

from: RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

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*Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward people of color. Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities.*

*A taxonomy of racial microaggressions in everyday life was created through a review of the social psychological literature on aversive racism, from formulations regarding the manifestation and impact of everyday racism, and from reading numerous personal narratives of counselors (both White and those of color) on their racial/cultural awakening. Microaggressions seem to appear in three forms: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation. Almost all interracial encounters are prone to microaggressions; ....*

### **Forms of Racial Microaggressions**

Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group. They are not limited to human encounters alone but may also be environmental in nature, as when a person of color is exposed to an office setting that unintentionally assails his or her racial identity (Gordon & Johnson, 2003; D.W. Sue, 2003). For example, one's racial identity can be minimized or made insignificant through the sheer exclusion of decorations or literature that represents various racial groups. Three forms of microaggressions can be identified: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation.

#### **Microassault**

A microassault is an explicit racial derogations characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions. Referring to someone as "colored" or "Oriental," using racial epithets, discouraging interracial interactions, deliberately serving a White patron before someone of color, and displaying a swastika are examples. Microassaults are most similar to what has been called "old fashioned" racism conducted on an individual level. They 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. In other words, 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. Because we have chosen to analyze the in intentional and unconscious manifestations of microaggressions, microassaults are not the focus of our article. It is important to note, however, that individuals can also vary in the degree of conscious awareness they show in the use of the following two forms of microaggressions.

#### **Microinsult**

A microinsult is characterized by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity. Microinsults represent subtle snubs, frequently unknown to the perpetrator, but clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient of color. When a White employer tells a prospective candidate of color "I believe the most qualified person should get the job, regardless of race: or when an employee of color is asked "How did you get your job?", the underlying message from the perspective of the recipient may be twofold: (a) People of color are not qualified, and (b) as a minority group member, you must have obtained the position through some affirmative action or quota program and not because of ability. Such statements are not necessarily aggressions, but context

is important. Hearing these statements frequently when used against affirmative action makes the recipient likely to experience them as aggressions. Microinsults can also occur nonverbally, as when a White teacher fails to acknowledge students of color in the classroom or when a White supervisor seems distracted during a conversation with a Black employee by avoiding eye contact or turning away (Hinton, 2004). In this case, the message conveyed to persons of color is that their contributions are unimportant.

### Microinvalidation

Microinvalidations are characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color. When Asian Americans (born and raised in the U.S.) are complimented for speaking good English or are repeatedly asked where they were born, the effect is to negate their U.S. American heritage and to convey that they are perpetual foreigners. When Blacks are told that “I don’t see color” or “We are all human beings,” the effect is to negate their experiences as racial/cultural beings. When a Latino couple is given poor service at a restaurant and shares their experience with White friends, only to be told “Don’t be so oversensitive” or “Don’t be so petty,” the racial experience of the couple is being nullified and its importance is being diminished.

We have been able to identify nine categories of microaggressions with distinct themes: alien in one’s own land, ascriptions 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. Table 1 provides samples of comments or situations that may potentially be classified as racial microaggressions and their accompanying hidden assumptions and messages.

**Table 1**  
**Examples of Racial Microaggressions**

Theme	Microaggression	Message
1- Alien in own land When Asian Americans and Latino Americans are assumed to be foreign born	“Where are you from?” “Where were you born?” “You speak good English” A person asking an Asian American to teach them words in their native language.	You are not American.  You are a foreigner.
2- Ascription of intelligence Assigning intelligence to a person of color on the basis of their race	“You are a credit to your race”  “You are so articulate”  Asking an Asian person to help with a math or science problem.	People of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites. It is unusual for someone of your race to be intelligent. All Asians are intelligent and good in math/sciences.
3- Color blindness Statements that indicate that a White person does not want to acknowledge race	“When I look at you, I don’t see color.”  “America is a melting pot.”  “There is only one race, the human race.”	Denying a person of color’s racial/ethnic experiences. Assimilate/acculturate to the dominant culture. Denying the individual as a racial/cultural being.
4- Criminality/assumption of criminal status	A White man or woman clutching their purse or checking their wallet as a Black or Latino approaches or passes A store owner following a customer of color around the store A White person waits to ride the next elevator when a person of color is on it	You are a criminal.  You are going to steal/ You are poor/ You do not belong. You are dangerous.
5- Denial of individual racism A statement made when Whites deny their racial biases	“I’m not racist. I have several black friends.” “As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority.”	I am immune to racism because I have friends of color. Your racial oppression is no different than my gender oppression. I can’t be a racist. I’m like you.

Theme	Microaggression	Message
<p>6- Myth of meritocracy Statements which assert that race does not play a role in life successes.</p>	<p>"I believe the most qualified person should get the job." "Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough."</p>	<p>People of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race. People of color are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder.</p>
<p>7- Pathologizing cultural values/communication styles The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant/White culture are ideal</p>	<p>Asking a Black person: "Why do you have to be so loud/animated? Just calm down." To an Asian or Latino person: "Why are you so quiet? We want to know what you think. Be more verbal." "Speak up more." Dismissing an individual who brings up race/culture in work/school setting</p>	<p>Assimilate to dominant culture.  Leave your cultural baggage outside</p>
<p>8- Second-class citizen Occurs when a White person is given preferential treatment as a consumer over a person of color</p>	<p>Person of color mistaken for a service worker  Having a taxi cab pass a person of color and pick up a White passenger  Being ignored at a store counter as attention is given to the White customer behind you "You people..."</p>	<p>People of color are servants to Whites. They couldn't possibly occupy high-status positions. You are likely to cause trouble and/or travel to a dangerous neighborhood. Whites are more valued customers than people of color.  You don't belong. You are a lesser being.</p>
<p>9- Environmental microaggressions Macro-level microaggressions, which are more apparent on systemic &amp; environmental levels</p>	<p>A college or university with buildings that are all named after White heterosexual upper class males. Television shows &amp; movies that feature predominantly White people, without representation of people of color Overcrowding of public schools in communities of color Overabundance of liquor stores in communities of color</p>	<p>You don't belong/You won't succeed here. There is only so far you can go. You are an outsider/You don't exist.  People of color don't/shouldn't value education. People of color are deviant.</p>

**Figure 1**  
 Categories of and Relationships Among Racial Microaggressions

