FACTORS FOR TRAUMA

- Race and Ethnicity (BIPOC likely to experience trauma)
- Acute Stress
- Childhood adversity
- Socioeconomic status
- Gender (women more likely to experience trauma)
- Education
- Lifestyle
- Genetics
- History of trauma and family history of trauma
- Domestic Violence
- Social determinants of health (access to care, environment, healthcare system, economic stability) (Gibbs, 2021)

BIPOC (BLACK, INDIGENOUS, PEOPLE OF COLOR) DISPARITIES

- Poverty
- Uninsured
- Access to care
- Food desserts
- Physiological factors (heart disease, stroke, obesity, Diabetes II)
- Maternal Mortality
- Childhood Asthma
- Alzheimer’s Disease
- Incarceration/Arrest
- Disruptive Behavioral Disorders

(Gibbs, 2021)
POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER DSM-5

HAVING FOR AT LEAST ONE MONTH AND EXPOSURE OR DIRECTLY WITNESSING, LEARNING ABOUT TRAUMA TO A LOVED ONE, OR BEING EXPOSED TO THE DETAILS OF A TRAUMATIC EVENT

- AVOIDING REMINDERS OF THE TRAUMA
- NEGATIVE THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS
- AROUSAL REACTIVE SYMPTOMS
- INTRUSIVE SYMPTOMS - THOUGHTS, NIGHTMARES, FLASHBACKS
**RACE-BASED TRAUMATIC STRESS (RBTS)**

Refers to the stressful impact, mental and emotional injury caused with racial bias, ethnic discrimination, racism, and hate crimes (Mental Health America, 2020)

- Exposure to discrimination either directly or indirectly (can include witnessing discrimination against a member of a particular group)
- Chronic exposure to discrimination can be humiliating, frightening, and isolating
- When others deny that this trauma exists or blames the victim, it may intensify the trauma

- Distress related to the trauma
- Avoiding things that remind the person of the trauma
- Intense anxiety or depression related to the trauma
- Negative thoughts about self, other people, or the world
- Increased sensitivity and reactivity
- Dissociation
- Weathering

(Klein, Villines 2020)
Impact of RBTS

(Family and Children’s Trust Fund of Virginia, 2019)

- **Increased vigilance and suspicion** - suspicion of social institutions (schools, agencies, government) avoiding eye contact, only trusting persons within our social and family networks
- **Increased sensitivity to threat** - defensive postures, avoiding new situations, heightened sensitivity to being disrespected and shame, and avoid taking risks
- **Increased psychological and physiological symptoms** - chronic stress, decrease immune functioning, limbic system dominance, anxiety, depression, and disruption of child development
- **Increased alcohol and drug use** - can become a disease when dependency occurs
- **Increased aggression** - domestic violence, gang activity, defiant behavior
- **Narrowing sense of time** - persons living in a chronic state of danger do not develop a sense of future
What can providers do?

“Service providers are encouraged to see “through the patient’s eyes”. Hallmarks of culturally competent, patient-centered care include services that meet patients needs and preferences; healthcare facilities that are convenient to the community; documents that are tailored to patient needs, literacy and language; and data on performance available to consumers” (Smith, 2019).
Respect
It is imperative to uphold the trauma informed tenet of respect
(Resler, 2019)

- Authenticity- Allowing honest and difficult conversations about experiences of racism, oppression, and racist systems
- Difference- honoring difference in perspectives and emotional responses
- Empathy- Offer empathy and understanding those who express distress and/or distrust
- Validation- validate and honor people’s experiences and emotions (rather than try to convince them they are not rationale or act in disbelief)
Patient-Centered Care
- Convenient office hours/ability to get same-day appointments/short wait times
- Availability of phone appointments or e-mail contact with providers
- Continuity/secure transition between healthcare settings
- Coordination of care
- Ongoing patient feedback to providers
- Attention to physical comfort of patients
- Focus on health promotion/disease prevention

- Services aligned to meeting patient needs and preferences
- Healthcare facilities convenient to community
- Documents tailored to patient needs/literacy/language
- Data on performance available to consumers

Cultural Competence
- Workforce diversity reflecting patient population
- Availability and offering of language assistance for patients with limited English proficiency
- Ongoing training of staff regarding the delivery of culturally and linguistically appropriate services
- Partnering with communities
- Use of community health workers
- Stratification of performance data by race/ethnicity
The beauty of the world lies in the diversity of its people.
“Humanity Consciousness Approach”

We see interconnectedness
We feel the suffering of others
We discern what action might help alleviate the suffering and harm
We take action and reflect on its impact

Rhonda Magee-Law professor and mindfulness practitioner
QUESTIONS???

Thank you!!!
Resources


Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice.
Sue, Derald Wing,Capodilupo, Christina M.,Torino, Gina C.,Buccheri, Jennifer M.,Holder, Aisha M. B.,Nadal, Kevin L.,Esquilin, Mart.

Cunningham, Candace (2017) *RACE AND TRAUMA: HOW TO BEGIN HEALING RACIAL TRAUMA*. Race and Trauma: How to Begin Healing Racial Trauma | myTherapyNYC


*Coping with Racial Trauma | The Department of Psychology (uga.edu)* (2021)

Villines, Z (2021) What to Know About Racial Trauma. Medical News today *What is racial trauma? Causes, symptoms, and how to cope (medicalnewstoday.com)*