

MICROAGGRESSIONS: A NECESSITY

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CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

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Microaggressions are a controversial topic. Some agree that this concept is useful, while others insist that the word itself invites aggression into a conversation, and that the concept makes people more aware and defensive of these subtle, back-handed racist remarks. I propose that microaggressions are a concept worth studying, as the trauma that microaggressions cause could be prevented if people were educated and trained properly on how to prevent microaggressions before they ever begin. Furthermore, the training will also educate people on how to show compassion after they have committed the microaggression and how to handle the situation appropriately. This paper will also address those who are in support of microaggressions and relay their facts and statistics to the reader. I will also address those that suggest that education and training is not necessary on this topic. I will rebuke their sentiments with facts and data that illustrate how damaging microaggressions can be, and that their recommendations of abandoning this word is the worst idea possible.

Introduction

The year 2020 has been unlike any in our lifetime. Firstly, there has been the pandemic. But aside from this sickness ravaging the entire world, there has also been one of the largest political movements in American history taking place. While this movement has been in place since 2013, it took a strong hold over the country this past summer, when George Floyd was killed in the hands of police. Although the death of George Floyd was just one of the brutalities that occurred, (these senseless beatings and murders have been happening for years and years), 2020 was the year that more Americans than ever took to the streets and voiced their opinion for what was correct. Over 26 million Americans protested in cities across the nation. From large cities like New York City to smaller areas like New Brunswick, NJ, people were coming out in droves to let the world know that police brutality needed to be acknowledged and halted immediately. It was a message that was sent loud and clear. This was one of the biggest, largest protests in American history. From coast to coast, protesters sent a message to the government and the world that police brutality needs to come to an end. All races- not just black folk- were standing together against police brutality.

The movement described above is how Americans told the world how they feel about physical attacks against black people by police that have caused injury and/or death. But what happens when a black person is hurt by a white person in a different way? What if a white person used their words to damage to a black person's self-esteem or self-worth? What if the person speaking did not realize their words were insensitive to a person of color? People of color can feel these words immediately, while the person speaking does not know they have performed an injustice. This is what is known as a

microaggression: a “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignity, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue 271). This paper will defend how microaggressions are useful concepts to study, analyze, learn from, despite criticism from opposition that determine microaggressions are not helpful, and that there is no need to study, analyze or learn from this debatable topic.

Origination of the term of Microaggression

The term “microaggression” was first described by Chester Pierce in 1974 in his book *Psychiatric Problems of the Black Minority*. Pierce describes how whites have been performing microaggressions for years, without realizing it, due to being influenced and biased by world around them. It has become the norm for whites to act and think in a certain way that causes them not to realize that what they are saying or doing is harmful to people of color. Pierce describes how whites have been influenced by movies, television, and other forms of media that make them have “a mental attitude of presumed superiority” (13). This type of behavior was normalized, and some feelings lapse into the present day.

After Pierce’s article was published, the term “microaggression” did not gain much popularity. However, in the present day, many people have at least heard of this word. The term “microaggression” was once again brought to life with the article *Racial Microaggressions in Everyday life: Implications for Clinical Practice*, by Derald Wing Sue (2007). Sue was able to redefine microaggressions again and suggest that more research was needed to unpack this reborn term. Before 2007, when researched online, the term “racial microaggression” produced just one result. After Sue’s article was published, the term exploded as far as research was concerned. The popularity of the concept grew and in 2012, when the term was again searched online, 58 articles appeared, discussing microaggressions. A website was created specifically for victims of microaggressions, so that they could talk about what they experienced. Likewise, at this time, Sue’s article was used as a reference 234 times (Wong). In the present day of

2020, when the word “microaggressions” is searched for in a database, there are 1,023 results.

With his 2007 article, Sue inspired researchers to delve deeper into studying microaggressions. In his article, Sue focused not only on what microaggressions were, but how more research was needed to define and explain microaggressions. Sue states that that training is needed to learn how to prevent further damage. As Sue gives credit to Pierce, Sue himself was the one who reignited the flame about microaggressions again and is credited with having made the word “microaggression” mainstream in present day.

Sue describes microaggressions as, “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (271). Sue created three different forms of microaggressions, based on what he learned through studying individual personal situations, and from studying social and counseling psychology. The first form is known as a microassault, the second form is known as a microinsult, and the third form is known as a microinvalidation. Each of these forms are different from each other, and each have their own purpose for describing microaggressions in everyday situations.

Different Types of Microaggressions

The first form of a microaggression is known as a microassault. Sue describes this type of microaggression as, “an explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions” (274). This form of microaggression is very explicit, and obvious. This is the closest form to outright racist behavior that a microaggression can be. The insult is obvious and blatant, and there is definite intent to cause harm. According to Sue, these insults will occur openly to recipient. Microassaults were described as shouting a racial slur at a black person from a car and then driving away quickly. Another example would be displaying a swastika or trying to purposefully bother and annoy someone who has Obsessive Compulsive Disorder to trigger their anxiety. As Sue writes, “Microassaults are most likely to be conscious and deliberate, although they are generally expressed in limited “private” situations (micro) that allow the perpetrator some degree of anonymity” (274). Sue writes, “People are likely to hold notions of minority inferiority privately and will only display them publicly when they (a) lose control or (b) feel relatively safe to engage in a microassault” (274). An example of this could be a party, where a confederate flag is displayed. The partygoers feel they are amongst friends and people they trust, so they are okay with their friends knowing that they are committing a microassault.

The second type of microaggression Sue describes is a microinsult. Sue defines this type of microaggression as, “communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity” (274). Microinsults usually send an understated message, and most times the perpetrator does not realize what they are saying

is harmful. As Sue writes, “Context is important” (274). When a black person is questioned by a white person on how they were offered employment, it makes them feel like the white person does not believe they deserve the position. It makes them feel as if to say, ‘Well, why wouldn’t I get the job?’ or as Sue describes, it makes the person feel, “as a minority group member, you must have obtained the position through some affirmative action or quota program and not because of ability” (274). These statements, when heard repeatedly, make a black person feel less of a person. There are also times when words are not needed to make a person feel they are under attack of a microinsult. When a white manager does not give a black person their full attention when speaking or is constantly breaking eye contact, this will make the person of color feel what they are saying has no value and that the person is not closely paying attention. Hearing and seeing these actions on loop can possibly make the black person believe they are a victim of microaggressions.

A third and final type of microaggression that Sue describes under the umbrella of microaggressions is a microinvalidation. A microinvalidation is defined by Sue as, “communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color” (275). This is to say that a person of color does not have any feelings, and what they are communicating does not matter or that it is worthless. Their thoughts/feelings/opinions are simply being assumed to be unimportant. An example of this would be for a Latino person to complain about how they were treated at a restaurant to a group of white people. If the white person tells the Latino that they are “being too sensitive” or “being too pushy”, then they are minimizing

the feelings of the Latino and making them feel that their feelings do not matter and that their feelings and thoughts are unimportant.

Microaggression Support

As noted above, Sue stresses the importance of needing more research and education into the development of the word microaggression. Sue wants to make the “make the invisible visible” (Sue 281). This can only happen with more research. People of different races need to sit down and talk to each other about racism. They need to be open and candid. Real talk needs to be established, so that people can become educated and aware of what they are doing and why they are hurting people in this unbeknownst way. Monica Williams would agree with Sue, as she explains that more education and awareness is needed, so that we can teach people what not to say, before they even say it. Williams continues to mirror Sue’s words, as she illustrates what needs to be accomplished with learning. When people see someone different, this is not an invitation to point certain qualities out. All people need to be treated with dignity and respect, no matter what skin color. People need to learn how their words can cause damage. They next need to be further educated on how to display empathy and understanding for those they have offended. Williams writes, “it is about giving language and voice to those who are routinely dismissed in their suffering” (Williams 20). Sue echoes Williams’ statement, as he writes that we need help those that have been suffering alone. Solorzano also agrees with Sue and Williams, as these authors stress how important education is when it comes to microaggressions. Solorzano witnessed first-hand how microaggressions affect people of color in a college setting, and he discussed how disturbed he was by the situations he saw. He also expresses that further research is needed, and that he hopes progress can be made and “move educators toward making

Professor Pierce's hope a reality" (72 Solorzano). With this statement, one can clearly see that these researchers are begging for more research and education on this topic.

Sue created nine different categories of microaggressions that each have their own theme. Sue describes these categories as: alien in one's own land, ascription of intelligence, color blindness, criminality/assumption of criminal status, denial of individual racism, myth of meritocracy, pathologizing cultural values/communication styles, second-class status, and environmental invalidation. The author provides real-life examples and implications. These microaggressive events continue, and eventually the victim will eventually notice. According to *Psychology Today*, humans tend to only focus on the negative characteristics of a person, more than the positive. That means that the victim will remember when the perpetrator insulted them and then focus on the microaggression each time they see that person. The victim may even expect these microaggressions to happen again at some point because they have grown used to this behavior. The victim will feel unsupported and unsafe in this environment. They will be unmotivated to do better (Hanson), and this will have detrimental effects on their position at work or school. In addition to these feelings, mistrust, anger, and racial tensions develop. At this point, the perpetrator and the victim are both affected by the situation. But the perpetrator may not realize what they have done. If the victim never addresses the problem, then the perpetrator will not understand the reality of what is happening. They will never grasp why the victim is not working up to their full potential. If the victim declines to bring the problem up to the perpetrator, then the person will never get to see the issue from their point of view. The perpetrator will never learn, and the abuse will continue.

As Sue writes, “the power of racial microaggressions lies in their invisibility to the perpetrator and oftentimes, the recipient” (275). People want to believe that they are good people. They believe they would never be racist. When confronted by the victim, the perpetrator might try to explain themselves and attempt an excuse for it. They will likely never see the situation from a different point of view and will not realize the harm they are causing. White Americans do not realize how they are hurting and offending people of color because performing microaggressions has become normalized. Pierce touches upon this in his book, as he writes, “One must be aware of the ubiquitous effects of racism, a contagious and lethal mental and public health disease, which is characterized by perceptual distortion and false beliefs about skin color” (9). Microaggressions are also known as hidden racism, and white Americans do not realize the effect they are having on people of color. It is important that communication exists about how a victim was offended, as mixed messages are sent all the time. These microaggressions must be expressed by the victim to the perpetrator, or else feelings of depression, anxiety, sadness, confusion, and hopelessness will forever exist (Williams 15).

How terrible are the microaggressions and why is it so important that they are addressed immediately? Monica Williams writes, “microaggressions are harmful and even deadly to clients of color” (15). According to Williams, microaggressions can cause low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, alcohol abuse, loss of feelings of self-worth, obsessive compulsive disorder, major psychological suffering, and even suicide. There is a connection. Stress builds up and eventually turns into chronic conditions such as hypertension and lowered immune systems. When one is the recipient

of a microaggression, they are in a “dangerous environment” (Williams), as the author states that microaggressions can cause fear, anger, frustration, confusion, helplessness, paranoia, and hopelessness. Williams continues to describe that the victims of microaggressions will usually begin to self-medicate. This could lead to substance abuse. Williams states that people of color will avoid seeking medical care, as they feel they are not taken seriously when describing their symptoms to doctors who they feel do not understand their position. When an illness left untreated, the condition will worsen, which in turn will cause a person of color to ultimately end up in an emergency room. When a mental condition is ignored and denied, the person of color could be harmed or even killed when shot by a gun when their mental irregularity is mistaken for a crime (Williams).

Daniel Solorzano would agree with Williams on how recipients of microaggressions felt that they are being discriminated against. Solorzano held interviews at three different universities and documented how African American students felt when they were met with these subtle forms of racism. The students felt that racial discrimination was very apparent and easy to see, as they described many situations where racist comments were made, in a non-aggressive way. Students felt that they constantly had to defend the stereotypes of African Americans. They felt like were unwelcomed in business and science classes. The students had feelings that Whites believed they were only accepted into the university because of Affirmative Action. Some students also expressed that many advisors and other students did not believe that they could be both Black and intellectual. The students possessed feelings of frustration when Whites assumed them to be a certain way. For example, one college student

described that his peers did not believe that he was in college based on an academic scholarship; they assumed he was there on a sport scholarship. Black students felt unwanted, underappreciated, and like they were constantly being watched and made to feel generally uncomfortable. Many students admitted they did not want to stay in the class with people who made them feel this way. The hazardous situation even caused some students to drop the class or even leave the college altogether (Solorzano).

As a result of feeling so many negative feelings due to microaggressions, African American students created “counter-spaces” to have a place where black students can be in an environment that was supportive to them. They were able to exchange stories and give each other advice and have someone who understood what they were going through. Some of these “counter-spaces” were created on campus by faculty members, while others were created off-campus by students. A student explained, “...that was one of the reasons I chose to live on the African American theme floor because if I go home and don’t have the support, then it can be really discouraging. You need some type of support to get through this thing. And if you are a freshman coming in, you don’t know African American faces...you need somewhere to start” (70). Solorzano concludes his study by pleading for more research to be done on microaggressions, because they do cause devastation and harm.

Sue would agree with both Williams and Solorzano, as the effects of microaggressions can cause extensive damage to the recipient. Sue explains that microaggressions cause a racial atmosphere that is not positive, such as the ones Solorzano describes of the black students at the three universities. As each student was faced with microaggressions and subtle insults from white people, they reported to feel

alone and full of self-doubt. It even made some students want to leave the university and abandon their education. Sue states that it is obvious to see why people of color can eventually say that they have enough and leave the situation entirely, as the microaggressions build upon one another. As stated above by Williams, not only do people of color feel the wrath of microaggressions mentally, but also physically, as high blood pressure eventually accumulates with victims of microaggressions (15 Williams).

Microaggression Opposition

Although evidence suggests microaggressions cause specific harm to recipients, other researchers believe that microaggressions do not cause the damage that the Sue, Williams, Solorzano suggest. This has become an extremely controversial topic. Some researchers admit that although indirect racism does exist, it is not as detrimental as researchers claim it be. Lilienfeld acknowledges that minorities experience “subtle slights and insults” (141) and he also acknowledges that small forms of prejudice occur in the United States. However, Lilienfeld argues that more scientific evidence is needed to prove how microaggressions affect people. Lilienfeld suggests the evidence presented is more of a qualitative type of data, with limited quantitative data. Lilienfeld feels that when research is fueled by qualitative, subjective data, combined with negative emotionality, it is easy to not take microaggressions seriously. Althea Nagai would agree with Lilienfeld, as she suggests that there is not enough substantial scientific data to suggest that microaggressions are hazardous to the life of a person of color. Nagai states that microaggressions do not have enough modern science in its favor to be considered a true danger. For example, Nagai lists that there is no modern use of examination, the sample sizes are small, there is no comparison group, and the replication of data is non-existent. Nagai refers to microaggressions as stories that have a political agenda but have no real back-up of science and she also suggests that people are putting this social issue above scientific research. Campbell also suggests that more analysis is needed, as each person has different ideas of what is okay and what is not okay to say. Campbell argues that if we could just understand each other’s point of view, then maybe we can better understand each other.

Researchers agree that more data is needed to prove that microaggressions are a real and present danger to people of color, but alongside to that idea, researchers have also agreed that if society does adapt their words to avoid microaggressions, freedoms will be lost. Both Haidt and Campbell share the same idea that colleges (where microaggressions are largely reported) who enforce awareness and training on the awareness and education of microaggressions will promote someone to not voice their true opinion. Students may not feel comfortable saying something out loud in front of other students in class, because they are afraid of being admonished for their thoughts. Both Haidt and Campbell agree that college will not be what it should be if voices and opinions of students must be stifled.

Also upsetting to defenders of microaggressions is that Lilienfeld and Haidt suggest to readers that the word “microaggression” must be left behind. Lilienfeld suggests that microaggression education training classes should be suspended, until further scientific research is completed (138). Haidt concurs with Lilienfeld as he says that there is not enough support to prove that microaggressions exist and are valid. Lilienfeld suggests that the word should be abandoned, at least temporarily until the term can be proven better. But Haidt takes it one step further and suggests that the term is unsalvageable altogether (176 Haidt) and that educating students about microaggressions would be teaching the opposite of wisdom. Haidt and Lilienfeld also agree on negative emotionality. They both believe that the students who claim to be victims of microaggressions have come to college with the same attitude that they had in high school. Haidt suggests that these students are miserable, angry and have the ingredients of negative emotionality. (176 Haidt)

Lilienfeld describes negative emotionality to include moodiness, guilt, shame, worry, anxiety, irritability, hostility, and feelings of always being the victim. This type of person overly reacts to stress and always seems to have a negative attitude about life in general. When there is a conversation between two people and something is said that is ambiguous, this type of person may feel that they are a victim of a microaggression from the offender. This may be the type of person who believes they have had a bad life and are always with negative, down-trodden thoughts. Solorzano described a college student who felt that she was a victim of microaggressions in her college as she stated, “I can’t stand this school and I’m ready to leave. And for me, that is how I feel. I know this is the real world and I’ve learned that...I know how I’m going to take what I want to do to get what I need to get...” (70). These were the words of an African American student who was considering withdrawing from her university entirely. Did microaggressions cause her to consider leaving college? Lilienfeld might argue that it was not microaggressions, but in fact, negative emotionality.

Haidt echoes Lilienfeld’s ideas that microaggressions may not cause the pain and anxiety that many researchers want to believe about microaggressions. Haidt suggests that the term “microaggression” should be abandoned and that professors and faculty should stop teaching about this concept. Haidt expresses that when a student learns about microaggressions, they are looking too deeply into the situation of others, instead of looking at themselves. Haidt uses quotes from the Bible and Buddha as he explains that he wants students to look inside of themselves when something bothers them, instead of getting offended by other people’s comments. Haidt defends the right for students to be able to express their thoughts and feelings in college freely, no matter who they might

offend, as he writes, “It (microaggressions) is the end of the open environment we prize in the academy, where students feel free to speak up and challenge each other, their professors, and orthodox ideas. On a campus that polices microaggressions, everyone walks on eggshells” (2). Haidt focuses on how Lilienfeld ties negative emotionality to reported higher rates of microaggressions. The author states that students who had a negative attitude in their elementary and high school days are now bringing these same thoughts and feelings into their college days. Haidt suggests that this attitude has the ripple effect and that others will begin to act the same. Haidt also writes that bringing a microaggression education class to campus will only cause “turmoil, distrust and anger” (2) amongst students. Haidt also maintains that educating students on microaggressions will also instill a false hope into them that microaggression training will continue at the workplace in their futures.

Lilienfeld explains that the word “microaggression” is still an *open concept* in the world of psychological construct. By this, Lilienfeld means that the idea of microaggressions is still not clear and the makeup of a microaggression is still murky. Being that there are so many possible versions of microaggressions, it is difficult to pinpoint an exact, precise obvious feeling of what a microaggression should be. Lilienfeld states that there is no outright beginning or ending, and that there is a grey area, where words are not transparent with what they are attempting to convey. Lilienfeld argues that anyone can take words and interpret what they mean by writing, “Absent such a floating anchor, the boundaries of an open concept can contract or expand radically at the whim of investigators, clinicians, or policymakers” (143). People can construe words in dissimilar ways, and this makes it difficult to prove a microaggression.

It is almost impossible to prove a microaggression, as Lilienfeld writes, “it is not evident which kinds of actions constitute a verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignity, nor what approximate severity of indignity is necessary for an action to constitute a microaggression” (143). One reason microaggressions are noted to be ambiguous is that these statements can be read in different ways. A microaggression can be viewed in various ways by many people, so the term the “eye of the beholder” comes into play. A microaggression is based on how one interprets words and meaning. For example, a White person could tell a Black person that they understand that their first year of college might be difficult, as white people have more educational opportunities than black people. A Black person could be offended at this statement, as they could take it that the White person was being condescending or even harsh, in an indirect way. However, a different Black person might view this as a White person attempting to be compassionate and helpful to the situation, as they were trying to understand the difficulties a Black person may experience while entering college. Therefore, according to Lilienfeld, microaggressions are subjective and are based on how an individual person interprets words in their own psyche.

I believe that although Lilienfeld, Haidt, Nagai, and Campbell have strong points, they are missing the big picture within. One should never make assumptions about another person. Just because a person may believe that traditionally, black people have a more difficult time being accepted and attending college, this does not mean that this is true for *all* black people. Just as Sue expresses in his article, this is just one’s racial bias making an appearance. This is what Pierce also touches upon in his article. White people have been told the same stories for years, and this leads to misconceptions and

stereotypes. This will be taught to their children and this will trickle down. I think the authors above are being naïve. I believe that people do realize the difference between right and wrong, and that they can avoid microaggressions overall. There really is no grey area here. The offender is basically saying that all black people have problems with going to and staying in college. I believe that people do understand when they are being offensive or not.

If by chance they do not realize how offensive their words are, then this would be where microaggression training and education could take place. At times, the words spoken are not as obvious as they should be. I can easily see how a black person would be offended when a white person tells them that it must be so hard, as a black person, to have limited educational opportunities. However, one thing I did not realize is that by touching a black person's hair, that I could offend them. A young black woman, who I have seen before, entered the room with her hair brushed in an unusual (to me) way. I honestly had never seen this style of hair before. I was amazed at what I was seeing, and I felt the need to touch it. I went to gently put my hair out, as I stated, "your hair...I've never seen it like this before". As I attempted to touch her hair, the woman bent her head away from me, as she clearly did not want me touching her hair. I immediately pulled my hand back, embarrassed that I had tried to touch a stranger's hair. Not once did I think that I was being racially offensive, but I was. This was a clear boundary that I had crossed. There was nothing ambiguous or weak about what had happened, such as what Lilienfeld suggests. I, being white, was amazed at a black person's hair. This was as clear as day, as this falls under the microaggression category that Williams describes as "Exoticization and eroticization", which means that "Black women are so exotic".

Seventy-one percent of black students believe this to be racist behavior, while eighty-seven percent of white people would not say this to a black person. These numbers are based on an evaluation that studied how black and white people felt about microaggressions, known as the Cultural Cognitions and Actions Survey (CCAS). This example proves that most people do realize what a microaggression is, and what *not* to say to black person. If there was training for myself, I possibly may not have said to the black girl. I treated her as though she was an exotic figure, and I certainly did not mean to. However, if I were educated on microaggressions, possibly this entire experience could have been avoided.

Lilienfeld suggests that the word “microaggression” alone in itself is already setting the stage for disaster because the word has “aggression” in it. Lilienfeld makes the point that the word has the definition of trying to cause harm to someone, so this is a pre-cursor of what will come. Lilienfeld also suggests that other words that are affiliated with microaggression should be readdressed. Monica Williams refers to people who perform microaggressions as *offenders* (5), and the recipients as *victims* (6), as Sue calls people who use microaggressions *perpetrators* (207). Lilienfeld suggests that possibly different verbiage should be used in the next study, to see if people do not get as distressed as they do when they hear words like “aggression, perpetrator, offender, and victim”.

Lilienfeld states that the words described above create feelings of hostility, anger, and possibly even more aggression. As a person hears these words, they may automatically jump to conclusions, when there was no harm meant originally. This could be known as the *hostile attribution of intent*, which means if someone is approached

aggressively, then they will come back just as aggressively. For example, pretend that a White person said “I want to give you extra money for the holidays; I know that you are not paid a lot of money at your job” to a Black person. The Black person may feel this is was an intention to hurt their feelings. They may feel as they are *victim* of the *perpetrator/offender* calling them poor. This could lead to feelings of hostility. The White person could have been honestly trying to be nice and generous at the time of the holiday, but the Black person could be offended by these words. Maybe the White person was trying to help and meant no harm. But the Black person, believes they are a *victim*. Lilienfeld questions whether the black person would see themselves as a victim, if they never heard of this concept at all. Lilienfeld maintains that the word “microaggression” is a word that does not make sense to him, and states that more data is needed to see if there is any truth to this theory (Lilienfeld 143).

Lilienfeld concedes that microaggressions still need more research, with a focus on how they affect mental health (163). Lilienfeld writes that ultimately, microaggressions are a combination of (1) statements that are made that are meant to be outright racist, (2) statements that appear to be prejudiced, but are truly not, (3) people being insensitive and (4) innocent comments that are not translated properly to the recipient (159). The researcher lists recommendations that the Microaggression Research Program should follow, with one suggesting they leave the word “microaggression” behind and replace it with a word that is neither “aggressive”, nor too “subtle” (161).

Microaggression Defense Response

Just as Haidt responded to Lilienfeld's article positively, many researchers responded to Lilienfeld's article, defending microaggressions yet again. Williams argues that Lilienfeld leaves the cultural point of view out of his argument, and that he believes that it is okay to hide information about microaggressions. Williams states that educating people about microaggressions will be helpful with students. Additionally, Williams voices her displeasure regarding Lilienfeld's suggestion to discard the term "microaggression". Williams states that education regarding microaggressions must continue. People of color will suffer greatly if the education ceases. Williams enforces the fact that people need to be taught how harmful their words can be. If people knew what they were saying could be construed in a different light, they would most likely change how they said things. This is Williams' hope, at least. She hopes that maybe these words can be stopped before they are said. If the words do get across to the recipient, and they feel offended, Williams wants the offender to show compassion towards the ones that they have hurt. Williams also expresses that we need specific rules and examples to follow, so that we can hear the voices of the victims. She desires for people to recognize a human being with real flesh and blood behind the color of their skin. Williams writes that, "we need to raise awareness...in would be offenders" (20). Williams explains that people must be taught about microaggressions to realize what they say could be taken as an insult but realize it *before* the offender makes the comment. Williams wants to make situations better, and to overall, make the world a better place to live in with each other. (Williams 20).

Derald Wing Sue also responded to Lilienfeld's article. Sue describes how Lilienfeld denies that microaggressions are a real, true part of a minority's daily life, which in turn, makes the situation even worse for the victim of the microaggression. Secondly, Sue writes, "Empirical reality is valued over experiential reality", as he discusses how the Western world observes statistics and data, especially. As we are searching for the data and scientific results, we lose what we are really focusing on: a human being with real thoughts and feelings that needs to feel understood and validated. Thirdly, Sue disagrees with Lilienfeld when he states that the word "microaggression" should stop being used. Sue describes that as he was writing his response to Lilienfeld, he learned about two more black men who has been shot and killed by police. The officers used their guns because "they feared for their lives". Sue wonders if this was an accurate description of how they were feeling. Were they really terrified that they would get shot and die, or were they simply reacting to their own personal biases? Maybe these deaths could have been prevented if they were educated more about microaggressions and stereotypes (Sue 17).

Despite education and awareness of microaggressions, the concept is very real and a force that people of color must face daily. Microaggressions affect more than people realize, and the most detrimental part is that most White Americans do not even realize they are partaking in hurtful remarks and assumptions. Most White Americans firmly grasp the notion that they are doing no harm when they let an African American know that they are amazingly smart (for a black person). What they are failing to realize is they are sending a message that all black Americans are not smart, so when they see one who they believe is, they must show their surprise. There are thousands of these

remarks happening daily throughout America, all while being unnoticed by the White American. They simply thought they were paying a compliment and probably thought they were being nice.

Microaggression Examples

Microaggressions have become normalized in the lives of everyday Americans. In the popular show *Impractical Jokers*, there are four middle-aged men who enjoy pulling pranks on the unknowing public. They dare each other to say and do things to the public to get a laugh. In one episode, they are daring one of their colleagues to say something to a member of the public. When they see that they must approach an older black woman, they all burst out loud laughing, even before a word was spoken. One would wonder why they are already laughing and gasping, when nothing has even been spoken yet to the black woman. But according to Sue, this would fall into the microaggression of “Pathologizing cultural values/communication styles”, as their laughter and gasping states that they are expecting the black woman to be rowdy, lively, and aggressive. The message sent to viewers is that black women are dominate in culture and therefore, will be loud and aggressive when approached for the laugh of the show. The members of the show are excited and look forward to seeing a black woman be assertive, expressive, and spirited, due the fact that she is from a “dominant culture” (276). If a child or even a young adult was watching this show (the show is popular with millions of viewers), they will learn from this scene that black women might be the ones to act aggressively when approached by someone. This message will stay in their head and remain with them for their lives. They may think of this the next time they have to approach a black woman and think that all black women will act hostile or possibly unfriendly, all because of one little show where they acted like a black woman would be a problem. This is the norm is set, that Pierce was refers to at the beginning of this paper.

Another example of a microaggression that Sue explains is the theme of a “second class citizen” (277). I have seen this with my own eyes, and I am positive this happens elsewhere. Sue explains this microaggression occurs when a white person is waited on before a person of color, even when the white person is behind the person of color. This microaggression makes the person of color feel like the white person has more value than them. When I was entering a nail salon recently, I was online waiting behind a black woman when an employee came up to me first, when there was obviously a (black) person in front of me waiting. I mentioned that I do not believe I am next, and the merchant then acknowledged the black person and asked if she had been helped yet. The black woman stated that she had not been helped yet, as the merchant noted that she thought someone else had taken care of her already. Could it be possible that the merchant thought that perhaps someone else was already tending to the black person? Of course. This may or may not have been a microaggression. But it felt like one to myself, and I felt awkward in the situation. If it was on purpose, then I am sure the black woman felt unnoticed and uncared for, such as Sue states that “Whites are more valued customers than people of color” (277).

Another example that I have experience myself is about trust. For extra money, I deliver food for a popular delivery service. There are many other delivery people such as me simply trying to make extra money to cover the bills. I arrived at an establishment that I had never been to before to retrieve my delivery and noticed another delivery person waiting to be acknowledged. The merchant acknowledged the delivery person, who happened to be a young black man. He told the name he was picking up for and then the merchant quickly halted him from speaking. The merchant rudely demanded,

“show me your phone!” My colleague then showed the merchant his cell phone, while he seemed to be annoyed while shaking his head back and forth. The merchant confirmed the name and order and then gave the delivery man the food. After my colleague left, I was next in line and went to show the merchant my phone. I assumed he would ask to see my phone as he had asked the young man before me. For anyone who does not know, I am a middle-aged white woman with blonde hair. The merchant said I do not need to see your phone; just tell me the name you are picking up for. I told him the name, retrieved my delivery, and departed the establishment. After returning to my car, I realized what had just happened. That was a microaggression. According to Sue, this would fall under the theme of “Criminality/assumption of criminal status” under the microaggression of “a person of color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant based on their race” (276). The merchant did not trust the black delivery person based on his word. But the merchant *did* trust my word because I was white. The merchant believed that because the delivery person was black, that they were possibly not telling the truth and possibly trying to get free food. According to Sue, the message that is being sent is that “you are a criminal, you are going to steal, you are poor, you do not belong, you are dangerous” (276). This (I presume) made the black delivery person upset and possibly have negative feelings. Unfortunately, this is happening every day throughout the country.

These are just three of the million microaggressions that happen each day in America. According to Sue, in one year’s time, 96% of black people felt that they were racially discriminated against. Whether they were given bad service, treated disrespectfully, flat-out ignored, or even mistaken to be a service worker, people of color

feel and notice these microaggressions. To the average white person, they feel as though they have done nothing wrong. Why does this keep happening? According to Williams, white people want to be like other white people. This is how they have grown. These are the things they know to be true. As Williams writes, “Microaggressions persist because the underlying cause of these behaviors (racism) reinforces social inequalities and hierarchies that are desirable to the in-group at the expense of the out-group” (6). Based on social dominance theory, people want to be like each other. They see their friends or family acting a certain way, and they want to replicate that behavior. These people tell themselves that if someone else is doing it, they can do it too and be just like them, which unfortunately justifies discrimination. They share beliefs with one another, and then the behavior is replicated. As Williams states, “Microaggressions are by definition caused by socially conditioned racial biases and prejudices” (6). Unfortunately, these are learned behaviors. But there is hope.

Many researchers have suggested different ways to stop microaggressions from continuing the way they do in society. From Pierce, to Williams, to Sue, each author offers their thoughts and ideas to combat microaggressions. Williams and her colleagues created the Racial Harmony Workshop (RHW) in 2018, which was created specifically to combat microaggressions. The workshop focuses on discussion and education about microaggressions, and even does exercises that help people who commit microaggressions realize how harmful and hurtful they can be. Williams reports that the workshop has had a high success rate, with people stating that they were satisfied with the results. Williams writes that the workshop benefits both black and white attendees, as both moods improved, and whites had good feelings towards blacks. Whites also

demonstrated a reduction in microaggressive thoughts, and less biased feelings were reported. However, Williams does recognize that much more is needed to help with microaggressions. Williams suggests an increase in diversity education, where people can be taught how to realize when microaggressions occur, defend against them, and then, ultimately end microaggressions (21).

Sue also has his own vision of how one can stamp out microaggressions. Sue suggests more training and education. Sue writes that we should try “making the invisible visible”, where people have an honest and open talk about racism. Sue suggests that coping strategies should be printed to assist children of color growing up, so they know how to react to microaggressions when they grow older. He also believes that analysis will be extremely helpful so that these assaults do not get ignored. By studying how microaggressions affect long-term mental health, we can learn more about how microaggressions affect self-esteem and other factors (284).

Conclusion

Although some may disagree, microaggressions are real and have true impact on people of color. For decades, this hidden form of racism has been sliding by whites daily. It is dangerous, and the effects are felt for years and years. Often white people do not realize what they are implying, or maybe they do. It does not really matter either way- it is still happening. Education and training is needed in all areas, to teach whites how to stop making offensive comments to people of color. If we learn, then we can prevent. Many do not think that people notice these slight snubs, but there is enough of them floating around that make most of America look blatantly racist. There is a better way to handle these situations where we do not leave so many people of color feeling so hurt, sad and vulnerable. Microaggressions are a useful concept, and more training and education is needed to make all people aware of what not to say.

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