Racial Microaggressions as Instigators of Difficult Dialogues on Race: Implications for Student Affairs Educators and Students

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This article defines racial microaggressions and discusses their role in instigating difficult dialogues concerning racial and ethnic issues in student affairs classroom settings. The authors present four reasons why dialogues on race are difficult for many White Americans.

As classrooms have become increasingly diverse, difficult dialogues on race have often served to polarize student affairs graduate students and faculty rather than to clarify and increase mutual understanding about race and race relations. Most well intentioned faculty find themselves ill prepared to deal with the often explosive race-related emotions that manifest themselves in the classroom (Sue, 2003). Poorly handled by some faculty, such dialogues may result in disastrous consequences (anger, hostility, silence, complaints, misunderstandings, blockages of the learning process, and so on); skillfully handled, they present an opportunity for growth, improved communication, and learning (Young, 2003).

Emotional "hot buttons" are likely to be pushed in people within the context of difficult dialogues. Many student affairs faculty confess that they do not know how to deal with these situations, and that they experience considerable discomfort and anxiety over broaching racial topics. They may halt discussions in the classroom when intense feelings may lead them to believe the debate may get out of control, or when they themselves become uncomfortable with the dialogues (e.g., "Let's table the discussion for now" or "Calm down everyone and let's respect one another's points of view"). Rather than facilitate discussions, student affairs faculty may act in ways to ignore, dilute, diminish, or cut off dialogues (Utsey, Gernat, & Hammar (2005).

Why is it so difficult for student affairs professionals to dialogue honestly about race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual orientation? Why do student affairs graduate students and faculty alike become so guarded and uncomfortable when racial topics are raised in and outside of the classroom?

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How can student affairs professionals learn to become comfortable when addressing race issues and what effective strategies can be used to facilitate a difficult dialogue? Answers to these important questions require an understanding of the role that racial microaggressions play in difficult dialogues on race (Sue, 2003). This article defines and discusses the role of racial microaggressions in instigating difficult dialogues concerning racial and ethnic issues in student affairs classrooms. It also delineates several reasons why dialogues on race are difficult for many White Americans.

What Are Racial Microaggressions?

Racial microaggressions are "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs'" (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978, p. 66; Sue et al., 2006; Sue et al., 2007). They also have been described as subtle insults delivered through dismissive looks, gestures and tones (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) toward people of color; often automatic or unconscious (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Simply stated, racial microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group (Sue et al., 2007). In the classroom, students of color may describe racial microaggressions as a pattern of being overlooked, under-respected and devalued because of their race. When racial microaggressions occur, they present highly charged racial situations that challenge both teachers and students alike. Perpetrators (whether student affairs faculty or fellow students) often are unaware that a microaggressive communication has occurred. They may, however, sense that something is happening but be unable to identify or articulate it.

Microaggressive exchanges are so pervasive and automatic in daily conversations and interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocent and innocuous. They are, nevertheless, extremely damaging to persons of color because microaggressions impair classroom performance and workplace productivity by creating emotional turmoil and depleting psychological resources (Sue, 2005). Although space does not permit an extended discussion, racial microaggressions seem to appear in three forms: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue, et al., 2007). All three of these types of microaggressions can appear in student affairs classroom situations, but it is the latter two forms that prove most problematic to open and honest dialogues on race.

Microassaults. Microassaults are explicit racial derogations meant to hurt intended victims through name-calling, avoidant behavior or purposeful discriminatory actions. Calling someone a "nigger" or "Jap," advocating that people of color are inferior, or avoiding students of color by refusing to work with them in classroom assignments are prime examples. Because

microassaults are conscious and deliberate acts most commonly associated with "old fashioned" racism (e.g., White Supremacists), they appear less frequently in student affairs classroom settings (McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981). There are essentially two reasons for this observation. First, most individuals working or aspiring to work in the area of student affairs hold strong egalitarian values and would never consciously discriminate against other racial groups. Second, because of public condemnation of racism, microassaults usually occur in limited "private" situations that allow perpetrators some degree of anonymity, secrecy, and safety. Because classroom situations are public and the overwhelming majority of Whites would never deliberately discriminate, we have chosen to confine our analysis to the unintentional and unconscious manifestations of microaggressions. In many respects, microassaults in the classroom are easier to handle because they are clear and intentional.

Microinsults. Microinsults are words and actions that convey rudeness, insensitivity, or demeaning attitudes toward the racial or ethnic heritage or identity of people of color. In general, they occur outside the level of awareness of the perpetrators, but they convey a hidden insulting message to the recipients of color. When students of color are asked, "How did you get admitted into this university" or are told during a discussion on Affirmative Action that, "I believe the most qualified students should be admitted to the university, regardless of their race," the underlying message to the recipient may be that, as a minority group member, you must have been admitted through some Affirmative Action or quota program (i.e., not because of ability or expertise). Microinsults also can occur nonverbally, as when a White student affairs professor fails to acknowledge students of color in the classroom, seems distracted during a conversation with a Black student, and/or avoids eye contact with or turns away from students of color while consistently focusing on responses when a White student speaks (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1996). In these cases, the message conveyed to people of color is that their thoughts/ideas and contributions are unimportant.

Microinvalidations. Microinvalidations are perhaps the most insidious form of microaggressions because they exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of people of color. Potentially the most detrimental of the three forms, microinvalidations directly attack the racial reality of persons of color and attempt to replace it with the racial reality of White American (oftentimes with damaging consequences to the targets). Students of color often report, for example, that fellow White students and teachers chastise them for "bringing race into everything" (e.g., "Why does everything have to be about race?"). When Asian American and Latino/a American students who are born and raised in the United States and who are complimented for speaking good English or repeatedly asked where they were

born, the impact of these inquiries or statements is to negate their U.S. heritage and to inform them that they are aliens in their own country. When students of color are told, "I don't see color" or "We are all human beings," the effect is to dismiss and negate their experiences as racial-cultural beings (Jones, 1997; Sue, 2003). When students of color attempt to point out instances of differential treatment in the classroom and are told "Don't be so oversensitive" or "Don't be so petty," their racial experiences are nullified or diminished.

What Makes Dialogues on Race Difficult for Many White Americans?

Difficult dialogues on race are likely to occur when racial microaggressions make their appearance in interpersonal encounters. They usually convey a hidden disparaging message to people of color who find them offensive, triggering intense emotional responses. It is clear that many people of color perceive race as an intimate part of their identity and often feel shut off from discussing how it affects their lives in this society. Because race and racism are such a part of their experiential reality, they are cautious in raising race issues for fear of being accused of being "oversensitive" or having it dismissed as an illegitimate issue (Constantine, 2007; Watt, 2007). Because most educational institutions are White European American in orientation, the power to define racial reality and impose it on people of color is highly probable when discussed or analyzed.

White individuals generally appear to experience greater discomfort in discussing issues of race and racism than their counterparts of color (Utsey, et al., 2005). Ironically, some may wonder why this would be the case, especially when they hold the power to determine reality and to enforce their interpretations on people of color. To understand this irony requires us to realize how racism has evolved to more subtle and unintentional forms. Although racism has been a part of American society for hundreds of years, its manner of expression has shifted from the "old fashioned" forms like microassaults (conscious and intentional racial hatred and bigotry) to more disguised and ambiguous forms in American social, political, and economic life (Thompson & Neville, 1999). This nebulous form has been labeled "aversive racism" (Jones, 1997). Aversive racists are strongly motivated by egalitarian values as well as anti-minority feelings. This forms the central basis of the fears Whites possess in dialogues on race.

Fear of appearing racist. Because most individuals are concerned about how they are perceived by others, it goes without saying that they present themselves to others in the most favorable light possible. This is especially true on topics of race. The United States Constitution, Declaration of Independence, Bill of Rights, and various educational materials teach us to cherish freedom, equality, and the intrinsic worth of everyone (e.g., "All men

are created equal," and" "Everyone should be provided equal opportunity to succeed"). Although these statements are considered conscious ideals of democracy, there is also a hidden curriculum that socializes us into accepting that certain groups are less desirable than others (Sue, 2003). Thus, when topics of race arise, many Whites become guarded and concerned that, in mixed company, whatever they say or do may appear racist. In social situations, for example, the "politeness protocol" discourages people from openly and honestly sharing their perspectives. In academic settings, the "academic protocol" dictates that students and teachers alike discuss topics in an objective, detached, and unemotional manner because "emotion is antagonistic to reason." In essence, both protocols serve to discourage honest dialogues on race. By setting limits on how or what is discussed, it serves to protect White Americans from disclosures of hidden biases through allowing continued concealment.

Fear of realizing their racism. Although the fear of appearing biased affects honest racial dialogue, the most threatening realization of many White Americans is that they are, indeed, racist. White students and teachers are averse to understanding how their beliefs and actions contribute to the oppression of others. Because egalitarian values of White Americans operate on a conscious level and anti-minority feelings are less conscious, these values serve to protect them from the truth of their complicity in denying their own racism (Watt, 2007). Research suggests that people experience themselves as good, moral, and decent human beings who would never intentionally hurt or oppress others (Dovidio & Gaertner 1996). Thus, many Whites find it difficult to realize that they may hold unconscious racial biases, prejudices, and stereotypes that unintentionally make their appearance in interracial encounters. When situations arise that may result in self-disclosure about biases toward others, or when they become aware of their hidden negative attitudes towards people of color, or experience strong feelings of aversion toward a particular group, Whites are likely to experience great discomfort and dissonance. The full realization that they are not free of biases, stereotypes and discriminatory actions assails their self-concept of being bias free and a belief in their own "goodness." The abhorrence that Whites have of racism on a conscious level is assailed and results in the shattering of their self-concept as good and moral individuals. White people's denial of their own racism is likely to elicit strong feelings of defensiveness and anger by them, and these intense feelings often serve as emotional roadblocks to acknowledging their racism.

Fear of confronting White privilege. Difficult dialogues not only present the danger of appearing racist and unmasking personal racism, but they also force Whites to consider the possibility they have benefited from the racist arrangements and practices of the society. Although many Whites are more than willing to entertain the notion that people of color suffer from prejudice

and discrimination, they find it difficult to accept their own complicity in the current state of affairs and that they directly and indirectly benefit from racism. These unearned benefits and advantages that accrue to Whites by virtue of their skin color have been labeled "White privilege" (Watt, 2007). Acknowledging their racial privilege is threatening to Whites for several reasons (Sue, 2005). First, White privilege could not exist outside the confines of White supremacy. In other words, privilege exists because of a doctrine of White supremacy that considers Whites to be more desirable and superior to all other non-White groups. The doctrine of White racial superiority is manifested in many insidious and invisible ways that allows Whiteness to be a default standard. Second, if one accepts the possibility that Whites are the recipients of White privilege, then the belief in meritocracy must also be challenged. Whites must confront the fact that they did not acquire their position in life primarily due to their own efforts, but to a system normed and standardized on the experiences of Whites.

Fear of taking personal responsibility to end racism. The ultimate White privilege is the ability to acknowledge its existence and do nothing about it. Herein lies one of the greatest fears of White Americans. If the veil of invisibility is lifted from their eyes, if the pain of racism and its detrimental consequences to whole groups of color can no longer be denied, and if their personal advantage is based on the unfair disadvantage of others, then the question becomes how could Whites possibly allow racism to continue without any effort on their part to rectify the situation?

These insights, once achieved, demand action. Most White Americans who come to this realization find the implications frightening (Sue, 2003). It means seeing some family and friends in a different light; for example, a favorite relative could engage in racist comments or jokes. It may mean realizing you may have been offered a job over a candidate of color because you had the "right" (White) skin color and not because of your qualifications. It means understanding how systemic societal forces produce segregation, allowing only certain groups to purchase homes in affluent neighborhoods. It means knowing that you participate in perpetuating segregated schools that dispense inferior education to one group, but advantaged education to another. It means seeing how your school uses biased curricula, textbooks, and materials that reaffirm the identity of one group while denigrating other groups. It means knowing that hiring policies and practices that utilize the "old boy's network" to recruit and hire prospective employees work to your advantage.

To accept responsibility for combating racism and injustice means actions that would forever change their lives because it means constant vigilance and action against the forces of oppression. It means potentially alienating family, friends, or colleagues when you confront them about their biases. It means risking their

position at work (not getting a promotion or being fired) by speaking up against unfair employment practices. It means making new friends that include people of color in an attempt to change their experiential reality. It means confronting forces in our society that constantly attempt to have them move back to a stance of denial, to once again enter into a conspiracy of silence and to maintain a naïve posture (Sue, 2005).

Conclusion

All four of the aforementioned fears motivate defensive responses as identified by the Watt (2007) PIE Model. These fears also serve as barriers to allowing White Americans to examine their own prejudices and biases, accept responsibility for their complicity in the perpetuation of racism, admit that they benefit from White privilege, and take action in combating racism. Facilitating difficult dialogues means overcoming these four basic fears among both student affairs students and educators. Educators must begin to (a) understand themselves as racial-cultural beings, (b) understand the worldviews of other racial groups, and (c) develop the expertise needed to facilitate difficult dialogues on race as they arise in classroom settings. The importance of recognizing and facilitating difficult dialogues in classroom settings may allow student affairs educators to avoid disastrous consequences (e.g., anger, hostility, silence, complaints, etc.) and improve inter-group relations. Being a culturally competent educator *requires* the ability to facilitate difficult dialogues among diverse groups.

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