Microaggression theory

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Microaggression is a term which some use to refer to unintended discrimination. Psychiatrist and Harvard University professor Chester M. Pierce coined the word *microaggression* in 1970 to describe insults and dismissals he said he had regularly witnessed non-black Americans inflict on African Americans.[1][2][3][4] In 1973, MIT economist Mary Rowe extended the term to include similar aggressions directed at women; eventually, the term came to encompass the casual degradation of any socially marginalized group, such as poor people, disabled people and sexual minorities.[5]

Description and prevalence

Psychologist Derald Wing Sue defines microaggressions as "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership."[6] Sue describes microaggressions as generally happening below the level of awareness of well-intentioned members of the dominant culture. Microaggressions, according to Sue, are different from overt, deliberate acts of bigotry, such as the use of racist epithets, because the people perpetrating microaggressions often intend no offense and are unaware they are causing harm.[7] Sue describes microaggressions as including statements that repeat or affirm stereotypes about the minority group or subtly demean it, that position the dominant culture as normal and the minority one as aberrant or pathological, that express disapproval of or discomfort with the minority group, that assume all minority group members are the same, that minimize the existence of discrimination against the minority group, seek to deny the perpetrator's own bias, or minimize real conflict between the minority group and the dominant culture.[7]

Race or ethnicity

Main article: Racism

Social scientists Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, and Torino (2007) described microaggressions as "the new face of racism," saying that the nature of racism has shifted over time from overt expressions of racial hatred and hate crimes, towards expressions of aversive racism, such as microaggressions, that are more subtle, ambiguous and often unintentional. Researchers say this has led some Americans to wrongly believe that racism is no longer a problem for non-white Americans.[8]

Studies[9] show that a wide variety of people in the United States report experience with racial microaggressions, including Hispanic/Latino American, African American, Middle Eastern American, European American, and Asian American people. Racial microaggressions are not limited by class or circumstance, and can be experienced by college students and upper-middle class professionals.[10] For example, white students and professors seeming surprised when an African-American student makes a particularly insightful or intelligent comment in class,[18] and Asian students being pathologized or penalized as too passive or quiet.[11] One famous example of a race-related microaggression happened when during the 2008 US democratic presidential primaries Joe Biden described Barack Obama as "the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy." Sue wrote that while on the surface Biden's comment sounded like praise, the message heard by African-Americans was "Obama is an exception. Most Blacks are unintelligent, inarticulate, dirty and unattractive."[7]

According to Sue *et al.*,[12] microaggressions seem to appear in three forms:

- microassault: an explicit racial derogation; verbal/nonverbal; e.g.: name-calling, avoidant behavior, purposeful discriminatory actions.
- microinsult: communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity; subtle snubs; unknown to the perpetrator; hidden insulting message to the recipient of color.
- microinvalidation: communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person belonging to a particular group.

Gender and sexuality

Further information: Sexism
See also: Transphobia, Homophobia, Biphobia and Heterophobia

Women, including trans women, report experiencing gender-related microaggressions.[13] Some examples of sexist microaggressions are "[addressing someone by using] a sexist name, a man refusing to wash dishes because it is 'woman's work,' displaying nude pin-ups of women at places of employment, someone making unwanted sexual advances toward another person."[14]

Members of sexual minorities commonly report experiencing microaggressions.[15] These commonly include the sexual exoticization of lesbians by heterosexual men; linking homosexuality with gender dysphoria or paraphilia; and prying questions about one's sexual activity.[7] Transgender people are commonly misgendered (labelled as having a gender other than the one they identify with), among other forms of microaggression.[16]

The following have been proposed as "microaggressable" themes:[7]

- Sexual objectification
- Second-class citizenship
- Sexist language
- Assumptions of inferiority
- Denial of sexism
- Traditional gender role assumptions
- Social invisibility
- Denial of individual sexism
- Sexist jokes

Intersectionality

People who are marginalized in multiple ways (e.g., a gay Asian-American man or a trans woman) experience microaggressions rooted in multiple forms of marginalization.[17] For example, in one study Asian-American women reported feeling sexually exoticized by majority-culture men or viewed by them as potential trophy wives.[18] Latina women report being assumed to be "spicy and sassy."[19] African-American women report experiencing microaggressions such as ones involving their hair (particularly that it is "unprofessional") or assumptions of stereotypes (such as being labeled an "angry black woman").[20] African-American women often experience microaggressions rooted in the assumption that they are scary, aggressive, loud and/or violent, that they are criminals, intellectually inferior to others, and/or that their culture is pathological.[21] Researchers say black women attribute most microaggression to their race, with gender as a secondary contributor.[22]

People with mental illness

Further information: Disability abuse

People with mental illness report experiencing more overt forms of microaggression than subtle ones, coming from family and friends and authority figures. In a study involving college students and adults experiencing community care, five themes were identified: invalidation, assumption of inferiority, fear of mental illness, shaming of mental illness, and being treated as a second class citizen.[23]

Perpetrators

Researchers report that most perpetrators of microaggressions consider themselves to be unprejudiced, with one U.S. study finding that even mental health professionals with extensive antiracist training engaged in microaggressions with African-American clients.[24]

Because perpetrators are generally well-meaning and microaggressions are subtle, their recipients often experience attributional ambiguity, which may lead them to dismiss the experience and blame themselves as overly sensitive.[25] If challenged by the minority person or an observer, perpetrators will often defend their microaggression as a misunderstanding, a joke, or something small that shouldn't be blown out of proportion.[26]

In guidance for mental health professionals, Sue asks them to be aware that everyone commits microaggressions, and says that if they are accused of committing one they should remain non-defensive and quickly apologize.[27]

Effects

Recipients of microaggressions may feel anger, frustration, or exhaustion. African-Americans have reported feeling under pressure to "represent" their group or to suppress their own cultural expression and "act white".[28] Over time, the cumulative effect of microaggressions can lead to diminished self-confidence and a poor self-image, and potentially also to mental health problems such as depression, anxiety and trauma.[24][26][28][29] Many researchers, Greer & Chwalisz, 2007; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Watkins, LaBarrie, & Appio, 2010, have argued that microaggressions are actually more damaging than overt expressions of bigotry precisely because they are small and therefore often ignored or downplayed, leading the victim to feel self-doubting rather than justifiably angry, and isolated rather than supported. On the other hand, some people report that microaggressions have made them more resilient.[29] Harvard's DuBois Institute associate Paula J. Caplan and research assistant Jordan C. Ford, wrote that although microaggressions "might seem minor" they are "so numerous that trying to function in such a setting is 'like lifting a ton of feathers.'" [30]

Studies have shown evidence that when women experience microaggressions, they may become depressed, develop low self-esteem, or experience sexual dysfunction. Some develop eating disorders and body image issues.[29] There are also studies showing evidence that microaggressions can lead people of color to fear, distrust and avoid relationships with white people.[24]

Culture of victimhood

A study conducted by two sociologists - Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning[31] - argues that the culture of microaggression leads to a culture of victimhood. Jonathan Haidt points out that being a victim is at the height of this culture.[32]

Older cultures relied on either dignity or honor, but this new culture is explicitly a culture of victimhood.[33]

Criticism

Scientific investigation of microaggression has been criticized for lacking a theory that makes any empirically testable prediction.[34]

Several journalists have written pieces questioning or criticizing microaggression theory. Writing for The Federalist, Paul Rowan Brian argued that microaggression theory pools trivial and ignorable instances of racism with real, genuine prejudice and exclusion.[35] Viv Regan, writing for Spiked Online, wondered whether the comfort provided by having a convenient label for alleged rudeness outweighs the damage caused by overreaction.[36] Amitai Etzioni, writing in The Atlantic, speculated that obsession about microaggressions is a distraction from dealing with much more serious acts.[37]

Microaggression theory has also been criticized by several conservative think tanks. Christina Hoff Sommers, in a video for the American Enterprise Institute, has criticized microaggression theory as oversensitive and paranoid.[38] Heather Mac Donald, writing for the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research's City Journal, has said that the theory is simply self-victimization.[39]

See also

- Anti-LGBT rhetoric
- Bullying
- Chauvinism
- Etiquette
- Intercultural communication
- I, Too, Am Harvard, a campaign illustrating microaggressions at Harvard University[39]
- LGBT stereotypes
- Micro-inequity
- Occupational sexism
- Race and health
- Stereotype threat

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External links

- "Tool: Recognizing Microaggressions and the Messages They Send (http://www.ucop.edu/academic-personnel-programs/_files/seminars/Tool_Recognizing_Microaggressions.pdf)" (Archive (http://www.webcitation.org/6ZRHleyFR)). University of California Office of the President.

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