Racial Microaggressions as a Tool to Understand Everyday Racism in Academia

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UC Office of the President
Faculty Leadership Seminar Series
Fostering Inclusive Excellence

University of California, Santa Barbara

February 23, 2015
“...one must not look for the gross and obvious. The subtle, cumulative mini-assault is the substance of today’s racism” (p. 516).

Racial microaggressions are one form of systemic everyday racism used to keep those at the racial margins in their place.

Racial Microaggressions are:

- **Verbal and non-verbal assaults** directed toward People of Color, often carried out in subtle, automatic, or unconscious forms.
- **Layered assaults**, based on a Person of Color’s race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, surname, or college type;
- **Cumulative assaults** that take a physiological and psychological toll on People of Color.
How Do Racial Microaggressions Happen?
“That’s not what I meant”

“Great job on your presentation! You are so articulate.”

“But I meant it as a compliment”

“You’re being too sensitive”

“It was just a joke”
Racial Microaggressions are a form of Unconscious Racism
A Model for Understanding Microaggressions

Types of Microaggressions
Some Examples of Microaggressions: Reflections on Theater Presentation

- **Research on diversity = Less rigorous/valuable, “a crutch”**
  - a “public service announcement” (Kyle)

- **People of Color are in their professional positions because of their race**
  - Polloa as an “diversity hire” in the department

- **People of Color are “too sensitive” about race and diversity issues.**
  - Polloa told to “lighten up,” too emotional

- **Patronizing women faculty**
  - References to female faculty as a “girls.”
  - Constant interruptions, invalidation of remarks (Judy with male faculty)
  - Comments reappropriated, acknowledged (Judy and Glen)
Other Examples
“There are very few African American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me. There are very few African American men who haven't had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me... There are very few African Americans who haven't had the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off. That happens often.”
President Obama
July 19, 2013
“And race matters for reasons that really are only skin deep, that cannot be discussed any other way, and that cannot be wished away. Race matters to a young man’s view of society when he spends his teenage years watching others tense up as he passes, no matter the neighborhood where he grew up. Race matters to a young woman’s sense of self when she states her hometown, and then is pressed, “No, where are you really from?” regardless of how many generations her family has been in the country.”
Justice SOTOMAYOR Dissenting in

SCHUETTE v. BAMN,
572 U. S. ___ (April 2014)
A Model for Understanding Microaggressions

Types of Microaggressions

Context of Microaggressions
“I notice in a class I teach that after each session a white, not a black, will come up to me and tell me how the class should be structured or how the chairs should be placed or how there should be extra meetings outside the classroom, etc…One could argue that I am hypersensitive, if not paranoid, about what I know every black will understand, is that it is not what the student says in this dialogue, it is how he approaches me, how he talks to me, how he seems to regard me. I was patronized. I was told, by my own perceptual distortions perhaps, that although I am a full professor on two faculties at a prestigious university, to him I was no more than a big black n-----. I had to be instructed and directed as to how to render him more pleasure!” (Pierce, p. 277, 1970).
A Model for Understanding Microaggressions

Types of Microaggressions
• Pain, Hurt...
• Anger, Stress (Racial Battle Fatigue)
• Self Doubt
• Poor Academic Performance
• Poor Health Outcomes

Context of Microaggressions

Effects of Microaggressions
Unnatural Causes (2008)

Episode 1: In Sickness and In Wealth

Experts:
Abewale Troutman, Director, Louisville, KY Department of Public Health & Wellness
S. Leonard Syme, Professor of Epidemiology, UC Berkeley

Ideas:
**Excess Death** = The Difference between the Predicted Deaths and Actual Deaths
A Model for Understanding Microaggressions

Types of Microaggressions

Context of Microaggressions

Effects of Microaggressions

• Denial
• Self Policing
• Prove Them Wrong
• Resistance

Responses to Microaggressions
One Response
Recommendations for Higher Education Institutions

1) General Campus Climate
2) Faculty/Student Interactions
3) Social Class, Tokenism, the Search Process
4) Tenure and Promotion
5) Networks of Allies and Mentors

-Chapter 30, Presumed Incompetent
Recommendations for Improving Campus Climate  
(Gutiérrez y Muhs et. al., 2012)

1. Model a culture of respect  
Leadership models treatment of underrepresented groups on campus

2. Be color-conscious, not colorblind  
Publicly convey faculty of color bring added value to the university

3. Model the value of campus diversity  
Include members of underrepresented groups in campus leadership

4. Develop an “equity scorecard” to assess how faculty fare by race and gender across departments  
Include data on retention, tenure and promotion across ranks

5. Develop an action- and outcome-based diversity plan  
University statement on creating a climate of inclusion, create task force
Justice SOTOMAYOR’s Dissent
“In my colleagues’ view, examining the racial impact of legislation only perpetuates racial discrimination. This refusal to accept the stark reality that race matters is regrettable. The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to speak openly and candidly on the subject of race, and to apply the Constitution with eyes open to the unfortunate effects of centuries of racial discrimination. As members of the judiciary tasked with intervening to carry out the guarantee of equal protection, we ought not sit back and wish away, rather than confront, the racial inequality that exists in our society.”
What Can We Do?
Acknowledge our own racial history and how we view ourselves and others

Confront our own biases

Actively work to develop our recognition, reflection, and action skills
“The black must be taught to recognize...microaggressions and construct his future by taking appropriate action at each instance of recognition.”

-Chester Pierce, 1974
THANK YOU

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