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# Racial Microaggressions

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## DESCRIPTION OF RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

### Definition

Sue et al. (2007) described racial microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards people of color” (p. 273). Additionally, Sue and colleagues developed several categories of racial microaggressions – *microassaults*, *microinsults*, and *microinvalidations*. Microassaults, thought to be intentional and conscious, are hostile behaviors that aimed to harm racial/ethnic minority individuals through verbal attacks, avoidance, or discrimination (e.g., “referring to someone as ‘colored’” or “displaying a swastika,” p. 274). Microinsults, often unconscious, represent indirect insults that degrade a person’s racial heritage (e.g., “A store owner following a customer around the store,” p. 276). Similarly unconscious, microinvalidations are communications that render invisible or negate racial/ethnic minority peoples’ experiences, cognitions, and emotions related to their race/ethnicity (e.g., “When I look at you, I don’t see color,” p. 276). Sue et al. (2007) also noted that all three forms of microaggressions can occur at systemic levels and term these incidents environmental microaggressions.

In addition to environmental microaggressions, eight microaggression themes have been identified (Sue et al., 2007). These include (a) ascribing intelligence based on race [*Ascription of Intelligence*], (b) preferential treatment of White consumers [*Second Class Citizen*], (c) assumption of White values as the epitome [*Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles*], (d) assuming a person of color is dangerous based on their race [*Criminality/Assumption of Criminal Status*], (e) assuming people of color are foreign-born [*Alien in Own Land*], (f) the denial of the cultural and racial experiences of people of color when White individuals do not acknowledge race [*Color Blindness*], (g) invalidations of the role of race in life achievements [*Myth of Meritocracy*], and (h) the denial of racial biases [*Denial of Individual Racism*] (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions have been linked to psychological distress, anxiety, and depression among racial/ethnic minority populations (Nadal, 2011; Sue, 2010; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Torres-Harding, Andrade, & Romero Diaz, 2012). Although this review focuses on racial microaggressions, it should be noted that microaggressions related to gender and sexual orientation have also been discussed (e.g., Balsam, 2011; Sue, 2010) and that consideration of racial microaggressions should occur in the context of other relevant social identities (Cole, 2009).

### Resources:

- DeAngelis, T. (2009). Unmasking ‘racial micro aggressions’. *Monitor on Psychology*, 40. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2009/02/microaggression.aspx>
- Sue, D. W., & Rivera, D. (2010, October) Racial microaggressions in everyday life: A new view on racism, sexism, and heterosexism. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201010/racial-microaggressions-in-everyday-life>

### Prevalence

Researchers have noted that because microaggressions are subtle and ubiquitous, they can be overlooked or dismissed making determination of the actual prevalence of racial microaggressions difficult to ascertain (Sue et al., 2007). However, in studies investigating experiences of racial discrimination, analogous to microaggressions, a sizable proportion (i.e., approximately 25% or more) of racial/ethnic minority participants report having experienced some form of race-based discrimination in the past year (e.g., Burgess, Ding, Hargreaves, van Ryn, & Phelan, 2008; Pérez, Fortuna, & Lisa, 2008; Tran, Lee, & Burgess, 2010), and a majority (i.e., 60% or more) of

African American/Black individuals reported experiencing racial discrimination over their lifetimes (e.g., Krieger, Kosheleva, Waterman, Chen, & Koenen, 2011). For example, with a subsample of 2,444 racial/ethnic minority people, Burgess et al. (2008) found that approximately 46% of African American, 40% American Indian, 47% Southeast Asian, and 45% Latina/o individuals reported experiencing racial discrimination at least once monthly or yearly.

#### **Resource:**

Booker, K. (2013, April). Asian Americans often feel racial 'microaggressions'. *Cornell Chronicle*. Retrieved from <http://www.news.cornell.edu/stories/2013/04/asian-americans-often-feel-racial-microaggressions>

## **IDENTIFICATION/ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES**

This section describes several measures that have been developed to assess the frequency and/or stressfulness of racial microaggression experiences in the lives or counseling experiences of people of color. All measures have evidenced good reliability and validity with racially/ethnically diverse groups.

### **Inventory of Microaggressions against Black Individuals (IMABI)**

The IMABI (Mercer, Ziegler-Hill, Wallace, & Hayes, 2011) is a 14-item measure intended to assess the frequency and impact of racial microaggressions, particularly microinsults and microinvalidations, against Black individuals. Each item of the IMABI is rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (i.e., 0 = *This has never happened to me*; 1 = *This event happened but I was not upset*; 2 = *This event happened and I was slightly upset*; 3 = *This event happened and I was moderately upset*; and 4 = *This event happened to me and I was extremely upset*). Items are averaged to obtain a total scale score. Higher scores indicate greater frequency and impact of microaggressions. A sample item is "Someone claimed that there is no racism or racial/ethnic discrimination anymore even though there is still a lot in our society."

### **Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS)**

The REMS (Nadal, 2011) is a 45-item self-report inventory used to assess the frequency of racial microaggressions in daily interactions. The REMS consists of 6 subscales (i.e., Assumption of Inferiority; Second-Class Citizen and Assumption of Criminality; Microinvalidations; Exoticization and Assumptions of Similarity; Environmental Microaggressions; and Workplace & School Microaggressions). The REMS utilizes a dichotomous rating scale of 1 (*I did not experience this event*) to 2 (*I experienced this event*). Items are averaged to obtain total and subscale scores. Higher scores indicate greater perceived frequency of racial microaggressions. A sample item is "Someone assumed that I would not be intelligent because of my race" (i.e., an item on the Assumption of Inferiority subscale).

### **Racial Microaggressions Scale (RMAS)**

The RMAS (Torres-Harding, Andrade, & Romero Diaz, 2012) is a 32-item scale used to assess the frequency and impact of racial microaggressions. The RMAS is comprised of six subscales (i.e., Invisibility, Criminality, Lowing Achieving/Undesirable Culture, Sexualization, Foreigner/Not Belonging, Environmental). For each item, respondents indicate how often they have encountered a particular racial microaggression on a 4-point Likert-type scale (i.e., 0 = *never*; 1 = *a little/rarely*; 2 = *sometimes/a moderate amount*; 3 = *often/frequently*). If a microaggression is endorsed, respondents report how stressful, upsetting, or bothersome the experience was for them on a 3-point Likert-type scale (0 = *not at all*; 1 = *a little*; 2 = *moderate level*; 3 = *high level*). Items are averaged to obtain each subscale score. A sample item is "Because of my race, people suggest that I am not a 'true' American" (i.e., an item on the Foreigner/Not Belonging subscale).

### **Racial Microaggressions in Counseling Scale (RMCS)**

The RMCS (Constantine, 2007) is a 10-item self-report measure used to assess a client's perception of the presence and impact of racial microaggressions in counseling. The RMCS uses a 3-point Likert-type scale (i.e., 0 = *This never happened*; 1 = *This happened but it did not bother me*; 2 = *This happened and I was bothered by it*). Items are averaged to obtain a total scale score. Higher scores indicate greater frequency and impact of microaggressions. A sample item is, "My counselor avoided discussing or addressing cultural issues in our session(s)."

## INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

### General Considerations

There is a paucity of empirical research investigating specific intervention strategies to address the racial microaggression experiences of racial/ethnic minority clients. However, several recommendations have been made for working with racial and ethnic minority clients. These interventions are grounded in the understanding that racial microaggressions should be recognized and addressed (Hall, 2001). At the foundation of all recommendations is the ethical responsibility of counselors to be multiculturally competent (American Counseling Association, 2005). This requires that counselors develop treatment plans that are inclusive of clients' cultural values and contexts (Dass-Brailsford, 2012). It also necessitates that counselors be willing and able to discuss cultural similarities and differences between the counselor and client. Counselors are encouraged to, "explore meanings of cultural differences and similarities rather than to assume that clients will bring a particular experience or perspective to therapy because of their gender, ethnicity, or race" (LaRoche & Maxie, 2003, p. 185).

### Resources:

ACA Code of Ethics

<http://www.counseling.org/Resources/aca-code-of-ethics.pdf>

AMCD Multicultural Counseling Competencies <http://www.counseling.org/docs/competencies/multicultural-competencies.pdf?sfvrsn=3>

APA Guidelines on Multicultural Education, Training, Research, Practice, and Organizational Change for Psychologists

<http://www.apa.org/pi/oema/resources/policy/multicultural-guidelines.aspx?item=2>

### Specific Interventions

Beyond these general guidelines, some authors have offered specific recommendations for interventions that may be effective when working with clients of color and when addressing their experiences of oppression. For example, given the more collectivistic nature of many racial/ethnic minority cultures, the importance of outreach to the families and cultural communities of racial and ethnic minority clients has been highlighted (e.g., LaFromboise, Trimble, & Mohatt, 1990; Murry & Mosidi, 1993). Hall (2001) discussed the mobilization of community assets (e.g., community leaders, churches) as an intervention for use in addressing racial microaggressions. DeBlaere et al. (2013) noted the importance of specifically assessing racial microaggressions in counseling. These authors also discussed the potential benefits of participating in activism as a means of combating oppression. Activism, with its ability to promote agency (Friedman & Leaper, 2010) and empower clients (Szymanski & Owens, 2009), may enhance clients' mental health. Thus, it is important for counselors to be aware of activities and organizations relevant to racial/ethnic minority clients and to facilitate participation when appropriate.

When considering how to address microaggressions, the following have been identified as important: (1) contextualizing microaggressions within larger systems of oppression, thus allowing clients to externalize the origin of their discriminatory experiences (e.g., Crocker & Major, 1989; DeBlaere & Bertsch, 2013); (2) including microaggression experiences in case conceptualizations so as to assist clients with making connections between their microaggression experiences and their presenting concerns; (3) integrating into counseling research findings that support a consistent negative link between discrimination experiences and psychological symptomatology so as to normalize client struggles; and (4) assessing and ameliorating potential negative scripts that clients may have developed as a result of internalizing microaggressions (Szymanski & Moffitt, 2012). Several sources also discuss the importance of social support (e.g., Szymanski & Moffitt, 2012; Williams, 2005). Williams (2005) identified support-seeking as a means of "psychological resistance to oppression" (p. 281). Finally, bibliotherapy has been offered as an effective therapeutic intervention for microaggression experiences for racial/ethnic minority populations (e.g., DeBlaere & Bertsch, 2013; McCoy & McKay, 2006). Culturally-affirming bibliotherapy is thought to have multiple benefits such as promoting a more positive self-concept, encouraging discussion of topics in counseling that might not have otherwise been shared due to shame or guilt, facilitating for exploration of prospective problem-solving strategies, and allowing racial/ethnic minority clients to connect with legacies of social justice activism (Holman, 1996; McCoy & McKay, 2006; Williams, Frame, & Greene, 1999).

Lastly, it is important to collaborate with clients to develop ways of coping with racial microaggressions. In a qualitative study with racial/ethnic minority mental health professionals, Hernández, Carranza, and Almeida (2010) identified self-care, connecting with one's spirituality, confronting the aggressor, and seeking mentoring as adaptive responses to microaggressions. Because racial/ethnic minority clients utilize subtle cues to gauge their counselor's multicultural attitudes, displaying racial/ethnic minority art and reading materials can be a relatively simple, but persuasive, way to communicate cultural sensitivity (Thompson, Bazile, & Akbar, 2004).

**Resource:**

Psychological Treatment of Ethnic Minority Populations

<http://www.apa.org/pi/oema/resources/brochures/treatment-minority.pdf>

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