Identifying and Addressing Microaggressions in and out of Therapy

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Identifying and Addressing Microaggressions

OBJECTIVES:
(a) DEFINE MICROAGGRESSIONS
(b) IDENTIFY DIFFERENT TYPES OF MICROAGGRESSIONS
(c) LEARN ABOUT DELETERIOUS EFFECTS OF MICROAGGRESSIONS
(d) RECOGNIZE THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MICROAGGRESSIONS AND OUR ETHICAL CODE
(e) LEARN SPECIFIC TECHNIQUES FOR IDENTIFYING AND ADDRESSING MICROAGGRESSIONS
Microaggressions

- Brief, commonplace, and subtle verbal and nonverbal slights, insults, indignities, and denigrating messages directed toward an individual due to their group identity, often automatically and unconsciously. These indignities communicate hostility toward groups that have been historically marginalized.
- Usually committed by well-intentioned folks who are unaware of the hidden messages being communicated.
- Similar to carbon monoxide - "Invisible, but potentially lethal." Continuous exposure to these type of interactions "can be a sort of death by a thousand cuts to the victim." Sue, 2010

Modern racism

- "...one must not look for the gross and obvious. The subtle, cumulative mini-assault is the substance of today's racism" (Pierce, 1974, p. 516)

Microaggressions in Everyday Life

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJL2P0JsAS4
Types of Microaggressions

**Microinsult:** Often unconscious verbal, nonverbal, and environmental communications that subtly convey rudeness and insensitivity that demean a person’s heritage or identity

- Ex: Joking that you cannot give female office worker constructive feedback or she’ll cry, “helping” a wheelchair user without asking if they need assistance.

**Microassault:** Explicit verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discrimination.

- Ex: “I didn’t get that train. Should I call it a he or a she?”

**Microinvalidation:** Communications that subtly exclude, negate or nullify the thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of a person’s identity.

- Ex: “color blindness”, pictures that represent organizations as homogenous.

**Microinequity:** Individuals are “either singled out, or overlooked, ignored, or otherwise discounted” based on an unchangeable characteristic.

- Ex: “You’re a lesbian, what do you think?” constantly interrupting a woman, change in body position.

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Table 1: Examples of Racial Microaggressions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Microaggression</th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Racial stereotypes</td>
<td>“Where are you from?” “Where were you born?”</td>
<td>You are not American.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“You speak good English.” “You speak crap English”</td>
<td>You are a foreigner.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adoption of intelligence</td>
<td>Asking an Asian person to help with a credit or postage problem.</td>
<td>Hopes of color are generally not as intelligent as whites.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Color blindness</td>
<td>“When I talk to you, I don’t see color.”</td>
<td>Drawing on personal color’s narratives of experiences.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“America is a Melting Pot.”</td>
<td>American is a dominant culture.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“There is only one race, the human race.”</td>
<td>Drawing for identification as a racial/ethnic being.</td>
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</table>
### Environmental Microaggressions

**Microaggressions:**
- A term used to describe subtle, everyday verbal or nonverbal interactions that express negative stereotypes about a specific individual based on their identity or characteristics.

#### Types of Microaggressions:

- **Racial Microaggressions:**
  - **Direct Racial Microaggressions:**
    - A white man or woman asking a black man or woman if they are a "fine or good person);
    - A store owner asking a customer if they are a "criminal in disguise.
  - **Indirect Racial Microaggressions:**
    - A white person who feels the need to know when a person of color is on the street;
    - A white person trying to include a person of color in an outing;

- **Gender Microaggressions:**
  - **Direct Gender Microaggressions:**
    - "You don’t act like a girl;
    - "As a woman, I know what you go through as a social minority;
  - **Indirect Gender Microaggressions:**
    - I am slower because I have no friends of color;
    - Your social aggression is no different than gender oppression; I can’t be a racist, I’m like you.

- **Age Microaggressions:**
  - **Direct Age Microaggressions:**
    - I believe the most qualified person should get the job;
    - Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough;
  - **Indirect Age Microaggressions:**
    - You are too old for this;
    - You work too hard;

- **Class Microaggressions:**
  - **Direct Class Microaggressions:**
    - Second Class Citizen: Occurs when a white person is given preferential treatment over a person of color;
    - Being ignored at a store counter;
  - **Indirect Class Microaggressions:**
    - Environmental Microaggressions: Macro-level Microaggressions, which are more apparent on systemic and environmental levels.

#### Examples of Environmental Microaggressions:

- A college or university with buildings that are all named after white heterosexual upper class males;
- Television shows and movies that feature predominantly white programs, without representation of people of color;
- Overcrowding of public schools in communities of color;
- Overabundance of liquor stores in communities of color;

#### Resources:

- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_hx30zOi9I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_hx30zOi9I)
Microaggression Invisibility

- Remember, microaggressions reflect *unintentional* bias and can be hard to identify (and insidious).
- Microaggressions can be particularly difficult for people of privileged groups to identify, due to blind spots.
- Those not affected may consider them minor and encourage those affected to not waste time or effort on addressing them.
- The most accurate assessment of a microaggression is from those disempowered rather than from those that enjoy the privilege of position or power.

Microaggressions - minimally harmful?

- “Death by a thousand nicks...” (Sue)
- The cumulative effects of microaggressions contribute to self-doubt, frustration, and isolation
- Feeling invisible, defensive, “spokesperson” pressure, exhausted
- Experiences omitted, distorted, stereotyped

Effects of Microaggressions

- Psychological Impact (Blume et al., 2012; Nadal et al., 2014; Sue, 2010)
  - Anxiety
  - Paranoia
  - Depression
  - Sleep Difficulties
  - Lack of Confidence
  - Worthlessness
  - Intrusive Cognitions
  - Helplessness
  - Loss of Drive
  - Stress
  - Decreased sense of well-being
Effects of Microaggressions

“Studies have shown that unlike blatant old-fashioned racism, contemporary subtle forms of prejudice and discrimination (microaggressions) can impede cognitive function and performance.”

(Banaji, Greenwald, 1994)

Microaggressions and Ethics

- Principle A: Beneficence and Nonmaleficence: Psychologists strive to benefit those with whom they work and take care to do no harm.
- Principle D: Justice
  Psychologists exercise reasonable judgment and take precautions to ensure that their potential biases, the boundaries of their competence and the limitations of their expertise do not lead to or condone unjust practices.
- Standard 2: Competence: Boundaries of Competence: ...an understanding of factors associated with age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, language or socioeconomic status is essential for effective implementation of services... Psychologists have or obtain the training, experience, consultation or supervision necessary to ensure the competence of their services...

Microaggressions in and out of therapy
What Can be Done About Microaggressions?

1. **Build Competence**: Establish expertise, learn
2. **Know Thyself**: Understand your identity, biases, defensiveness
3. **See it**: “To make the invisible, visible” Know when a microaggression has occurred.
4. **Address it**: Acknowledge it, talk about it, and “repair the tear.”

**Step 1: Build Competence**

1. Acquire knowledge about diverse groups/clients.
2. Provide culturally- and population-relevant services.
3. Develop culturally-relevant services through collaboration with different populations.
4. Learn ways to interact with/shape organizational structures, policies, practices, and regulations within institutions.

**Step 1: Build Competence – Next Steps**

1. Acquire knowledge about diverse groups/clients and provide culturally- and population-relevant services.
   - *Book:* Culturally Alert Counseling: A Comprehensive Introduction (Garrett McAuliffe)
2. View client as expert.
   - Consider feminist therapy approach
   - *Book:* Feminist Therapy (Laura S. Brown)
3. Develop culturally-relevant services.
   - Ask clients what works; hold focus groups
   - Consult with diverse professionals
4. Learn ways to shape organizational structures, policies, practices, and regulations within institutions.
Step 2: Know Thyself

1. Get to know your own identity.
2. Acknowledge biases, address shame and defensiveness.
3. Explore the context of power in the therapeutic relationship.

Step 2: Know Thyself – Next Steps

Get to know your own identity.

1. Know what privileged status you have, and how this can impact therapy.
2. Know what marginalized status you have, and how this can impact therapy.
3. Be aware of hidden identities as well, in yourself and others.

Privilege – unseen and unheard... "An invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to be remain oblivious.” - Peggy McIntosh (Feminist and Anti-Racism Activist). A ‘cultural tunnel vision/privileged perspective’ limits—if not impairs—the counselor’s ability to provide ethically appropriate treatment services for non-similar, vulnerable clients.

Heterosexual privilege and white privilege handouts online.


RESPECTFUL Model

- R: Religion/spirituality
- E: Ethnic/racial background
- S: Sexual identity
- P: Psychological maturity
- E: Economic class background
- C: Chronological/developmental challenges
- T: Threats to one’s personal well-being
- F: Family history and dynamics
- U: Unique physical characteristics
- L: Location of residence

Step 2: Know Thyself – Next Steps

Acknowledge biases, address shame and defensiveness.

1. Identify your blind spots and biases.

2. Defensiveness prevents self-awareness and growth and needs to be managed:
   1. Address shame: Brené Brown.com
   3. Deconstructing Privilege: Teaching and Learning as Allies in the Classroom (Ch. 2: Addressing Inequality and Injustice without Shame or Blame)

Reactions to Privilege
Step 2: Know Thyself – Next Steps

Explore the context of power in the therapeutic relationship
1. Know your power in the therapeutic relationship. (Expert? Educated?) Acknowledge the inherent power differential in psychotherapy. Where am I located in the power structures of my culture and community? Where is my client located?
2. How could the use of power affect my decision?
3. How could a power differential between myself and my client affect the welfare of my client?
4. How can we share lenses to come to an ethical and just decision?
5. Those in positions of power are less attuned to those who have less power. Subordinates are more attuned to those with more power. Remember: Power and Privilege BLIND!

Step 3: Identify when microaggression has occurred.

- If the client seems to react negatively, that’s a clue.
- Collect outcome data, session satisfaction data with clients, at least new ones.
- If the same statement/question seems odd when applied to a dominant or non-marginalized group, that’s a clue.

Microaggression?

"Don’t get me wrong, I’m absolutely fine with dads who work. It boosts their self-esteem and gives them an identity beyond just ‘dad.’"
Step 3: Identify when microaggression has occurred, cont’d

How do we know?? **ASK**.

- When we are fearful about addressing the meaning of tension-filled interactions, offenses will be invisible (Goodman, 1995).
- Avoidance of sensitive topics (about race, etc.) is "a conspiracy of silence" (Sue). To combat microaggressions we must make the invisible visible. Otherwise, we let unintentional racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc. continue.

Step 4: Address it (Including “Repair the Tear”)

- Rehearse responses using the “Five Secrets of Effective Communication” (David Burns):
  - Paraphrase the patient’s words (Thought Empathy).
  - Acknowledge his or her feelings (Feeling Empathy).
  - Find the truth in what the patient is saying (Disarming Technique).
  - Gently probe for more information (Inquiry).
  - Express warmth and compassion (Stroking), and
- Share your reaction (“I Feel” Statements), in an honest and genuine manner
- Share how you can make it different and ask for future feedback
- Follow up

- Forgive yourself and understand the root of your defensiveness
- Understand intention does not equal impact
- “The simple act of naming a bias as such or objecting to it on the spot establishes a social atmosphere that discourages it: saying nothing serves to condone it.” – Daniel Goleman
- Emotional Intelligence

- Successful resolution of ruptures can create an "emotionally corrective experience” (Safran & Muran, 2000)
Outside the Therapy Room: What can we do to increase visibility?

- Consult with, confide in trustworthy colleagues
- Prioritize ongoing personal and professional development
- Practice self-awareness and vigilance re: biases, power, privilege
- Remember CBT – challenge your own biases, practice disarming and communication techniques
- Engage in experiential reality: interact with people who are different from you
- Check out Dr. Alison Briscoe-Smith’s website: http://www.drbriscoesmith.com/

Outside the Therapy Room: What can we do?

- Be an advocate and an ally – Speak up when you see a microaggression occurring, change policies when possible
- Build your EQ:
  - Self-Awareness: Understanding identity, privilege, power
  - Affect regulation: Managing shame, guilt, defensiveness
  - Interpersonal Sensitivity/Awareness: reading others’ reactions
  - Relationship management: metacommunication, repairing ruptures, effectively discussing difficult topics
- Emotional Intelligence 2.0 Hardcover – June 16, 2009 by Travis Bradberry (Author), Jean Greaves (Author)

For more information!

- Visit the OPA website for today’s slides and materials.
- For additional questions contact: drjennifersweeton@gmail.com