Racial Microaggressions Against Black Americans: Implications for Counseling

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■ Racial microaggression themes were identified using a focus-group analysis of self-identified Black participants. Six categories of demeaning and invalidating messages reflected beliefs of White supremacy that were unintentionally conveyed by perpetrators. Implications for counselors and the counseling process are discussed.

The counseling and helping professions have acknowledged the importance of developing cultural competence in providing services to an increasingly diverse population (American Psychological Association, 2003; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). One of the steps to achieving that goal is for counselors to become aware of their worldviews: the standards used to judge normality and abnormality; the implicit values and assumptions about human behavior; and the biases, prejudices, and stereotypes inherited from their social conditioning in society (Ridley, 2005; Sue, 2003). It is clear that the counseling profession has taken important steps to point out that (a) racism detrimentally affects the mental health of Black Americans (American Counseling Association, 1999), (b) counseling may represent cultural oppression for culturally diverse groups (Ridley, 2005), and (c) high rates of underuse of mental health services and premature termination may be due to individual and institutional bias toward clients of color (Burkard & Knox, 2004; Kearney, Draper, & Baron, 2005).

Although it can be acknowledged that the helping professions have done much to directly combat the overt forms of counselor and institutional bias through their production of competency standards and guidelines, the counseling profession has been less successful in addressing insidious forms of racism that invisibly infect the worldviews of well-intentioned helping professionals and the biased policies and practices within mental health delivery systems. Part of the problem is related to the profession's confusion regarding what the U.S. public views as racism and the profession's failure to understand racism's more insidious manifestations (Sue, 2003).

The nature of racism in the United States has evolved over time from the old-fashioned overt expressions of White supremacy and racial hatred to the more subtle, ambiguous, and unintentional expressions called *aversive racism* (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). Because most White Americans associate racism with hate crimes and White supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and skinheads, they are unaware how bias and discrimination have taken on an invisible nature that protects them from realizing their own complicity in the perpetuation of unintentional racism toward persons of color (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002; Sue, 2004). As a result, most White Americans believe that discrimination is on the decline, that racism is no longer a significant factor in the lives of people of color, that they are personally free of bias, and that equality will be shortly achieved (Sue, 2003).

Black Americans, however, perceive the situation quite differently. They claim that racism is a constant and continuing reality in their lives and that many well-intentioned, White individuals continue to respond toward them with racial insensitivity, to act as if White people are superior, to possess a need to control everything, and to treat them poorly because of their race (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, in press). According to Black Americans, these attitudes and behaviors are frequently communicated by White persons through racial microaggressions directed toward them (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Because counselors and helping professionals seem no more immune than other individuals from inheriting the biases of their forebears, research now indicates that White counselors also deliver racial microaggressions in their counseling sessions with Black clients and Black supervisees (Constantine, 2007; Constantine & Sue, 2007).

■ The New Face of Racism: Racial Microaggressions

According to Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, and Torino (2007),

> 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, and are expressed in three forms: microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidations. (p. 72)

Microassaults are probably most similar to what has been called *old-fashioned racism* because their expression is deliberate, conscious, and explicit. Calling someone a "nigger," displaying the hood of the Ku Klux Klan, or refusing to serve a Black person are examples of microassaults. These expressions of racism are most often deliberate on the part of the mi-

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croaggressor, whose intent is to hurt, oppress, or discriminate against a person of color (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000).

Microinsults and microinvalidations are significantly different from microassaults in that they are not usually expressed intentionally by perpetrators because the racial biases and prejudices that underlie these behaviors are outside the perpetrators' conscious awareness (Banaji, 2001; DeVos & Banaji, 2005). The power that these microaggressions have to hurt and oppress people of color is due to their invisible nature. In fact, many Black individuals may find it easier to deal with microassaults because the intent of the microaggressor is clear and obvious, whereas microinsults and microinvalidations involve considerable guesswork because of their ambiguous and invisible nature (Sue et al., in press).

Microinsults can be defined as actions (verbal, nonverbal, or environmental) that convey insensitivity, are rude, or directly demean a person's racial identity or heritage. Microinvalidations are actions that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiences of people of color. Telling a Black American that "You are a credit to your race" or telling the person "You are so articulate" are examples of microinsults, whereas complimenting an Asian American for speaking good English or constantly asking the person "Where were you born?" are classified as microinvalidations. Both forms of microaggressions convey a hidden message and meaning to the recipient. In the former, the message is that "People of color as a group are unintelligent," and, in the latter, the message is "You are a foreigner or alien in your own land."

After proposing a hypothetical taxonomy of racial microaggressions, researchers were able to identity four microinsult themes in previous studies. These themes were as follows: (a) ascription of intelligence (assigning low or high intelligence on the basis of race), (b) assumption of criminal status (belief a group is more prone to crime), (c) pathologizing cultural values/communication styles, and (d) second-class citizenship (treating others as lesser beings). This line of research also resulted in the uncovering of four microinvalidation themes: (a) being alien in one's own land, (b) color blindness, (c) denial of personal racism, and (d) the myth of meritocracy (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007).

Other researchers note that racial microaggressions have a cumulative and harmful impact on people of color by assailing their sense of integrity, invalidating them as racial/cultural beings, sapping their spiritual and psychic energies, and imposing a false reality on them (Franklin, 2004; Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue et al., in press). Black Americans frequently report feelings of racial rage, frustration, low self-esteem, depression, and other strong emotional reactions when subjected to microaggressions. Investigators have also confirmed that racial microaggressions may be more harmful to people of color than overt acts of racial hatred and bigotry because the hidden, unintentional nature of microaggressions allows them to flourish outside the level of conscious awareness of the perpetrators, thereby infecting interracial interactions, institutional procedures and practices, and social policies (Franklin, 2004; Hinton, 2004; Sue, 2003).

Microaggressions reflect an unconscious worldview of White supremacy that directly assails the racial reality of Black Americans. These unique forms of aggression result in the perpetuation of various injustices that have major consequences not only on the mental health of the recipients, but also in creating and maintaining racial inequities in health care, employment, and education (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). As such, eliminating racial microaggressions and minimizing their impact on achieving equal access and opportunity become issues of vital importance for counselors who embrace a multicultural/social justice helping perspective (Sue & Sue, 2008).

Getting White Americans to become aware of their unintentional racist communications is a major challenge to society and the helping professions. Although research on overt forms of racism is valuable, few scholars have explored the hidden and denigrating messages of racial microaggressions that are directed toward Black people. The first step toward reversing the endless cycle of microaggressions that is perpetuated in the United States involves unmasking the hidden themes that reflect a racially biased worldview that harms and oppresses others. The following qualitative study of Black Americans was designed to delineate some of the hidden messages that are inherent to microaggressions and indirectly tests the taxonomy developed by Sue, Capodilupo, et al. (2007) in previous research.

▪Method

The current investigation used a qualitative approach to explore the types of microaggressions experienced by Black Americans, the meanings they construed to them, and their emotional reactions to different microaggressions. Qualitative approaches are highly appropriate when conducting research with marginalized populations, especially when contextualizing issues of power and privilege (Morrow & Smith, 2000). To fully explore a new area of investigation and capture the depth of participants' experiences, we used focus groups (Krueger, 1994, 1998; Seal, Bogart, & Ehrhardt, 1998). Focus groups allow the social interaction of participants to generate meaning of the phenomenon under investigation (Krueger, 1998). This method has been successful in generating knowledge with racial/ethnic groups in other studies as well (Saint-Germain, Bassford, & Montano, 1993; Solórzano et al., 2000). Through describing, comparing, and categorizing microaggressive events produced from the focus groups, we were able to categorize them into themes and uncover their hidden messages.

Participants

The research participants were solicited through various means: flyers posted at a local graduate school in the Northeast, classroom visits, and e-mail requests to Black student organizations. All participants had to identify as being either Black or African American, agree that subtle racism and discrimination existed in the United States, and indicate that they had personally experienced or witnessed racist incidents.

Two focus groups were formed, with membership of 8 individuals in one group and 5 in another. Of the 13 self-identified Black Americans who participated in the study, 4 were men and 9 were women. Participants' ages ranged from 23 to 33 years. Nine participants were graduate students in either master's or doctoral programs in counseling psychology, and 4 worked in higher education settings.

Researchers

The research team was composed of four Black Americans, three Asian Americans (including the first author and one of the coauthors), one Latino, and two White Americans (including two of the coauthors). The pivotal role of investigators, who are involved in the data collection and analysis processes generated from qualitative research methods, demands the identification of the researchers' values, assumptions, and biases to check for potential bias (Fassinger, 2005). The members of the research team met to discuss these issues prior to collecting and analyzing the data generated in this study. Assumptions of the team members included a belief that racial microaggressions exist, that they are committed against Black Americans, that their effects have detrimental emotional consequences, and that they may be race/ethnic group specific. The purpose of acknowledging such assumptions is to minimize bias in the data-collection and analysis process.

Measure

Data were collected through a demographic questionnaire seeking information about the research participants' ethnicity, age, gender, occupation, level of education, and information generated from the use of a semistructured interview protocol (available from the first author upon request). The protocol consisted of eight questions that were aimed at producing diverse examples of microaggressions, investigating their effect on the recipients, exploring their meaning, and summarizing the responses of the participants.

Procedure

The research participants were assigned to one of two focus groups on the basis of their availability. Financial compensation was not offered to the participants. Basic information about the study on racial microaggressions was shared with the participants. Both the group facilitators and observers were Black. These persons conducted 90-minute focus groups with the participants who composed the two groups in this study. The racial similarity of the participants, facilitators, and observers was intentional to promote ease of disclosure and reduce negative feelings related to interacting with non-Black persons. The roles of the facilitators and observers were to lead the focus-group discussions and unobtrusively observe the group dynamics and the participants' nonverbal behaviors in these group meetings (Krueger, 1998).

The focus-group meetings were facilitated in a private room at the researchers' university. Prior to the onset of the group discussions, all participants signed consent and audiotape permission forms. At the end of the group meetings, a debriefing was immediately conducted between the facilitators and observers to check their observations about the group dynamics and issues of concern that arose during the group meetings. The focus-group sessions as well as the debriefing sessions were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim after removing the identity of the participants. The tapes were destroyed after transcription, and the transcripts were checked for accuracy before analysis.

A subteam of researchers that included three research team members identified the domains used to categorize the narratives produced from the group meetings in accordance with the principles of focus-group analysis (Krueger, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Seal et al., 1998). The central task of the subteam was to make sense of the particular forms of microaggressions reportedly experienced by Black Americans; the messages conveyed through these microaggressions; and the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional reactions the research participants had to these microaggressions. Data analysis was conducted on the following: (a) identification of the microaggressions, (b) description of critical incidents, (c) examination of emerging themes, (d) categorization of consequences, and (e) narration of common responses to the microaggressions.

Upon formulating domains, the subteam reconvened with the first author, who served as the auditor, following an essential procedure that is used in consensual qualitative research (Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). Using a modified consensual qualitative research approach is considered an acceptable methodology because qualitative studies are fundamentally interested in the richness of an experience as reported by the research participants (Polkinghorne, 2005). Thus, the transcript analysis was accomplished through uniform agreement of the subteam members, who were required to independently extract core ideas from the aforementioned domains.

Core ideas are notions derived from the aforementioned domains that detail and holistically integrate the data given the context of the subject under examination (Hill et al., 2005; Hill et al., 1997). Upon extracting core ideas from the participants' responses, the subteam members then presented, discussed, and negotiated their own analytical results among themselves. The goal of reaching consensus among the subteam members was to enable an ultimate presentation to the auditor. The auditor then (a) compared the individual contributions of the subteam members, (b) curtailed groupthink tendencies, (c) encouraged diverse viewpoints, and (d) confirmed or disconfirmed the themes manifested in the focus groups. This process of data analysis was completed separately for each transcript before the results from the two groups were compiled.

Results

Six themes emerged from the data analysis and represent the meanings participants made of specific microaggressive inci-

dents. Meaning making usually involves interpreting the events in question, unmasking their hidden messages, and surmising the intention of the microaggressor. To be considered a free-standing microaggression theme, only those incidents endorsed by multiple participants in both focus groups are recognized as such. One category of undeveloped incidents/responses was included because several incidents could not be classified under any of the themes or did not reach group consensus.

Theme 1: Assumption of Intellectual Inferiority

This theme refers to microaggressions that assume Black Americans to be intellectually inferior, inarticulate, or lacking common sense. Both male and female participants spoke of negative reactions to being told, "You speak so well" or "You are so articulate." Such statements usually allow the microaggressor to maintain a belief in Black inferiority by considering the speaker to be an exception to his or her racial group. These incidents occurred frequently in the workplace and in academic settings. One 25-year-old female participant stated, "In a class, if I say something that's insightful, quote unquote, you get a reaction. Like, 'Oh, that was really smart.' Like, 'That was really insightful' or some words like that." Although such statements were intended as compliments, they were generally interpreted as insults.

Participants also described multiple incidents of being treated differently when someone erroneously assumed that they were White because of their stellar résumés or through conversations over the phone. One 31-year-old female participant stated, "Every time I go on an interview, my résumé doesn't speak Black. . . . [When I show up for the interview] I get the same reaction from people. Sometimes it's more blatantly obvious than others, but it's always like, 'Oh, you're Silvia [pseudonym]?'" The hidden message communicated by the microaggressor was that educational and occupational accomplishments are "normal" for White individuals, but not for Black individuals. A number of Black persons entertained the notion that they would not have been called for an interview if the interviewer had known that they were Black.

One 22-year-old male participant described the following classroom situation: "You say something, [and] someone repeats back the exact same thing that you have said." He described incidents in which his comments were seemingly ignored or not acknowledged by the instructor or other students. However, when White students would make similar statements, the professor would positively acknowledge them. Many participants felt that their contributions were deemed "worthless" or "lacking in intellectual substance."

Theme 2: Second-Class Citizenship

Being perceived and treated as a lesser being was a frequent microaggressive theme. A typical incident includes the type of service that an individual receives at a store or restaurant. One 28-year-old male participant shared the following in describing his experience with this type of microaggression: "I go to the supermarket and there's an opportunity. [The salesperson says,]

'Who's in line next?' [and then chooses] someone who was not in line next, and I was standing there." Participants described many examples in which they were served last or ignored altogether.

The notion of second-class citizenship was further exemplified by a 25-year-old female participant who reported the following experience: "I put money in someone's hand and they won't put the money back in my hand. They'll make sure that they put the money on the counter as if I'm toxic." This Black participant believed that the microaggressor did not want to have any physical contact with her because she was a lesser being. This belief is reinforced by observations that the salesperson would hand change directly to others if they were White.

Theme 3: Assumption of Criminality

A belief that Black Americans are potential criminals and prone to antisocial or violent behaviors was another common theme that emerged in this study. A typical situation involving this theme was described by a 22-year-old female participant: "I've walked down the block from where I live and had a White woman cross the street and go to the other side and continue up." In this situation, the Black female participant recognized that a White woman would go out of her way to cross the street because she was either physically afraid of the research participant or assumed the participant had criminal intent.

Other situations occurred in which Black individuals were viewed as thieves or shoplifters. One 30-year-old male participant stated, "Sometimes they follow you [in a store]. . . . Somebody's walking behind me trying to monitor me or whatever." The meaning construed was that White individuals automatically assume that Black people are likely to steal, cannot be trusted, are immoral, and are likely to engage in criminal misconduct.

Most participants in both groups endorsed having experienced or knowing other Black individuals who were followed in stores, scrutinized closely by security guards in shopping malls, and pulled over by police while driving. All participants interpreted close surveillance behavior to be an assumption that they are "up to no good" or "dangerous." As one 40-year-old female participant stated, "It makes you feel like you are guilty of something . . . like you're a criminal."

Theme 4: Assumption of Inferior Status

Believing that Black individuals are inferior in status and credentials was the fourth theme that emerged in this study. Some participants indicated how they were assumed to hold lower paying jobs and to occupy lower status career positions; in social situations, they were assumed to be poor or uncultured. One 26-year-old male participant described his entering a new building for business purposes as follows:

> I was in shoes, dress slacks, dress shirt, carrying a messenger bag, and so I walked in. . . . [The] first person I see is a guard, and the guard's like, "OK you go through that door right there." So I go through the door, and it turns out to be the messenger area, you know?

This participant immediately recognized the guard's assumption that he could not possibly be a manager or corporate executive, but instead was a lesser worker.

Another male participant described numerous incidents in which unhappy White individuals would come to his store and complain, "I need to see a manager!" in which case the Black participant replied "I am the manager!" This response was, in turn, met with incredulous and dubious looks from the microaggressor. In this situation, the microaggressor seemed to assume that the Black individual could not possibly occupy a position of authority or responsibility.

There were also reported instances in which an assumption of inferior status involved believing that a Black individual is poor, primitive, or unsophisticated. One 31-year-old female participant recollected an incident that happened at a restaurant; she and a friend wanted to sit in the main dining room of a fancy restaurant but were instead seated in a casual dining area: "[The hostess says,] 'I wasn't aware that you wanted the main dining room.' My friend's like, 'Is it because we're Black and we're young?'"

In this situation, both the participant and her friend believed that the hostess assumed that they could not afford to dine in the main room (as opposed to the less expensive casual dining area in the back of the restaurant). It was further suggested that the hostess may also not want Black patrons to be seen in the main dining room and thus treated them as second-class citizens (an example of the additive nature and interaction of more than one microaggression theme).

Theme 5: Assumed Universality of the Black American Experience

Many participants reported numerous instances of being asked to speak for all members of their race. For example, a 27-year-old male participant stated, "I had a manager who would get résumés of people and whenever the name he thought looked Black, he would come, 'How do I pronounce this name?'" The manager assumed that the research participant knew how to pronounce all Black-sounding names by virtue of his being Black. The manager also seemed to believe that all Black people share identical experiences and were all the same.

Another male participant described the following incident:

> This White woman had called the office, and she was asking for Tyrone. And I was the only brother working there and my name is Leroy. And I know she had just lost it, and she knew it was one of those Black-sounding names.

This participant stated that he felt a negation of his individual experience because he was viewed as being interchangeable with other Black people.

A female participant shared this sentiment when she discussed being the "only Black person on an all-White board" at a nonprofit organization. She often believed that White members thought that her presence "brought a certain degree of authenticity" to the board, as if she alone could represent all Black people.

Many participants endorsed the feeling that in work and school settings, they were often looked to as the "Black representative" who could "speak for all Black people."

Several other participants reported incidents in which coworkers or managers "consulted" them when they had a question about a Black person the participant did not know. One male participant described the following experience in this regard: "[A coworker] asked me, 'Do I say African American or Black when referring to another coworker?'" The participant felt frustrated by this question, wondering, "[How] should I know what he/she prefers?" alluding to the notion that there is not just one way that people self-identify and that it is impractical to assume a universal experience for all Black people.

Theme 6: Assumed Superiority of White Cultural Values/Communication Styles

Nearly all of the research participants discussed incidents in which Black cultural values and communication styles were devalued and deemed inferior while the superiority of White values and ways of communicating were upheld. Speaking about the pressure to conform to White standards in her workplace, a 25-year-old female participant asserted the following:

> In a professional setting, you really have to sort of masquerade your responses. You can't say what's really on your mind, or you have to filter through so many different lenses till it comes out sounding acceptable to whoever's listening.

This participant indicated feeling that she could not be her authentic self or use her true voice, because it may not be "acceptable" to White supervisors or coworkers. She further described messages (direct and indirect) at her workplace to "act White" in order to be "acceptable" and "professional."

A similar sentiment was echoed by a male participant: "Yeah and that sort of way of interacting is not, in terms of a cultural experience, is not always what I value nor even always want to do but it's something you have to learn how to do." This participant was discussing how he negotiates his workplace, specifically his feeling that he has to adopt White cultural values to "fit in" and "be successful."

Another male participant immediately followed up this statement by adding, "I don't like the small talk of 'How's your baby?' that I feel pressured to get involved in or I'm seen as rude, or disengaged." Both of these research participants concluded that White workplace norms could not be rejected without negative consequences. Not only could these norms not be followed, but many expressed feeling pressure to assimilate and acculturate to White standards if they were to have a chance to advance in the organization. Illustrating this further, a 30-year-old female participant explored how she learned to get involved in the office small talk that was common among White coworkers: "The way you interact, like I had to learn how to [engage in] the casual banter. . . . There is a certain rhythm that I had to learn . . . when you're asking questions and you have no real interest in the answers."

Several other participants discussed classroom experiences in which they were teased by classmates or corrected by their instructors for using words that were common and natural for them. As a 27-year-old male participant stated, "It was not uncommon for teachers to ask me to repeat myself, or make it clear that I needed to change my words to be understood." The message being communicated to these participants was that they needed to "learn the correct (read White) manner of speaking" to be successful in life.

A subtheme that emerged from the aforementioned major theme was titled *White standards of beauty are superior*. Endorsed only by female participants in both groups, this subtheme focused on one's physical appearance (hair texture and style). Commenting on this microaggression, women in both groups shared multiple incidents in which they felt that White women and men communicated to them that their way of wearing their hair (i.e., natural) is abnormal and strange. A 23-year-old female participant corroborated this subtheme by pointing out the following:

> I went on a job interview, so I think I twisted my hair so it looked a little calmer and so to not scare them. . . . We're wearing it our natural way, but my natural is different, you know, it's not natural.

This participant felt pressured to "twist her hair" because wearing it natural is "different" and "not natural" and may detrimentally affect her job interview.

Acknowledging a similar incident, a 31-year-old female participant stated,

> I used to work in a high school, a very White high school, and over the summer I got my hair braided. I went up there to do some business and oh, the reactions! "Oh my God! I mean, what's happening to you?" Like this whole militant and "What are you doing this summer?" They treated me like the angry Black woman, afraid of how I was going to come back. The comments were just all like cautionary "Are you OK?"

The immediate response by coworkers to the participant's braided hair is that she is "militant" and to be feared.

Both incidents, described previously, convey the idea that the more "Black" (i.e., natural) a woman wears her hair, the stronger the assumption that she fits the stereotype of the "angry Black woman." It seems inherent in these messages that conforming to White standards of beauty (i.e., relaxing or straightening hair) will result in more acceptance from White coworkers and/or friends.

With regard to their hair, women in both focus groups also discussed feeling that their hair was "on display" for White people to comment on. For example, a 40-year-old female participant, who had recently straightened her hair, was approached by a coworker who commented, "Oh, you look like Diana Ross and the Temptations!" This experience resonated with many of the other women in the group, who agreed with verbal yesses and head nods. Another female participant responded, "It's like they need to pass out a memo that I've

changed my hairstyle. Want to take a picture and pass it around, so everyone can see how I've changed my hair?"

Other female participants likened the excitement over their changed hairstyle to a "news story" in the office, despite feeling that they were not doing anything different or worthy of such attention. They pondered aloud about whether a White coworker's haircut would generate as much attention and generally felt that their privacy was invaded with regard to their personal aesthetic.

Theme 7: Underdeveloped Incidents/Responses

Both focus groups mentioned a number of incidents that could not easily be classified into any of the aforementioned six major themes, because they were not fully endorsed by all group members. Additionally, because these incidents were not probed further, it was difficult for the entire research team to reach consensus. For example, one female participant shared a story in which she felt dehumanized: "This White woman approached a Black family and looked at a baby in the stroller and said, 'Oh, ain't that a cute little monkey!'" In this situation, the participant was appalled that the woman made a blatantly racist comment referring to a Black baby as a "monkey," particularly because the racial epithet is outdated and obviously offensive.

A male participant shared his reaction to an acquaintance's use of the term *nigger rigging*: "I was like, 'What did you just say?' [which the acquaintance follows with] 'No, I'm not being racist, calm down. . . . Oh, you know, you know what I mean?'" The participant was frustrated that the microaggressor wholeheartedly denied that his comment was racist, thereby denying the racial reality of the individual who is insulted. Furthermore, the Black individual is now seen as angry and oversensitive, hence perpetuating the stereotype that Black Americans are "angry minorities."

Finally, one male participant disclosed that "two of my friends were talking about how rap music is always blasting in cars and how [they] hate that . . . and I walked into the conversation [and they reacted,] 'Oh but not you . . . you're not like that.'" The participant in this case felt tokenized in that because he may not engage in what is stereotyped as "typical Black behavior" (i.e., listening to rap music), he is viewed as exceptional and more acceptable to White people.

■ Limitations of the Study

It is important to note several limitations of this study. First, our findings were drawn from a nonrepresentative population of Black individuals: 13 total participants, twice as many women as men, and all with college experience. Although we believe that the findings have validity for most Black individuals in U.S. society, further qualitative and quantitative studies would prove fruitful to explore the generalizability of our findings.

Second, it must be cautioned that the terminology used in identifying microaggressive themes may have been influenced by the questions in the interview protocol. The researchers in the present study tried to guard against this possibility by

making sure the participants could readily provide multiple examples under each microaggressive theme.

Third, although this study provided an in-depth exploration of racial microaggressions for Black individuals, future studies should probe the experiences of Latinos/Latinas and Native Americans, Black and Caribbean Americans, and the myriad ethnic groups that compose Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders.

Fourth, given the limited generalizability of qualitative research that involves focus-group discussions composed of a small number of participants, it would be helpful if instruments quantifying racial microaggressions could be created with subscales that measure specific themes identified in this and other studies among larger numbers of research participants. Such a development would allow counselors to quantitatively measure the types of racial microaggressions people of color experience, identify similar and different race-specific expressions, and determine the degree of psychological distress produced among larger samples.

Fifth, the present study focused exclusively on racial microaggressions. Recognizing the ways that persons in other devalued groups are likely to routinely experience similar microaggressions, future research that focuses on microaggressions associated with gender, sexual orientation, and other sociodemographic characteristics may prove equally valuable as those related to race.

Discussion

The results of this study support and extend the microaggression taxonomy proposed by Sue, Capodilupo, et al. (2007). Of the original proposed eight microaggression themes, four were similar or overlapping: ascription of intelligence, second-class citizenship, assumption of criminal status, and pathologizing cultural values/communication styles. One of the original proposed themes, denial of personal racism, was listed as an underdeveloped theme because only 1 participant mentioned such an incident in the groups. Two new themes emerged from the present study that are referred to as *assumption of inferior status* and *assumed universality of the Black American experience*.

Our ongoing investigations in this area indicate that racial microaggressions lead to psychological distress in Black Americans and that race-related stress occurs not only in response to overt racism but also in response to more indirect and subtle forms of racism. Microaggressions have a harmful and lasting psychological impact that may endure for days, weeks, months, and even years. Participants reported feelings of anger, frustration, doubt, guilt, or sadness when they experience microaggressions and noted further that the emotional turmoil stayed with them as they tried to make sense of each incident. The research team members' observations that many participants seemed to become distressed as a result of retelling their stories (e.g., crying/tearing, fluctuations in voice volume, stammering over words) provided additional evidence substantiating the long-lasting effects of the stress and trauma experienced from being subjected to various microaggressions.

Microaggressions were commonly perpetrated by all types of people—strangers, casual acquaintances, and even personal friends. The type of denigrating themes directed at Black persons seemed to be influenced by two dimensions: (a) whether the person was a casual or close acquaintance and (b) the social situation or environment in which the microaggression occurred. Our ongoing research of this phenomenon suggests, for instance, that a microaggressor treating a Black American as intellectually inferior tended to be a coworker, classmate, or authority figure at either the Black person's workplace or educational institution. Microaggressions that are classified in the assumed universality of the Black American experience and the assumed superiority of White cultural values/communication styles categories frequently occurred at work or school as well.

On the other hand, microaggressions that reflected themes of second-class citizenship or assumption of criminality or inferior status more typically came from strangers in public settings. In other words, Black Americans are more than likely to be stereotyped and treated in more discriminatory ways in public, whereas they are more likely to be invalidated or insulted in school or work settings.

The idea that microaggressions reflect commonly held prejudicial beliefs and stereotypes suggests that certain microaggressions will be differentially experienced by diverse racial/ethnic groups. For example, in a qualitative study on Asian Americans (Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007), the theme *alien in one's own land* captured experiences in which participants were reportedly treated as perpetual foreigners despite being born and raised in the United States. Although the original hypothetical taxonomy (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007) included this theme, it did not arise in the present study with Black American participants.

Similarly, the theme *assumption of criminality* was not present in the Sue, Bucceri, et al. (2007) study of Asian Americans but was prevalent in the current study. It is possible that this theme reflects a historical stereotype of Black Americans as violent and dangerous, whereas Asian Americans are regarded as law abiding and quiet. In other words, although microaggressions reflect a worldview of White supremacy relative to other racial groups, some of their manifestations are specific for racial/ethnic group (e.g., Asian Americans are more likely to encounter incidents with the theme of being a foreigner, whereas Black Americans are more likely to encounter incidents with the theme of criminality).

Another new theme emerging from this study that was not included in the original taxonomy was the assumption of inferior status theme. Although some of the experiences participants reported concerning this theme were similar to those related to the second-class citizenship theme, the research participants described their being assumed to be from a lower status was qualitatively different from their being treated as a second-class citizen. For example, being overlooked in store lines, being passed by cabs, and having change put on the counter instead of in one's hand were all examples of being treated like a second-class citizen. On the other hand, other persons' assuming that one was uneducated, poor, or a menial labor worker composed the

theme of assumption of inferior status. Furthermore, the examples supporting this theme could be broken down into "credentials" and "social class" to characterize the nature of the assumption. An example of the former is when a microaggressor acted surprised that a Black participant had a master's degree, whereas an example of the latter is when a hostess seated one of the research participants in the more casual, less expensive area of a restaurant. When a person is viewed as a second-class citizen, the message is conveyed that he or she is "less than," unimportant, and invisible. On the other hand, microaggressions conveying inferior status reflect the historical stereotype that Black Americans are uneducated, poor, and occupy low-status positions.

Both themes have relevance for counseling situations. Although counselors and therapists are unlikely to communicate that a client of color is a second-class citizen, they may be prone to indirectly communicating the assumption of lower status. For example, when reading an application for counseling or hearing an individual's voice over the phone, a counselor may make assumptions about the race of the applicant (on the basis of the applicant's reported socioeconomic status, level of education, or "articulate" way of speaking). Similar to an interviewer being "shocked" to meet a Black job applicant with sterling credentials, a counselor can convey expectation surprise (facially) when first meeting a Black client in session. Participants in this study were very sensitive to such racial microaggressions that left them distrustful, angered, and resentful.

Also, although counselors may not directly communicate that clients of color are second-class persons, this theme seems to have prevalence in both Black American and Asian American participants' lives. The experience of being invalidated, unimportant, and invisible has been well documented for both Black Americans and Asian Americans (Franklin, 1999; Sue, 2004). Therefore, counselors should be mindful that this dynamic may be a reality that many clients of color experience on a daily basis. Counselors are also encouraged to be cognizant of their own reactions in sessions that reflect microaggressive stereotypes, biases, and assumptions.

Another common trend that emerged in the data analysis of the present study included participants describing attempts to prevent future microaggressions from occurring. In this regard, participants reported making an intentional effort to speak "clearly" and "articulately" when entering new situations (e.g., social gatherings, interviews, and workplace meetings) to establish credibility and evade microaggressions that communicate intellectual inferiority. As one research participant stated, "In the first meeting, I have to crush all those stereotypes in one conversation. . . . OK, I know big words. . . . I'm articulate. . . . I can talk to you about things that interest you." In doing so, the individual is attempting to dispel any negative stereotypes that others may have about Black people's competence and intelligence.

Suffocating the authentic Black or Afrocentric self to conform to White, Eurocentric standards has long been perceived as a threat to the mental health of Black Americans (Franklin, 1999). Thus, it would behoove White counselors to be aware of how their own stereotypes and implicit biases operate in sessions with clients of color (Ridley, 1995) and recognize how these clients may feel pressured to obscure their true selves for the comfort or the sake of the helping professional (Franklin, 1999).

Conclusion

When taken together, the results from the present study of Black Americans and the previous investigation of Asian Americans do not include two of the originally proposed themes: color blindness and the myth of meritocracy. Several reasons are possible for the absence of these themes in the Sue, Bucceri, et al. (2007) and the present study on microaggressions. First, the limited time of the focus-group discussions restricted sampling of the universe of possible microaggressions. Second, both of these themes might involve microaggressions that are situational and reactional, in that a microaggressor might only reply with a color-blind or meritocracy statement when confronted or provoked in a discussion (e.g., a microaggressor saying that he or she "doesn't see color" after being accused of something racist or an employer saying, "Anyone could have gotten the job if he or she worked hard enough").

Although these themes were not mentioned by the participants in either study, there is potential for both themes to be endorsed by well-intentioned White counselors. This is possible because it is not uncommon for White counselors to directly convey that they are color blind and do not see race or to indirectly convey that they do not believe race to be salient to the lived experiences of clients of color (Neville, Worthington, & Spanierman, 2001).

Finally, we return to our earlier assertion that racial microaggressions (a) often reflect an invisible worldview of White supremacy in otherwise well-intentioned individuals; (b) are manifested in individuals, institutions, and the U.S. culture at large; (c) induce enormous psychological distress in people of color; and (d) create disparities in education, employment, and health care for the target groups. We believe that dealing with racial microaggressions represents a social justice issue and that counselors need to become proactive in addressing their biases and those of society. Sue and Sue (2008) made such a point in their definition of social justice counseling:

> Social justice counseling/therapy is an active philosophy and approach aimed at producing conditions that allow for equal access and opportunity, reducing or eliminating disparities in education, health care, employment and other areas that lower the quality of life for affected populations, encouraging mental health professionals to consider micro, meso, and macro levels in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of client and client systems, and broadening the role of helping professionals to include not only counselor/therapist but advocate, consultant, psychoeducator, change agent, community worker, etc. (p. 74).

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