A Note on Understanding Microaggressions

From [Sue, Derald Wing, et al. “Disarming Racial Microaggressions: Microintervention Strategies for Targets, White Allies, and Bystanders.” The American Psychologist, vol. 74, no. 1, American Psychological Association (APA), 2019, pp. 128–42, doi:10.1037/amp0000296](https://rutgers.instructure.com/courses/26841/files/10309628/download?wrap=1) (attached)

*What are microaggressions?*

“Racial microaggressions are the everyday slights, insults, putdowns, invalidations, and offensive behaviors that people of color experience in daily interactions with generally well-intentioned White Americans who may be unaware that they have engaged in racially demeaning ways toward target groups (Sue et al., 2007). In addition to being communicated on an interpersonal level through verbal and nonverbal means, microaggressions may also be delivered environmentally through social media, educational curriculum, TV programs, mascots, monuments, and other offensive symbols. Scholars conclude that the totality of environmental microaggressions experienced by people of color can create a hostile and invalidating societal climate in employment, education, and health care (Clark, Spanierman, Reed, Soble, & Cabana, 2011; Neville, Yeung, Todd, Spanierman, & Reed, 2011; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yasso, 2000; Sue, 2010). Likewise, the current political climate (Potok, 2017) has been identified as a significant stressor for many Americans, especially to people of color because of its racially charged connotation (American Psychological Association [APA], 2017a, 2017b)” (129).

*What makes microaggressions different from everyday rudeness?*

“They are (a) constant and continual in the lives of people of color, (b) cumulative in nature and represent a lifelong burden of stress, (c) continuous reminders of the target group’s second-class status in society, and (d) symbolic of past governmental injustices directed toward people of color (enslavement of Black people, incarceration of Japanese Americans, and appropriating land from Native Americans). In one revealing study on Asian Americans, for example, Wang, Leu, and Shoda (2011) found that race-based microaggressions were much more harmful to the targets than nonraced-based insults because their lower social status in society was a constant reminder of their overall subjugation and persecution. They concluded that racial microaggressions differed significantly in quality and quantity from general nonrace-based incivilities” (130).

From: [Ramasubramaniana, S., Sousaa, A.N., & Gonlinb, V. (2017).  Facilitated difficult dialogues on racism: a goal-based approach. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 45*(5), 537-556.](https://www-tandfonline-com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/doi/full/10.1080/00909882.2017.1382706)

Campus racism and everyday racial microaggressions

“Higher education institutions have long been sites of racism and systemic violence. Universities ‘have not invested in the resources necessary to address the complexities of racial and ethnic diversity on predominantly White campuses’ (Hamer & Lang, 2015, p. 905). Smith, Mustaffa, Jones, Curry, and Allen (2016) also note that they prefer the phrase ‘historically White,’ as opposed to ‘predominantly White’ to describe the university setting, in order to indicate that actual demographics of college campuses ‘have less to do with constituting the majority population than with the historical and contemporary racialized infrastructure that is in place’ (p. 1190). Experiencing racism on campus can cause negative health outcomes, which can in turn affect the educational and personal well-being of marginalized students (Franklin, Smith, & Hung, 2014). Racism that occurs on college campuses can be overt, but can also take the more concealed form of microaggressions (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014). Overt racism is not typically ‘socially condoned,’ which make covert racist acts more relevant on college campuses (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013). Therefore, learning about and addressing microaggressions becomes an important task for diversity leaders on campuses.”

“Nadal (2011) defines racial microaggressions as ‘subtle statements and behaviors that unconsciously communicate denigrating messages to people of color’ (p. 470). Microaggressions take three forms: (1) microinsults (‘subtle snubs’ that attack or disregard someone’s identity), (2) microassaults (explicit attack, most closely tied to overt racism), and (3) microinvalidations (‘negating or nullifying’ someone’s lived experience) (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). Sue (2010) adds, microaggressions are ‘everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership.’ (p. 3). Microaggressions that occur on college campuses have an adverse effect on the academic performance, self-esteem, and mental health of students of color (Franklin et al., 2014; Nadal et al., 2014). Repeated exposure to microaggressions can also lead to racial battle fatigue, which can impact marginalized people at the individual and group level (Smith et al., 2016). Without addressing this form of racism, students of color will continue to feel marginalized on college campuses.” (pp. 538-539)

Reflection: We chose to end our short self-study with this article by communication scholars who call for dialogue and holding difficult conversations, which we hope to have as our next step.

We are grateful to the English Department at Rutgers for allowing us to use material developed by the Anti-Racist Pedagogy Workshop Committee: Lynda Dexheimer (Chair), Brad Evans, Nicole Houser, Stacy Klein, and David Kurnick. Faculty members Jennie Snow, Nela Navarro, Jacqueline McDaniel also contributed the content of the workshop.