Chapter 6
Microaggressions:
An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

Microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward people who are not classified within the "normative" standard. Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with people who differ from themselves. This review of microaggressions in its numerous forms seeks to address the current literature regarding aversive behavior and its impacts; this includes investigating the manifestation and influence of everyday "isms," on the quality of life of those on the receiving end of these acts. Ensuing suggestions regarding institutional-level education, training, and research—particularly in the higher educational realm—in the work towards reducing microaggression-inducing behaviors are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

'You got beat by a girl!'...is a direct insult to the female professor, sending the message that women are inferior to men. Telling an African American professor: 'You are a credit to your race,' is insulting because the message is that African Americans are not as smart as Whites to be professors. 'Complimenting' an Asian American [by saying]: 'You speak excellent English,' is offensive because it communicates that he or she is not a real American. These insults are called 'microaggressions' (Berk, 2017, p. 64.)

Psychiatrist and Harvard University Emeritus Professor Chester M. Pierce is credited as the originator of the term 'microaggression'. In 1969, he created the word to describe the insults and dismissals he regularly witnessed non-black Americans inflict upon those of African American descent (Delpit, 2012; Lau & Williams, 2010; Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2015; Sue, 2010; Treadwell, 2013). Microaggressions, according to Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, and Willis (1978), refer to the "everyday subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs' of blacks by offenders. The offensive mechanisms used against blacks often are innocuous" (p. 66). Peggy Davis (1989), Professor of Law at New York University School of Law, defined microaggressions as "stunning, automatic acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute a verification of black inferiority'' (p. 1576). Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) refer to these as "subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of color, often automatically or unconsciously" (p. 60).

The meaning of this term has evolved since its inception. In 1973, MIT economist Dr. Mary Rowe extended the term to include similar backhanded remarks directed at women, referring to these acts as "apparently small events which are often ephemeral and hard-to-prove, events which are covert, often unintentional, frequently unrecognized by the perpetrator, which occur wherever people are perceived to be 'different'" (2008, p. 2). Since then, the use of the word microaggression has expanded further to describe the unintentional, unpremeditated degradation of members of any socially marginalized group (Paludi, Denmark, Denmark, & Paludi, 2010). This includes, but is not limited to, groups experiencing societal exclusion in any capacity due to race, gender, social economic status (SES), disability, and/or sexual orientation. Psychologist and diversity training specialist Derald Wing Sue (2010) defines microaggressions as "the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, and sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group" (p. 229). In sum, although explicit racism is now widely frowned upon – and thus, deemed a non-issue for most people – implicit biases remain prevalent. For this reason, the term 'microaggression' has evolved from being mainly concerned with racism to a focus on the subtle indignities regularly suffered by marginalized groups.

For clarity's sake, a microaggression is 'micro' in the size of the infraction – as compared to a 'macro' overt, illegal hate crime – and the perception by the aggressor that it is trivial, inoffensive, and even trite (Wells, 2013). It is in no way, however, 'micro' in that the potentially detrimental impact it bears on the victims can be lasting and downright hurtful. In fact, scholars such as Berk (2017) compare the 'aggression' component of this phenomenon to a misdemeanor-level assault (Garcia & Johnston-Guerrero, 2015; Paludi et al., 2010; Sue et al., 2007; Wells, 2013). Similar to an assault, microaggressions can produce fear, stress, and emotional harm, and may embarrass or intimidate the victim, undermine his or her credibility, and expose vulnerabilities. Unlike an assault in a traditional sense, they are often absent of the intent, threats, and/or the fear of physical harm (Berk, 2017; Garcia & Johnston-Guerrero, 2015; Paludi et al., 2010; Sue et al., 2007; Wells, 2013).

Across the board, contemporary scholars contend that microaggressions are now commonly understood as subtle affronts, directed towards a person or a group of people, as a way of putting them down – regardless of intent (or the lack thereof) (Sue et al., 2009; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). Though widely accepted as pejorative, microaggressions remain distinct in their relation to more overt, deliberate acts of bigotry, such as the use of racial epithets. That is, those who micro-aggress often lack ill-intent and, thusly, are unaware of the harm they are inflicting (Berk, 2017; Campbell & Manning, 2014; Dovidio, Gaetner, Kawkami, & Hodson, 2002; Flagg, 1993; Lau & Williams, 2010; Paludi et al.,

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