

Microaggressions

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In the post civil rights movement United States, racial prejudice has gone underground to a large extent among white people, particularly those who think of themselves as liberal, educated, enlightened. The more blatant forms of racially prejudiced behavior are no longer socially acceptable. One new problem, or a new version of an old problem, is that many people, perhaps the vast majority of white people, consider progress to date an adequate solution to the problem of racial prejudice.

As psychoanalysts, we should be among the first to recognize that socially unacceptable, but deeply rooted, feelings and attitudes persist and leak out. One form this leakage takes is what Derald Wing Sue (2010) spoke of, following Pierce (1978), who coined the term, "microaggressions." Sue wrote of microaggressions as "slights, insults, invalidations, and indignities visited upon marginalized groups by well-intentioned, moral, and decent family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, students, teachers, clerks, waiters and waitresses, employers, health care professionals, and educators." (2010, p. xv) Among psychologists microaggressions are thought to flow from unconscious prejudice. The notion of unconscious prejudice makes clear quite readily how many white people, all the while thinking of themselves as free from prejudice, can act in a way that nonwhite people might perceive as prejudiced.

Why is it not enough to be well intentioned and thoughtful? Here are a few reasons: In the US, white people are socialized to think of whiteness as the standard, from which people of color deviate. Referring to nonwhite people as "diverse", for example, ignores the fact that diversity is a property of a group, not the property of a person. A group that includes white people and nonwhite people is a racially diverse group (not that white people do not have color, but that is another, related, issue), but people of color do not make the group diverse any more than white people make the group diverse. To say that nonwhite people are "diverse" is to say that white people are the baseline, the standard; from the stand point of a person of color this is a microaggression.

Another reason it is not enough for individuals to be well intentioned: many times behavior speaks louder than intentions. A classic example is Word, Zanna, and Cooper's (1974) study with Princeton undergraduates in which white interviewers were found to show more non-verbal signs of discomfort (sitting farther away, ending the interview sooner) when interviewing nonwhite people than when interviewing white people. In an experimental situation, when white interviewers were instructed to exhibit these behaviors when interviewing some white people, but not others, the white people exposed to the uncomfortable non-verbal behavior of the interviewers performed less well in the interview than the white people not subjected to the behavior. All this operated unconsciously, indicating that nonwhite people may perform less well on job interviews, for example, when the interviewer is white, without either party being aware of the underlying dynamic. The interviewer's uncomfortable behavior is a microaggression that likely operates under the conscious radar of both parties.

A final reason, in this far from comprehensive list, of why it is not enough to be well intentioned: racism is institutionalized in this country and does not require individual prejudice to operate. As examples, there is systematic relative underfunding of schools in neighborhoods where nonwhite people and people of lower socio-economic status are the majority. Property values go down when an African-American family moves into a neighborhood. Since most of the

household wealth of families in the US is in their house, there is a built-in racial discrepancy in wealth, with pervasive real life consequences. White people expressing the belief that equal opportunity exists (in arguing for ending affirmative action as no longer necessary) in this country is a microaggression.

Microaggressions are confusing to nonwhite people because of the ambiguity of meaning in many cases (was the uncomfortable behavior of the interviewer a function of the racial difference, or just the way he or she is?) One might be wondering a lot of the time if one is over-reacting or under-reacting. White people, if confronted, may protest that their innocent behavior was misunderstood. Leonard Pitts (19xx), a journalist, refers to this situation as making people of color feel "crazy sometimes". "Crazy" in this context can refer to confusion as to how to interpret a comment or action, or it may refer to a sense of disorientation and dislocation when a note of prejudice appears in an interaction unexpectedly, even outside the awareness of the microaggressor.

Well intentioned white people in this country may readily think of microaggressions in terms of the taxi driver passing by the black potential passenger on the street. It is more difficult to think of oneself, or people like oneself, as perpetrating microaggressions. There are issues of guilt avoidance here that would require a separate article. If our Postdoctoral program seeks to become more inclusive it behooves us to engage in some self-examination, some serious thought about the experience of nonwhite people in our program.

References

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