Microaggressions and Marginality

Manifestation, Dynamics, and Impact

Edited by Derald Wing Sue
Microaggressions and Marginality
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the Editor xiii</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part I  Microaggressions and Marginality**

1. Microaggressions, Marginality, and Oppression: An Introduction 3  
   *Derald Wing Sue*

**Part II  Racial/Ethnic Manifestation of Microaggressions**

2. Black Undergraduates’ Experiences with Perceived Racial Microaggressions in Predominately White Colleges and Universities 25  
   *Nicole L. Watkins, Theressa L. LaBarrie, and Lauren M. Appio*

3. Microaggressions and the Life Experience of Latina/o Americans 59  
   *David P. Rivera, Erin E. Forquer, and Rebecca Rangel*

4. Racial Microaggressions Directed at Asian Americans: Modern Forms of Prejudice and Discrimination 85  
   *Annie I. Lin*

5. The Context of Racial Microaggressions Against Indigenous Peoples: Same Old Racism or Something New? 105  
   *Jill S. Hill, Suah Kim, and Chantea D. Williams*

6. Multiracial Microaggressions: Exposing Monoracism in Everyday Life and Clinical Practice 123  
   *Marc P. Johnston and Kevin L. Nadal*

7. Microaggressions and the Pipeline for Scholars of Color 145  
   *Fernando Guzman, Jesus Trevino, Fernand Lubuguin, and Bushra Aryan*
PART III OTHER SOCIALLY DEVALUED GROUP
MICROAGGRESSIONS:
International/Cultural, Sexual Orientation and
Transgender, Disability, Class, and Religious

8 Microaggressions Experienced by International Students
Attending U.S. Institutions of Higher Education 171
Suah Kim and Rachel H. Kim

9 The Manifestation of Gender Microaggressions
Christina M. Capodilupo, Kevin L. Nadal, Lindsay Corman,
Sahran Hamit, Oliver B. Lyons, and Alexa Weinberg 193

10 Sexual Orientation and Transgender Microaggressions:
Implications for Mental Health and Counseling 217
Kevin L. Nadal, David P. Rivera, and Melissa J. H. Corpus

11 Microaggressive Experiences of People with Disabilities
Richard M. Keller and Corinne E. Galgay 241

12 Class Dismissed: Making the Case for the Study
of Classist Microaggressions 269
Laura Smith and Rebecca M. Redington

13 Religious Microaggressions in the United States: Mental
Health Implications for Religious Minority Groups 287
Kevin L. Nadal, Marie-Anne Issa, Katie E. Griffin,
Sahran Hamit, and Oliver B. Lyons

PART IV MICROAGGRESSION RESEARCH

14 Microaggression Research: Methodological Review
and Recommendations 313
Michael Y. Lau and Chantea D. Williams

About the Contributors 337
Author Index 343
Subject Index 355
Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics, and Impact is the second major text that follows the previous publication of Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation (Sue, 2010). Like its predecessor, it represents a major step forward in (1) exploring the psychological dynamics of unconscious and unintentional expressions of bias and prejudice toward socially devalued groups; (2) exploring the numerous manifestations of microaggressions, the harm they engender, and how marginalized groups and individuals cope with them; and (3) expanding the concept of microaggressions beyond simply that of race and the expressions of racism.

It differs, however, in that this recent work invites various experts in their respective fields to present their original research and scholarly works across a broad spectrum of groups in our society who have traditionally been treated as second-class citizens and lesser beings, thereby being marginalized and disempowered. There are separate chapters on racial/ethnic, international/cultural, gender, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT), disability, class, and religious microaggressions. In the case of racial/ethnic microaggressions, multiple chapters are devoted to specific populations such as African Americans, Latino/a/Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, Indigenous populations, and biracial/multiracial people.

In less than a decade, research and scholarly theorizing on racial microaggressions have exploded on the scene, especially in the social science literature devoted to topics of implicit bias and subtle racism. With the realization that racial microaggressions reflect the worldviews of perpetrators, such as their ethnocentric assumptions about human behavior, values, biases, and prejudices, it did not take long for other marginalized groups in our society to realize that the manifestation and dynamics of microaggressions could be equally applied to nearly all socially devalued groups. Microaggressions reflect attitudes and beliefs about inclusion/exclusion, superiority/inferiority, healthiness/unhealthiness, and normality/abnormality between groups. While microaggressions include both conscious and unconscious biased beliefs and attitudes, current research reveals that it is the unconscious,
subtle, and unintentional expressions that are most damaging and harmful to oppressed groups. Thus, microaggressive research now makes clear that overt expressions of racism, sexism, ageism, and ableism are less problematic than the covert and unconscious manifestations delivered by well-intentioned individuals.

Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics, and Impact (1) conceptually organizes the marginalizing experiences of socially devalued groups in our society under an oppression framework, (2) explores and discusses the common dynamics of covert and unintentional biases directed toward them, (3) investigates the detrimental harm perpetrated against these groups, (4) explores possible coping strategies that best allow targets to survive such onslaughts, and (5) recommends what society must do if it is to reduce prejudice and discrimination directed at these groups. What is unique about this text is the devotion of separate in-depth chapters addressing group-specific microaggressions by scholars who are members of these groups or who are working with these populations. This allows readers to compare and contrast the various group-universal and group-specific microaggressions encountered by people of color, women, the poor, religious minorities, gays/lesbians, and so forth. In a number of chapters, groundbreaking research is reported for the first time on group-specific microaggressions.

Part One, “Microaggressions and Marginality,” opens with an introductory chapter.

- Chapter 1: “Microaggressions, Marginality, and Oppression: An Introduction” presents the original taxonomy of racial microaggressions that has generated so much interest in understanding the psychological dynamics, manifestation, and impact of unintentional, subtle, and covert forms of racism. In this chapter, the relationship of microaggression, marginality, and oppression applied to all socially devalued groups is proposed as an introduction to the many group-specific chapters to follow.

Part Two, “Racial/Ethnic Manifestation of Microaggressions,” is composed of five separate chapters, each dealing with a specific racial/ethnic minority group and/or how microaggressions impact their mental/physical well-being, education, employment, and other endeavors in life.

- Chapter 2: “Black Undergraduates’ Experiences with Perceived Racial Microaggressions in Predominately White Colleges and Universities” by Watkins, LaBarrie, and Appio reports an important research study on how Black students experience the numerous racial snubs and invalidations in their day-to-day lives at primarily White institutions. They
provide numerous helpful suggestions about what institutions of higher education must do to ameliorate these constant invalidations.

- Chapter 3: “Microaggressions and the Life Experience of Latina/o Americans” by Rivera, Forquer, and Rangel also presents important research on racial microaggressions experienced by Latinos/as in their daily lives. Using a similar qualitative approach as that employed in Chapter 2, these authors go on to describe the types of racial microaggressions this population is most likely to experience and offers possible solutions.

- Chapter 4: “Racial Microaggressions Directed at Asian Americans: Modern Forms of Prejudice and Discrimination” by Lin applies the racial microaggression taxonomy to Asian Americans. The author discusses unique issues that confront this population and compares and contrasts the microaggressions experienced by Asian Americans to those of African Americans and Latinos/as.

- Chapter 5: “The Context of Racial Microaggressions Against Indigenous Peoples: Same Old Racism or Something New?” by Hill, Kim, and Williams indicates how colonialism is a basic part of historic genocide directed toward Indigenous populations throughout the world. They cover various forms of microaggressions directed toward these groups and the harmful effects of them.

- Chapter 6: “Multiracial Microaggressions: Exposing Monoracism in Everyday Life and Clinical Practice” by Johnston and Nadal is among the first scholarly attempts to critically examine the unique and common forms of subtle racism perpetrated against this population. They make helpful suggestions for mental health practitioners who hope to truly understand the life experiences of multiracial clients.

- Chapter 7: “Microaggressions and the Pipeline for Scholars of Color” by Guzman, Trevino, Lubuguin, and Aryan looks at how microaggressions are partially responsible for the lack of faculty of color in institutions of higher education. Throughout the recruitment, retention, and promotion phases, faculty of color encounter significant obstacles in academia. These authors provide possible solutions to this dilemma.

Part Three, “Other Socially Devalued Group Microaggressions: International/Cultural, Sexual Orientation and Transgender, Disability, Class, and Religious,” is composed of six chapters that discuss several other socially devalued or marginalized groups in our society. Little doubt exists that international/cultural, gender, sexual orientation, disability, class, and religious microaggressions have historically and continue to be directed toward these specific groups. As a result, the inclusion of these groups will give readers greater understanding of how
unintentional biases, prejudices, and discrimination are the result of society’s marginalization of those who are socially devalued.

• Chapter 8: “Microaggressions Experienced by International Students Attending U.S. Institutions of Higher Education” by S. Kim and R. H. Kim provides valuable information to colleges and universities about the plight affecting international students and what must be done to make the campus climate truly multicultural.

• Chapter 9: “The Manifestation of Gender Microaggressions” by Capodilupo, Nadal, Corman, Hamit, Lyons, and Weinberg represents another original study aimed at identifying gender microaggressions and their manifestation and impact.

• Chapter 10: “Sexual Orientation and Transgender Microaggressions: Implications for Mental Health and Counseling” by Nadal, Rivera, and Corpus applies the microaggression taxonomy to the LGBT population. They discuss important implications for culturally competent mental health counseling.

• Chapter 11: “Microaggressive Experiences of People with Disabilities” by Keller and Galgay conducts a study of people with disabilities and finds unique insults and invalidations that they experience. They conclude with helpful suggestions about what able-bodied people must do to stop the constant onslaught of disability microaggressions.

• Chapter 12: “Class Dismissed: Making the Case for the Study of Classist Microaggressions” by Smith and Redington is one of the first conceptual pieces to look at how our society treats our less affluent citizens from a microaggressive perspective. While race, gender, and sexual orientation are often discussed in the literature, the power of class discrimination is often overlooked.

• Chapter 13: “Religious Microaggressions in the United States: Mental Health Implications for Religious Minority Groups” by Nadal, Issa, Griffin, Hamit, and Lyons helps readers understand how religious orientation can form the basis of prejudice and discrimination. Not only do they outline a taxonomy of religious microaggressions, but they discuss mental health implications as well.

Part Four, “Microaggression Research,” is composed of a final chapter on research.

• Chapter 14: “Microaggression Research: Methodological Review and Recommendations” by Lau and Williams does a superb job in analyzing methodological approaches to microaggression research and issues related to qualitative and quantitative studies and suggests future directions that will prove helpful in strengthening our understanding of this phenomenon. It will arm future researchers with the tools to ask and answer questions about the human condition.
In closing, I wish to acknowledge the help and work of many faculty and graduate students at Teachers College, Columbia University, who have worked with me in producing this volume and the many forthcoming studies on microaggressions. Nearly all contributors are faculty, former doctoral students, current students, or those who have become influenced by them. They represent some of the finest minds in the field, and I am positive they will continue to contribute to the profession.

The important work on racial, gender, sexual orientation, disability, class, religious, and other forms of microaggressions would not have been possible without their energies and efforts. Already, the impact of our work has begun to generate much interest and other scholarly research on this topic. Our work at Teachers College has made us affectionately known as the “microaggression capital of the world.” I take pride in this designation but am uncertain how our administration would feel about its possible misinterpretation.

Derald Wing Sue
Editor
About the Editor

Derald Wing Sue is a professor of psychology and education in the Department of Counseling and Clinical Psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University. He has served as president of the Society for the Psychological Study of Ethnic Minority Issues, the Society of Counseling Psychology, and the Asian American Psychological Association. Dr. Sue is an associate editor of American Psychologist and continues to be a consulting editor for numerous publications. He is the author of over 150 publications, including 15 books, and is well known for his work on racism/antiracism, cultural competence, multicultural counseling and therapy, and social justice advocacy. Two of his books, Counseling the Culturally Diverse: Theory and Practice (Jossey-Bass) and Overcoming Our Racism: The Journey to Liberation (John Wiley & Sons), are considered classics in the field. Dr. Sue’s most recent research on racial, gender, and sexual orientation microaggressions has been a major breakthrough in understanding how everyday slights, insults, and invalidations toward marginalized groups create psychological harm to their mental and physical health and create disparities for them in education, employment, and health care. A national survey has identified Derald Wing Sue as “the most influential multicultural scholar in the United States,” and his works are among the most frequently cited.
Microaggressions and Marginality
PART I

MICROAGGRESSIONS AND MARGINALITY
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 persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership (Sue et al., 2007). In many cases, these hidden messages may invalidate the group identity or experiential reality of target persons, demean them on a personal or group level, communicate they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment. While microaggressions are generally discussed from the perspective of race and racism (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue et al., 2007), any marginalized group in our society may become targets: people of color, women, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered people (LGBTs), those with disabilities, religious minorities, and so on (Sue, 2010).

The most detrimental forms of microaggressions are usually delivered by well-intentioned individuals who are unaware that they have engaged in harmful conduct toward a socially devalued group. These everyday occurrences may on the surface appear quite harmless, trivial, or be described as “small slights,” but research indicates they have a powerful impact upon the psychological well-being of marginalized groups (Brondolo et al., 2008; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001; Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, & Meyer, 2008) and affect their standard of living by creating inequities in health care (Sue & Sue, 2008), education (Bell, 2002), and employment (Purdie-Vaughns, Davis, Steele, & Ditlmann, 2008).
Racial, gender, sexual orientation, disability, class, and religious microaggressions deliver hidden demeaning messages that often lie outside the level of conscious awareness of perpetrators. These hidden messages, however, have detrimental impact upon recipients through the contradictory metacommunications they convey. Some sample microaggressions and their hidden meanings are given next (taken from Sue, 2010; Sue & Capodilupo, 2008).

**Racial Microaggressions:**
- A White man or woman clutches her purse or checks his wallet as a Black or Latino man approaches or passes them. (Hidden message: You and your group are criminals.)
- An Asian American, born and raised in the United States, is complimented for speaking “good English.” (Hidden message: You are not a true American. You are a perpetual foreigner in your own country.)
- A Black couple is seated at a table in the restaurant next to the kitchen despite there being other empty and more desirable tables located at the front. (Hidden message: You are a second-class citizen and undeserving of first-class treatment.)

**Gender Microaggressions:**
- An assertive female manager is labeled as a “bitch,” while her male counterpart is described as “a forceful leader.” (Hidden message: Women should be passive and allow men to be the decision makers.)
- A female physician wearing a stethoscope is mistaken for a nurse. (Hidden message: Women should occupy nurturing and not decision-making roles. Women are less capable than men).
- Whistles or catcalls are heard from men as a woman walks down the street. (Hidden message: Your body/appearance is for the enjoyment of men. You are a sex object.)

**Sexual Orientation Microaggressions:**
- Students use the term “gay” to describe a fellow student who is socially ostracized. (Hidden message: People who are weird, strange, deviant, or different are “gay.”)
- A lesbian client in therapy reluctantly discloses her sexual orientation to a straight therapist by stating she is “into women.” The therapist indicates he is not shocked by the disclosure because he once had a client who was “into dogs.” (Hidden message: Same-sex attraction is abnormal and deviant.)
Two gay men hold hands in public and are told not to flaunt their sexuality. (Hidden message: Homosexual displays of affection are abnormal and offensive. Keep it private and to yourselves.)

As indicated previously, microaggressions can be based upon any group that is marginalized in this society. Religion, disability, and social class may also reflect the manifestation of microaggressions. Some of these examples include the following.

- When bargaining over the price of an item, a store owner says to a customer, “Don’t try to Jew me down.” (Hidden message: Jews are stingy and moneygrubbing.)
- A blind man reports that people often raise their voices when speaking to him. He responds by saying, “Please don’t raise your voice; I can hear you perfectly well.” (Hidden message: A person with a disability is defined as lesser in all aspects of physical and mental functioning).
- The outfit worn by a TV reality-show mom is described as “classless and trashy.” (Hidden message: Lower-class people are tasteless and unsophisticated.)

MARGINALITY AND OPPRESSION

Groups that are marginalized in our society exist on the lower or outer limits of social desirability and consciousness. Whether racial/ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, LGBTs, or women, these groups are perceived negatively, given less status in society, and confined to existing on the margins of our social, cultural, political, and economic systems. The result is often exclusion from the mainstream of life in our society, unequal treatment, and social injustice. The inferior status and treatment associated with marginality are constant, continuing, and cumulative experiences of socially devalued groups. Racial, gender, and sexual orientation microaggressions, for example, are active manifestations of marginality and/or a reflection of a worldview of inclusion/exclusion, superiority/inferiority, normality/abnormality, and desirability/undesirability (Sue, 2003). Because most people experience themselves as good, moral, and decent human beings, conscious awareness of their hidden biases, prejudices, and discriminatory behaviors threatens their self-image. Thus, they may engage in defensive maneuvers to deny their biases, to personally avoid talking about topics such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism, and to discourage others from bringing up such topics. On the one hand, these maneuvers serve to preserve the self-image of oppressors, but on the other, they silence the voices of the oppressed. In
other words, keeping oppression from being acknowledged and enforcing a conspiracy of silence allows oppressors to (1) maintain their innocence (guilt-free) and (2) leave inequities from being challenged (Sue, 2004).

Microaggressions reflect the active manifestation of oppressive worldviews that create, foster, and enforce marginalization. To be confined to the margins of existence in mainstream life is to be oppressed, persecuted, and subjugated; denied full rights of citizenship; imprisoned or trapped to a lower standard of living; stripped of one’s humanity and dignity; denied equal access and opportunity; invalidated of one’s experiential reality; and restricted or limited as to life choices (Freire, 1970; Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, 2000; Sue, 2004). Oppression can occur through imposition or deprivation. In both cases, they span a continuum from its direct/concrete nature to those with more symbolic or psychological manifestations and from being consciously perpetrated to being unintentional, indirect, and subtle.

**IMPOSITION**

Oppression by imposition, force, coercion, and duress has been defined by Hanna and colleagues (2000) in the following way: “It is the act of imposing on another or others an object, label, role experience, or set of living conditions that is unwanted, needlessly painful, and detracts from physical or psychological well-being. An imposed object, in this context, can be anything from a bullet, a bludgeon, shackles, or fists, to a penis, unhealthy food, or abusive messages designed to cause or sustain pain, low self-efficacy, reduced self-determination, and so forth. Other examples of oppression by force can be demeaning hard labor, degrading job roles, ridicule, and negative media images and messages that foster and maintain distorted beliefs” (p. 431).

Most of us can immediately recognize the horror and heinous nature of overt and concrete acts of rape (imposition of a penis), torture (imposition of physical and psychological abuse), murder (taking away life), and unjust imprisonment as obvious forms of injustice and unfairness visited upon individuals and groups. Racial hate crimes, for example, are recognized by an overwhelming number of citizens as abhorrent actions that they strongly condemn. They are the actions of White supremacists such as Klan members and Skinheads. Good, moral, and decent folks do not condone such actions. Yet, acts of oppression by imposition or force through microaggressions can be many times more harmful to racial/ethnic minorities than hate crimes (Sue, 2010).

The power of microaggressions lies in their invisibility to perpetrators and oftentimes the recipients. The definition of oppression includes imposing “abusive messages” (microaggressions) that both reflect and perpetuate false beliefs about people of color. Those beliefs cause humiliation and pain, reduce
self-determination, confine them to lesser job roles and status in society, and deny them equal access and opportunities in education, employment, and health care. Most of the pain and detrimental impact of racism does not come from that of overt racists but from ordinary, normal, decent people who believe in life, liberty, and the pursuit of justice for all. They are unaware of their racial biases and prejudices but act them out in the form of racial microaggressions.

**Deprivation**

Oppression can also take a second form—that of deprivation. It can be seen as the flip-side of imposition and involves depriving people of desired jobs, an education, health care, or living conditions necessary for physical and mental well-being. Food, clothing, shelter, love, respect, social support, or self-dignity can be wrested from any marginalized group (Hanna et al., 2000). In our history, we once banned the Sioux nation from practicing their spiritual and religious traditions, deprived them of their lands, and took away their dignity as Indigenous people in their own country. Taking away a group’s humanity and integrity through forced compliance is a very common practice directed toward marginalized groups. When African American students are told to “calm down” and to speak objectively and without emotion because “emotion is antagonistic to reason” and when Asian Americans are admonished because they are too quiet and nonparticipative in classroom discussions, we are not only imposing Western standards of communication styles upon them but also depriving them of their cultural communication styles. When nursing home attendants address their elderly residents as “sweetie” and “dear,” they are unaware of how these microaggressive terms belittle and infantilize the elderly and how they deprive them of their roles as capable and competent adults. “Elderspeak” has been identified as a very harmful and humiliating form of microaggression and can result in a downward spiral for older persons, low self-esteem, withdrawal, and depression (Leland, 2008).

**Forms of Microaggressions**

Microaggressions may take three forms: (1) microassault, (2) microinsult, and (3) microinvalidation (Sue et al., 2007). Figure 1.1 briefly defines each, illustrates their relationship to one another, and lists some common hidden messages/denigrating themes under each category that are directed toward people of color. We use racial microaggressions to illustrate more specifically the forms they take when racism is the primary culprit. Please keep in mind that other marginalized groups either may share or may experience different
group-specific themes and hidden messages. Research on gender, sexual orientation, disability, class, and religious microaggressions is needed to identify commonalities and differences that may be directed toward other socially devalued groups.

**Microassaults**

Microassaults are conscious biased beliefs or attitudes that are held by individuals and intentionally expressed or acted out overtly or covertly toward a marginalized person or socially devalued group. They differ from the other two forms of microaggressions (to be discussed shortly) in that the perpetrator harbors conscious bias toward an identified and socially devalued group. This bias may be directly and publicly expressed through racist, sexist, or heterosexist statements (using racial epithets or making
catcalls toward women, for example) or acted out in any number of ways (preventing a son and daughter from dating or marrying outside of their race, giving second-class service to a woman, and so on). In extreme forms of microassaults, LGBTs may experience teasing and bullying in schools, isolation, physical violence, hate speech, and anti-LGBT legislation.

The case of Matthew Shepard, a gay University of Wyoming student who was tortured, beaten, and tied to a fence to die by two homophobic men, represents extreme acts of hate. Conscious-deliberate bigots generally possess a strong belief in the inferiority of a devalued group and will discriminate when an opportunity arises. Because of strong public condemnation of such undemocratic beliefs and actions, overt expressions of bigotry are most likely to occur when perpetrators feel safe to express their biases and/or they lose emotional control. Social scientists have referred to these forms of overt bigotry as “old-fashioned racism, sexism, or heterosexism” and believe that they have transformed into more disguised, subtle, and less conscious forms (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Salvatore & Shelton, 2007; Sue, 2010; Swim & Cohen, 1997). Interestingly, some research suggests that socially devalued groups may find it easier to deal with old-fashioned forms of bigotry, because no guesswork is involved in discerning the motives of the perpetrator. Unconscious and unintentional bias, however, is ambiguous, and subtle and prejudicial actions are less obvious. As we will shortly see, they create psychological dilemmas for marginalized group members.

MICROINSLUTS

Microinsults are also forms of microaggressions, but they differ significantly from microassaults in that they likely occur outside the level of conscious awareness of the perpetrator. These are either interpersonal interactions (verbal/nonverbal) or environmental cues that communicate rudeness, insensitivity, slights, and insults that demean a person’s racial, gender, sexual orientation, or group identity and heritage. Microinsults are subtle snubs often unconsciously disguised as a compliment or positive statement directed toward the target person or group. The contradictory communication starts with what appears to be a positive statement but is undermined with an insulting or negative metacommunication.

For example, an African American student who has done outstanding work in his economics class is told by the professor, “You are a credit to your race.” On the conscious level, the professor appears to be complimenting the Black student, while on the other hand, the metacommunication contains an insulting message: “Blacks are generally not as intelligent as Whites. You are an exception to your people.” This type of microinsult does several things: (1) it disguises a racial bias or prejudicial worldview of the perpetrator; (2) it
allows the perpetrator to cling to the belief in racial inferiority, albeit unconsciously; and (3) it oppresses and denigrates in a guilt-free manner.

Microinsults can take many other forms. For example, they can occur environmentally. Men who display nude pictures of women from *Hustler* or *Playboy* magazines in their places of employment (offices, desks, locker rooms, etc.) may be unknowingly contributing to sexual objectification. The hidden message is that women’s bodies are not their own and they exist to service the sexual fantasies of men. The impact is to strip women of their humanity and the totality of their human essence (intelligence, emotions, personal attributes, and aspirations) and to relegate them to being only sexual beings. Environmental microaggressions are generally invisible to those in the majority group but quite visible to those groups most disempowered (Sue, 2010). When a Fortune 400 company displays pictures of its past CEOs and presidents and they are all White males, there is a powerful metamessage being communicated to women and employees of color: “You will not feel comfortable working at this company.” “You do not belong here.” “People of color and women do not belong in leadership positions.” “If you choose to stay, your advancement is limited.”

**MICROINVALIDATIONS**

Microinvalidations are similar to microinsults in that they generally occur outside the level of conscious awareness of perpetrators. However, this form of microaggression is perhaps the most insidious, damaging, and harmful form, because microinvalidations directly attack or deny the experiential realities of socially devalued groups (Sue, 2010). They accomplish this goal through interpersonal and environmental cues that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and experiences of the target group.

Color blindness, for example, is one of the most frequently delivered microinvalidations directed toward people of color. It can be defined as an unwillingness to acknowledge or admit to seeing race or a person’s color. Such an orientation is predicated on the mistaken belief by many Whites that “not seeing color” means they are unbiased and free of racism. As a result, many Whites engage in defensive maneuvers not to appear racist by either pretending not to see color or by actively avoiding any discussions associated with race (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Despite studies indicating that race and gender are two of the most easily identifiable qualities seen by people, color blindness and gender blindness inundate our everyday interactions. “There is only one race: the human race.” “When I look at you, I don’t see color.” “We are all Americans.” “Regardless of your gender or race, I believe the most qualified person should get the job.” Such
statements and their orientation serve to deny the racial, gender, or sexual orientation reality and experiences of these groups. Sue (2010) has suggested that “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 ultimate denial is a denial that dominant group members profit from the isms of our society and a denial of personal responsibility to take action.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DYNAMICS OF MICROAGGRESSIONS

In a previous publication, Sue and colleagues (2007) identified four major psychological dilemmas or dynamics created by microaggressions directed toward racial groups: (1) the clash of realities between the dominant group and socially devalued group members, (2) the invisibility of unintentional bias and discrimination, (3) the perceived minimal harm of microaggressions, and (4) the catch-22 of responding. The analysis here is being broadened to include a number of different marginalized groups besides that of race.

CLASH OF REALITIES

Studies reveal that culture and group-based experiences (racial, gender, sexual orientation, religious, and class) shape worldviews and influence the perception of reality of various groups (Babbington, 2008; Hanna et al., 2000; Sue, 2010). For example, the racial reality of people of color has been found to be significantly different from that of White Americans (Astor, 1997). Many Whites seem to believe that racism is no longer a significant problem (à la post-Obama race era), while many Blacks continue to report that their lives are filled with constant and continuing experiences of prejudice and discrimination. Women continue to report that sexism keeps them from rising to top managerial positions, that their contributions are not recognized by their male counterparts in the workplace, that they are not promoted when otherwise qualified, and that they encounter the glass ceiling frequently. Men, however, are fond of saying that “competence will rise to the top” regardless of gender and that “you’ve come a long way, baby.”

Such differences in racial, gender, or sexual orientation realities is most pronounced when a significant power differential exists between groups that hold power and those who are most disempowered (Sue, 2003). Whites hold greater power over people of color. Men hold greater power than women. Straights possess greater power than LGBTs, able-bodied people are more likely to have power over those with disabilities, and those with wealth hold greater power over the poor or less affluent. “True power,” however, is in a group’s ability to define reality (Guthrie, 1998; Hanna et al., 2000; Keltner &
Robinson, 1996). In general, mainstream groups hold the ability to define reality through the tools of education, mass media, and social institutions. When children are taught by parents, the mass media, and schools that LGBTs are sick or deviant, when people of color are portrayed as dangerous and unintelligent, and when women are stereotyped as the weaker sex and less capable in leadership positions, a system of hierarchy and access to privilege and power is established in our society.

Racial, gender, and sexual orientation microaggressions, especially micro-insults and microinvalidations, operate from an imposed reality that is outside the level of conscious awareness when the beliefs, biases, and false assumptions are defined as truth and normative. Thus, if racism, sexism, and heterosexism are believed to no longer be a major problem and if normality is based upon White, male, and “straight” standards, then those who differ from them are defined as abnormal and problematic. We have already indicated that microaggressions are reflections of worldviews of inclusion/exclusion and normality/abnormality. When racial microaggressions are delivered by well-intentioned White brothers and sisters, perpetrators are unlikely to be aware of the biased hidden messages they are sending to people of color. Herein lies a major dilemma. If motives and the insulting messages of perpetrators are outside awareness, how do we make the “invisible” visible? In other words, when a clash of racial realities occurs, whose reality is likely to hold sway? Whose reality will be judged to be the true reality? The answer, unfortunately, is that the group who holds the greatest power has the ability to impose reality on less powerful groups.

Let us try to address these questions from the perspectives of both perpetrators and targets using racial microaggressions as an example. In studies dealing with racial microaggressions in the classroom (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009), it was found that (1) racial microaggressions were often instigators to difficult dialogues on race, (2) students of color could identify and define them quite well, (3) White students had difficulties understanding what they had done or said that was racially offensive, and (4) Whites often became defensive and labeled students of color as “oversensitive” and even “paranoid.” Additionally, similar findings regarding White professors were found (Sue et al.). They had great difficulty recognizing racial microaggressions committed by White students; more importantly, they were equally baffled in identifying them when they themselves were the perpetrators!

One common racial microaggression delivered by well-intentioned White teachers can be seen in the following example. Black students often report that when they make a particularly insightful or intelligent comment in class, both White students and White professors act surprised. A common reaction by