

EDUC6164: Perspectives on Diversity and Equity
“Microaggressions in Everyday Life”
Program Transcript

NARRATOR: There are times when verbal behaviors create feelings of uncertainty, inferiority or marginalization even though no offense was consciously intended. Such behaviors are called microaggressions. What are some of the causes for microaggressions? In what ways do they affect people, and how can they be prevented? In this presentation, Dr. Derald Wing Sue answers these questions, discusses forms of microaggressions and explains the hidden messages sent to targets of microaggressions. Listen as Dr. Sue shares personal experiences with microaggressions and discusses research-based information with regard to preventing them.

DR. DERALD WING SUE: The concept of racial microaggressions, gender microaggressions and even sexual orientation microaggressions was of interest to me when our team at Columbia University studied for over six years the manifestations of racial microaggressions in which we began to apply to gender, sexual orientation, disability/ability as well. It's best understood if I can give you an example. Several years ago, when I was asked to do a keynote address in Washington D.C., I arrived at Dulles Airport, hopped a cab and engaged in a conversation with a cab driver. At the end of that trip when I got off, paid the cab driver, the cab driver turned to me and said that, you know, you speak perfect English, and my comment to him was that thank you, I hope so. I was born here. Now, I want you to keep that example in mind with another example that occurred immediately after my address to a packed audience who had come to listen to issues of cultural diversity. After the presentation, it's not unusual for people in the audience to come in, come up to the podium and speak to me about their reactions, questions and so forth. Well, one of the audience members, a white woman, came up to me and complimented me on a good presentation and asked me, "Well, Dr. Sue, where were you born?" And I said to the woman, "Oh, I was born in Portland, Oregon." Then she said, "No, no, no. Where were you born?" And I said, "Portland, Oregon?" I was beginning to doubt where I was born at that point. But she persisted and then said that, "No, what country were you born in?" And I said, "I was born in the United States." She became very flustered, embarrassed, thanked me and left the podium at that particular point.

DR. DERALD WING SUE: Now, during these two examples, what happened was that I know that both of these individuals were well-intentioned individuals who wanted to get to know me. They complimented me. There was no malice or insult intended, yet I felt very uncomfortable because of the hidden message that I felt was being communicated to me. And that hidden message that many Asians and

Latinos experience is a message that you are a perpetual foreigner in your own land. Now, these two minor examples are indicators of what I call racial microaggressions. Microaggressions are brief everyday indignities that are verbal, behavioral or environmental, that they may be intentional or unintentionally communicated to women, to people of color, to gay/lesbians that have an insulting message behind them that often time causes severe psychological distress and harm. That's what we mean by a racial, gender, sexual orientation microaggression. They can be based upon any marginalized group in the United States.

DR. DERALD WING SUE: Now, why are microaggressions so harmful? They indeed reflect a world view that is one of inferiority/superiority, inclusion/exclusion or in some sense reflect a oppressive belief in, if we talk about racial microaggressions, white supremacy. I am not saying that people aren't well-intentioned. These two individuals, the cab driver, the woman who complimented me, were well-intentioned individuals. They would never, I think, deliberately, consciously do anything that was discriminatory in action and behavior, and yet these slights, these every day insults, indignities, invalidations happen day in and day out outside the level of awareness of the well-intentioned individual. And while microaggressions can be intentional, conscious, it is the unintentional, unconscious forms that are outside the level of awareness that creates the greatest difficulty for people of color, for women and other marginalized groups in this society. It saps the spiritual and psychological energies of the person receiving the microaggressions, because it is cumulative in nature. It isn't just one act. Its constant acts, such as what happened to me throughout, and it gets tiring and very fatiguing to every day, day in and day out, have to cope with these issues. You've got to really be on the receiving end to realize how detrimental and damaging this has on your self-esteem and your integrity.

Dr. DERALD WING SUE: Microaggressions have four major psychological dilemmas that at places both the perpetrator and the recipient under. First of all, there is a clash of racial realities. My racial reality tells me that both the cab driver and the well-intentioned woman, who complimented me during my presentation, did not perceive--their racial reality is that we're trying to be friendly. We're trying to get to know you. I'm complimenting you. I like what you're saying, and I admire you for what you've done. Yet as a recipient of that message, I am experiencing something quite different. And as a recipient of that message, what I'm receiving is an insult that you are not a true American. True Americans are pale-skinned, blond-haired, blue eyes and look another way, and as a result, I feel alienated in some of this. The racial reality of people of color differ from that of white people. We can talk about this in surveys that were taken that oftentimes what happens is that people of color are more prone to entertain the notion, for example, a police misconduct in trials that involve black Americans. White Americans,

however, don't entertain that as a high possibility. This is a clash of racial realities, and the question becomes, whose racial reality is the true racial reality?

DR. DERALD WING SUE: The second dilemma is the unintentional and invisible nature of microaggressions that occur. The perpetrator of a microaggression experience themselves as good, moral, decent individuals. And that makes it very difficult for them to understand that, in some way, they have made a statement, engaged in a behavior that has been offensive and reveals some bias or stereotyping on their part. And, again, I go back to this issue, the invisibility makes it easy for many white individuals, if we talk about racial microaggressions, oblivious to their acts and what the outcome for people of color are all about. Studies in social psychology indicate that the most accurate assessment, the most accurate assessment of reality of what has occurred comes from people who are most disempowered. In other words, men don't need to understand women in order to survive, but women have to understand men in order to function and survive in this society. The same can be said, really, when we begin to deal with issues of race. If you want to understand racism, do you ask white people or people of color? If you want to understand homophobia, do you ask gays or straights? To me, the answer is quite clear.

DR. DERALD WING SUE: The third dilemma is the perceived minimal harm of racial microaggressions. Many white people, for example, say that, "Well, that's such a minor slight. Why are you getting so upset? You know, it's trivial, it's banal." Our studies on racial microaggression suggest that they are not only cumulative in nature, but they leave deep-seeded scars on the individual when we begin to talk about it in a lifelong type of pattern. Racial microaggressions not only cause psychological distress but creates inequities in employment, in education and in health care. The last issue of dilemma of a racial microaggression is a Catch-22. Oftentimes, what happens with a person of color that receives a racial microaggression is that did I think what happened really happened? And if it did happen, how do I raise the issue? And if I raise the issue, for example, if you were to compliment a black American, a black man, for example, that you are so articulate and bright. That is a racial microaggression if, indeed, the person's hidden message is that you are an exception because most blacks are unintelligent. Now, how does that black individual convince the perpetrator that a microaggression has occurred? And if they raise the issue or get angry, what happens is that that behavior is seen as a fault of the recipient, the black individual is too oversensitive, too paranoid, let go of it. So you're caught in a Catch-22, either ignore it and suffer the consequences of being insulted or raise the issue and being pathologized as being paranoid in one way or another.

DR. DERALD WING SUE: There are three forms of racial microaggressions that we can talk about: a microassault, which is an overt, deliberate, hostile act

intended to hurt the person on a conscious level, calling someone a nigger or a Jap, purposely discriminating against the individual. These are most similar to old-fashioned racism and I'm not going to talk about this, because it is truly my belief that it is not the overt forms of racism that do the most harm to people of color, to women and other groups, but the subtle unintentional, well-intentioned assaults that occur as a result of it. The two other forms of racial microaggressions that you might begin to study here deals with what we call microinsults that demeans a person's racial heritage by suggesting they are intellectually inferior in one way or another. The third form that we can talk about is microinvalidation, what I consider to be the most insidious form of a microaggression because it invalidates your experiential reality. When I raise the issue that in a restaurant I was served last and a close friend of mine says to me, "Derald, you're just oversensitive." My experiential reality of what has just happened to me is invalidated. And this is something that happens to people all the time, and you've got to realize what it's like to--it feels like you walk into a social setting, you extend your hand to shake hands with people and no hands come out. That is the ultimate invalidation. You raise a racial issue and no one talks about it or is willing to touch what they consider to be the elephant in the room.

DR. DERAL WING SUE: Now, we have learned a lot about racism, aversive racism, symbolic racism from the field of social psychology, and I encourage many of you to read the work of Jack Dovidio, Sam Gaertner on aversive racism; Susan Fiske's work on impression formation, sexual stereotyping; James Jones work on cultural racism; and Banerjee's work from Harvard on explicit and implicit behaviors and stereotyping. Now these are all social psychologists who have conducted study after study indicating that racism, indeed, has evolved and morphed into another contemporary form that is outside the awareness of the perpetrator or instigator. Now, their studies indicate several conclusions that I would like to share with you today that are important for each of us to understand, in order to understand how racial microaggressions have come to be and what we need to do to combat those. One of them is that we have been socialized into a society in which there exist individual, institutional and societal racism. It is inescapable. If you look at the history of the United States, it is a history of racial oppression. You have sterling examples of this, the enslavement of African Americans, the internment of the Japanese Americans, the taking away of land from Native Americans and the trail of terrors. I could go on endlessly to point out. Now, this is not to say that the history of the United States isn't also a history of anti-racism, but it is clear to me that our history and our institutions indeed come from and have embedded within it racist thoughts and attitudes.

DR. DERALD WING SUE: The second assumption that we need to look at that comes from social psychology in terms of understanding socialization, cultural

conditioning processes is that none of us are immune from inheriting the racial biases of our forebears. For me to believe, for example, that I have been born and raised in the United States for some 64 years without inheriting the racial biases of our forebears is, I believe, to be a height of ignorance or naivete or arrogance, in some sense. And more and more, especially, through the work of Banerjee and Jack Dovidio, they find that about 85% of white Americans harbor, for example, racial biases and stereotypes that are outside their level of awareness. The third thing that many of these studies are pointing to is that it is not old-fashioned racism that does the greatest harm to people. It is not the white supremacists, the Klan, the skinheads that brings fear to me as a person of color. Of course, I wouldn't like to meet them in a darkened alley by myself, but in essence, they do less harm on the quality of my life, the standard of living that I experience than well-intentioned individuals who experience themselves as good, decent individuals who go to the voting booths and vote, not being aware that there may be racial bias in terms of how they deliver a vote. Then managers or CEOs who hire individuals that they are hiring individuals with good conscience but unaware that on a subtle unconscious level, they are evaluating employees or prospective employees of color in a less competent fashion, and therefore they are being denied the opportunity to be employed.

DR. DERALD WING SUE: So in some sense, more and more studies are revealing that our teachers or educators, mental health professionals, physicians, everyday individuals who are unaware of their biases who indeed do the greatest harm to individuals of color. The characteristic of racial microaggressions that is most harmful, and the two that we know, microinsults and microinvalidations, are that they are unintentional, subtle, invisible to the perpetrator, outside the level of awareness. And as a result, the person never has the ability to self-correct, because they are unaware that they have engaged in something that is harmful, oppressive and detrimental to the person of color or to other individuals that represent what we call marginalized groups in the society. Social psychology points to the issue of prevention, that is, that most of us who engage in microaggressions are the aftermath of a failed social psychological conditioning process that has already occurred. How can we, in some sense, intervene and prevent these things from occurring? Now the early studies of intergroup dynamics, intergroup conflicts, gives us some clues about conditions that need to exist in our society in order to combat these forms of bias. These conditions, condition one, have intimate contact with people different than yourself. You know, most of us don't do it. If I was to ask you the question, how many of you have been to primarily an all-black function or Asian function? How many of you live in an integrated neighborhood? How many of you socialize outside of the work setting? I think that most of us would have to be aware that we, other than interacting with people who are racially different, let's say in our worksite, we primarily keep to our self. Social psychology indicates, if you are to overcome

bias stereotyping, intimate contact must occur, not just transitory, superficial contact.

DR. DERALD WING SUE: The second one is that we have to experience a cooperative rather than a competitive environment. Racism thrives because individuals have competitive types of values, that is, in our society if you look at it for someone to succeed, others have to be less successful. What social psychology points to is a society that is so competitive that it tends to stratify groups within our society and that we tend to operate in a way in which we do not have shared values that result in an ability to work effectively together. The third thing is the need to work towards mutually shared goals, that many groups in our society perceive one another as not having mutually shared goals. In fact, we see them as antagonistic goals. What are the goals that we can share that in some sense we can all groups look for? And I think that one of them deals with the issue of social justice, equal access and opportunity. I think if you look at the democratic ideals of this society, what you see is that we all believe in inclusion, in respect, in equal access and opportunities. Now, why can we not operationalize those into meaningful policies, practices and behaviors in our society, and that is one of the questions that I'm going to ask you all to begin to think about. The fourth one is that there has to be an accurate exchange of information rather than stereotypes or misinformation that is perpetrated in our society. Social psychology says social conditioning occurs through the educational curriculum, through the mass media, through our interactions with significant others in our lives. What happens if the mass media feeds us stereotypes/falsehoods that is deeply embedded in our psyche? What happens if the educational materials we study--for example, when I was young, I was taught that Columbus discovered America. We know now that that's not true, especially Native Americans saying that we were never lost. How could we be discovered? It really does something on an insidious level where it elevates one group, white Europeans, and it denigrates another group, Native Americans.

DR. DERALD WING SUE: The fifth type of prevention that we need to look at is that we have to begin to interact with one another on an equal footing. Trying to overcome bias isn't likely to happen when you have a white CEO trying to interact with a black custodian. There has to be an equal status relationship for us to overcome bias. The sixth one is that we have to view leadership as supportive of intergroup harmony and intergroup relationships, free of bias and stereotyping. It doesn't do any good during the time that we study, during the time of integration where a governor of a major state says that the federal government has requested that we have to integrate the schools, but I'm personally against it. There is a double message that is sent. We have to have the president, Congress, CEOs, superintendents of schools, they have to be behind this because people watch the actions of the leaders in order to have the

support of. And finally, there has to be a sense of interconnectedness with all of

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humanity. And I know this is a very ambiguous issue for us to--I'm talking not about religion but a spiritual connection. Biased discrimination, hostility exists between groups because we perceive them as lesser beings. That's why we call--during wartime we dehumanize groups--Japs, Gooks--we use all these--Krauts--we use all these terms to dehumanize a group in order for us to create inhuman offenses against them. How can our American soldiers have been so cruel at Abu Ghraib unless they saw the prisoners as subhuman aliens? And so in some sense, this society has to begin to look at its moral spiritual connectedness with each and every one of us in which we begin to realize that the suppression/oppression of one group oppresses me and my group as well. That is where, I think, ultimately, our society needs to go.

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