

organizations. At the individual level, resistance lies in employees' fears and apprehensions—in their inability to acknowledge their hidden biases and the meanings of them. Yet, to end the cycle of oppression for people of color, women, and LGBTs in the workplace means that we all must work together to overcome these resistances.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Microaggressive Impact on Education and Teaching: Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race in the Classroom

I was teaching a sophomore class in urban education and lecturing on the "achievement gap" between Black and White students. Our topic for discussion dealt with analyzing a collection of brief biographical sketches of Black Americans who described how race impacted their lives and the special hardships they encountered in education. Usually students in my class are very talkative, but today the responses were tepid and brief. It felt like pulling teeth to get any type of response. I kept asking questions and making comments in an attempt to generate interest and to fill the long silences. Finally, one of the White female students stated that "I'm not sure this is a race issue, because as a woman, I've experienced low expectations from my teachers as well." Another White male student chimed in by asking "Isn't it a social class issue?" Another White female student immediately agreed, and went into a long monologue concerning how class issues are always neglected in discussions of social justice. She concluded by asking "Why is everything always about race?"

I could sense the energy in the classroom rise and felt eager to discuss these important issues when one of the few Black female students angrily confronted the White female with these words: "You have no idea what it's like to be Black! I don't care if you are poor or not, but you have White skin. Do you know what that means? Don't tell me that being Black isn't different from being White." A Latina student also added to the rejoinder by stating "You will never understand. Whites don't have to understand . Why are White people so scared to talk about race? Why do you always have to push it aside?" The two White female students seemed baffled and became obviously defensive. After an attempt to clarify their points, both White female students seemed to only inflame the dialogue. One of the female students began to cry, and the second student indignantly got up, stated she was not going to be insulted, and left the classroom.

As a White male professor, I felt paralyzed . This was truly "the classroom from hell." What had just happened? I was concerned about losing control of the classroom dynamics and immediately tried to calm the students down. I told them to respect one another, and to address these issues in a rational, calm, and objective manner. We could not let our emotions get the better of us. Because of the volatility of the situation, I suggested that we table the discussion and go on to another topic.

While I continued to lecture as if nothing had happened, I experienced a deep sense of failure and was concerned with the impact of this situation in our class. It was later substantiated when the student who broke out in tears dropped the course, and the one who left the room bitterly complained to the Dean, blaming me for handling the situation poorly. I was haunted by this classroom experience, did not understand what had happened, and felt at a loss of what to do. Nothing in my education had prepared me for handling this explosive difficult dialogue on race.

The above example is one that is reenacted frequently in classrooms throughout the United States, especially when topics revolve around those of race and racism. Studies reveal that many difficult dialogues on race are triggered by racial microaggressions not only in classroom settings, but in many public and private forums (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009; Sue, Rivera, Capodilupo, Lin , & Torino, 2009; Sue, Torino, Capodilupo, Rivera, & Lin, 2009; Young, 2004). Difficult racial dialogues are perceived quite differently between people of color and Whites. For students of color, race is an intimate part of their identities and avoiding topics related to it, dismissing it, negating it, or having it assailed create emotional reactions that may be brewed over in silence, or result in lashing out toward offenders (Young, 2004). For many White students,

however, race is invisible—they seldom think about or investigate it, and they become defensive about their own privilege. Ultimately, this can lead to denial or minimization of race as an important aspect of We (Bolgatz, 2005). Let us briefly identify the issues illustrated in the example.

First, it is apparent that all three well-intentioned White students did not realize that they were delivering racial microaggressions toward students of color. In addressing how race influenced Blacks, the White students seemed to dilute its importance by refocusing the topic on gender and class issues. They did not realize that they were (1) assailing the racial identities of Black students, and (2) denying or invalidating their racial experiences and realities (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009) through their microaggressive comments. As you recall, both of these communications have been identified as forms of racial microaggressions. Further, by equating racial bias with gender/class biases, the legitimacy of racism and its detrimental impact on the lives of people of color is diminished, pushed aside, and considered unimportant. Again, as with all microaggressions, there is a difference between the legitimacy of the topics (importance of gender and class factors), and the hidden demeaning and invalidating messages that are sent. The White students were unaware that they might be delivering microaggressions.

Second, the invisibility of these interactional dynamics—what triggered the intense reaction of students of color (racial microaggressions)—is often outside the level of conscious awareness of the White students, and even the professor. When critical consciousness is missing and when the interpersonal dynamics are unclear, puzzlement and confusion reign supreme. The White students and professor are at a loss to understand what just happened, and what was responsible for the emotive reactions and statements of students of color. Thus, they are not in a position to respond in a helpful or enlightened manner. The White students are left with the feeling of being personally attacked and only vaguely sense that something they did or said offended students of color. But other than their own defensiveness, anxiety, and feeling hurt from the exchange, they have little understanding of their own roles in the difficult dialogue (Sue, Rivera, et al., 2009). The professor also realizes something is amiss (tentativeness in discussing racial topics, anxiety, heated exchanges, crying and leaving the room), but is at a loss to determine its meaning and how to respond appropriately (Sue, Torino, et al., 2009).

Third, difficult dialogues on race are seldom completed or resolved in such a way as to be a meaningful learning experience. Indeed, classroom interactions on topics of race, gender, and sexual orientation often deteriorate into

monologues rather than develop into true dialogues (Sue & Constantine, 2007). There is no attempt to reach out to others, to hear their points of view, and to digest the meanings; instead, defensiveness, anger, and an attacking shouting match occur between participants (Young, 2003). Students seem more motivated to press their views (stating and restating their positions, and talking over each other) rather than attempting to listen to another's point of view. If sufficient emotional intensity is reached, students may leave the classroom, break down in tears (Accapadi, 2007), and not participate further in racial dialogues; the professor, on the other hand, may admonish students to respect one another, to control their emotions, or to "table the discussion." These avoidance maneuvers are intended to end the dialogue or *to place extreme restrictions on how to talk about race*.

Fourth, the unsuccessful outcome of difficult dialogues on race represents a major setback and failure in understanding and improving race relations. It can actually lead to a hardening of racially biased views on the part of White students (people of color are oversensitive and can't control their emotions), and it leaves the students of color pained, hurt, and invalidated, reinforcing beliefs that Whites cannot understand or be trusted. Further, by leaving the topic untouched and unresolved it will continue to represent the "elephant in the room" and negatively affect the learning environment by teaching students to avoid race topics. As a result, many students of color find the classroom situation oppressive and intolerable, reflecting the power and privilege of White students and professors to control the dialogue. While White students can avoid issues of race by leaving the situation or avoiding it, students of color have no such privilege. They must *deal* with race on a day-to-day basis; escape and leaving the situation are not options open to them.

Last, the White professor reflected upon how his training had never prepared him to facilitate these emotional interactions among students, or even between himself and his students. It is clear that the professor was baffled by the interaction and was unaware and unable to recognize racial microaggressions. While educators are often prepared to teach in classrooms by stressing knowledge acquisition and cognitive analysis, topics of race and racism are more than intellectual exercises because they involves taboos, and nested feelings of anxiety, fear, guilt, and anger. As we shall shortly see, facilitating difficult dialogues on race requires professors to (a) be aware of their own values, biases, and assumptions about human behavior, (b) understand the worldview of the culturally diverse students, and (c) possess a repertoire of teaching or facilitation strategies to aid students in self-reflection and learning.

MICROAGGRESSIONS IN EDUCATION

It is becoming increasingly clear that many inequities in education are due to lower expectations, stereotypes, and a hostile invalidating climate for people of color, women, and LGBTs (Bell, 2002; Cadinu, Maass, Rosabianca, & Kiesner, 2005; Sue, Rivera, et al., 2009). In the last chapter we analyzed how microaggressions operate systemically in worksites and their effects can be found in the hiring, retention, and promotion of employees. This is also true with respect to pre-K-12 schools, institutions of higher education, and professional graduate programs. The underrepresentation of women in science and engineering in elementary levels, secondary schools, and in professorial positions in colleges/ universities may speak to possible discrimination. The low representation of minority faculty can also be the insidious operation of aversive forms of racism. Not only may such forces operate in an educational institution, affecting which teachers, staff, and administrators are hired, but a similar framework can be applied to students as well.

Microaggressions can affect the student body composition through recruitment (which students are selected), retention (which students drop out), and promotion (graduation rates) of students of color. If racial, gender, and sexual-orientation microaggressions present a hostile and invalidating learning climate, these groups are likely to suffer in any number of ways. Women, for example, have been found to experience stereotype threat because of gender microaggressions, may underperform in math and sciences despite having high abilities, and/or may become segregated in their career paths or vocational selections by well-intentioned educators (Bell, 2003; Gore, 2000; Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990). Such factors speak to educational inequities that are present systemically and may inundate the classroom environment.

Educational Disparities among Marginalized Groups

Despite parents of color encouraging their sons and daughters to develop educational and career goals, racism and poverty continue to create disparities, especially among African American, Latina *l*o, and American Indian students. The high school graduation rates for African Americans are significantly below those of Whites and even worse for those going to college (14.3% vs. 24.3%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005b); Latinas/os have fared poorly as approximately two of five aged 25 or older have not completed high school, and more than 25% have less than a ninth-grade education (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003); and Native Americans show an astounding pattern of dropping out beginning

in the fourth grade, resulting in low rates of completing elementary and secondary schools and college (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Although Asian Americans are often perceived as a "successful minority" with higher educational levels, the statistics mask a bimodal distribution of this group; a large number of Asian subgroups have a large undereducated mass (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005a). Only 40% of Hmongs have completed high school and fewer than 14% of Tongans, Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmongs 25 years and older have a bachelor's degree.

Looking beyond these gross measures of academic achievement, it is undeniable that a large discrepancy exists between the academic performance of students of color and their White counterparts. American Indian children do well during the first four years of school, but by the end of fourth grade they begin to "drop out" and by the seventh grade significant decreases in academic performance are evident (Juntunen et al., 2001). Black students during middle and high school years evidence a separation of self-esteem from academic performance that results in loss of interest in schoolwork and resulting poor acquisition of knowledge and skills. Behavioral problems in schools, higher pregnancy rates among African American and Latina girls, and increasing alienation from school curriculum all contribute to poorer academic performance. Students of color are also many times more likely to be suspended from school and to receive harsher consequences than their White peers (Monroe, 2005).

For years, educators have attempted to understand the causes of "the achievement gap" in an attempt to close it. They have recognized that the inability to complete an education perpetuates the cycle of poverty, lack of job opportunities in the larger society, and detrimental psychological consequences associated with low self-esteem and subjective well-being (Sue & Sue, 2008). Appropriate intervention strategies can only arise, however, when the causes for school failure are identified. The causes of high drop-out rates and lower academic achievement among students of color are probably multidimensional and may vary from group to group. Explanations for the poorer academic performance of students of color, however, seem to fall into two camps: (1) causation resides internally, within the individual, group, or culture, and (2) causation resides externally in the system or the academic/ classroom and societal environment.

Internal Causation-Individual Focus

We have already identified two major forms of microaggressions that seem to form a worldview with hidden assumptions and messages: (1) the myth

of meritocracy and (2) pathologizing cultural/ communication styles of marginalized groups. Both take a person- or group-focused approach to explaining the poor academic performance of marginalized groups. The explanations can range from genetic speculations that biology determines intelligence and abilities (math/science capabilities are deficient in women) to factors associated with incompatible group characteristics and values. Educators and especially teachers often hold both conscious and unconscious stereotypes or preconceived notions that students of color are less capable and motivated, that parents are uninvolved in the educational welfare of their children, and/or that their cultural values are at odds with educational values (Sue & Sue, 2008).

School personnel, for example, often attribute the poor performance of African Americans to internal attributes or to their parents. One teacher stated: "The parents are the problem! They [African American children] have absolutely no social skills, such as not knowing how to walk, sit in a chair . . . it's cultural" (Harry, Klinger, & Hart, 2005, p. 105). With respect to Native American students, some have argued that Indian cultural values and beliefs are incompatible with those of the educational system, and that this is the culprit for their achievement gap. Likewise, many educators believe that much of the educational difficulties of Latinos are due primarily to their language, Spanish, which prevents them from acquiring the ability to speak "good standard English" (Hayes, 2006).

Although these explanations may contain some grain of truth, they all assume internal causation and have the unintended consequence of blaming the victim; the problem resides in the genes of the group, in their culture, or in their language. The genetic deficiency and inferiority models have been used to explain why African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Spanish Indian families perform poorly on intellectual tasks (Samuda, 1998). The culturally deficient model described marginalized groups in our society as deficient, disadvantaged, or deprived (Sue & Sue, 2008; Thomas & Sillen, 1972). Logically, the terms *deprived* or *deficient* suggest that people of color lack the advantages of middle-class culture (education, formal language, books, values, and traditions) to perform well in classes. While the cultural deprivation theories were proposed by well-intentioned White educators as a means of combating racist and sexist biological explanations, they only worsened our understanding by shifting the blame from genetics to a more acceptable one, culture.

At first glance, the phrase "culturally impoverished" appears more benign and less harmful. But explanations of cultural deprivation suffer from several

problems. First, we can ask the question, how can any individual or group be culturally deprived or "lack a culture"? Such a phrase is contradictory because everyone inherits a culture and no one was born "culturally naked." Second, it causes conceptual and theoretical confusions that may adversely affect educational policy and practice. If African American family values and behaviors are at the root of the problem, then it opens the floodgates for us to infuse White Eurocentric notions into the family values of the Black community. Third, a hidden microaggressive assumption is that cultural deprivation is used synonymously with deviations from and superiority of White middle-class values. In essence, these models and explanations send the same message: People of color and many other marginalized groups lack the right culture! White Eurocentric norms, masculine norms, and heterosexist norms become the worldview that reflects racial, gender, and sexual-orientation microaggressions in the educational setting.

A society based upon the concept of "individualism"—that one's lot in life is based upon individual effort, abilities, and skills—is said to be oriented toward explaining behavior from a person-focused perspective. Three philosophical outlooks derive from an internal explanation of behavior or outcome: (1) stress is placed upon understanding individual motives, values, feelings, and goals; (2) causal attribution of success or failure is determined by the skills or inadequacies of the person; and (3) there is a strong belief in the relationship between abilities, effort, and success in education. Educational performance, educational attainment, and educational outcome of students of color, women, and LGBTs, for example, are the result of their own internal attributes. Success is explained as outstanding attributes, and failure is attributed to personal or group deficiencies.

External Causation-System Focus

While individual responsibility for achievement in school is an important factor in explaining academic performance, ignoring external forces (prejudice, discrimination, poverty, etc.) to explain academic disparities in education may result in blaming the victim. Many microaggressions originate from a myth of meritocracy ("any one can succeed in life if they work hard enough" and "the playing field is level"), and the failure to consider powerful external forces that affect outcome. Native American students report that educational curriculum, teaching and learning styles, and the classroom climate are unwelcoming, and ignore their cultural and social differences. They feel "pushed out" and mistrusted by teachers and liken the educational experience

to forced compliance or being "civilized" (Deyhle & Swisher, 1999). Latina/o students, especially immigrants, must deal not only with racism, but acculturative stress, poverty, high unemployment, and culture-conflicts (Hovey, 2000). It is reported that this confluence of external factors not only saps the energies of Latina / o students for learning in the classroom, but predisposes them to higher rates of mental disorders such as depression and attempted suicide (Tortolero & Roberts, 2001). Dealing with family distress, discrimination in the school and community, and social isolation may result in increased gang activities as well (Baca & Koss-Chioino, 1997).

Likewise, gay and lesbian youths, especially those out of the closet, face discrimination and harassment in the schools at a high rate. They are more likely to have been involved in a fight that required medical attention (Russell, Franz, & Driscoll, 2001). Their tendency to be exposed to violence in schools is frighteningly high: a Massachusetts high school study revealed that LGB students are more likely to be confronted with a weapon in school (32.7 vs. 7.1%), and to avoid going to school because of safety concerns (25.1 vs. 5.1%). Furthermore, they were more likely to attempt suicide not because of their sexual orientation, but because their school, home, and *social* environments have proven hostile and invalidating (Russell & Joyner, 2001).

Given these brief examples, it is clear that systems forces can be powerful and influential in determining the academic outcome of students. A singular belief that people are "masters of their own fate" unfairly blames marginalized populations for their inability to achieve more in school or society. It fails to consider the operations of racism, sexism, and heterosexism in determining the outcome of school performance and achievement in other areas of life. Whether educators view the locus of responsibility as residing in the person or the system has major impact upon how they define a problem (achievement gap), the attributions made, and the strategies chosen to solve it. Poor academic performance of African Americans, for example, may be attributed to the group's inadequacies or shortcomings (person-focused), thus changing them (assimilation or acculturation) is seen as the solution. If, however, a system analysis is employed, racial discrimination and the lack of opportunities are identified as the culprits, and systemic intervention is recommended (Jones, 1997). Neither approach taken to the extreme tells the whole story. However, the values of individualism and autonomy undergird our beliefs in individual responsibility and self-reliance, making it difficult for many educators to see how their assumptions of equal access and opportunity may not apply to many devalued groups in our society. Systemic barriers to minority achievement

can be found in the following culture-bound and culturally biased forces operating in schools at all levels.

How microaggressions make their appearance in the larger educational setting can be analyzed from a broader systemic level, as we have seen in Chapter 10. Racial, gender, and sexual-orientation microaggressions can be manifested in many areas:

- Faculty, administrators, staff, and students on an interactional level may unwittingly invalidate, insult, or assail the identities of people of color, women, and LGBTs.
- Microaggressions can make their appearance in the curriculum (culturally biased or culture-bound textbooks, lectures, teaching materials, etc.) that ignore or portray marginalized groups in unflattering ways.
- Low numerical minority representation among teachers and administrators may act as a symbolic cue signaling a threat to a group's social identity.
- The campus climate may be unwelcoming, not only through the actions of individuals (harassment, racist/sexist/heterosexist jokes, etc.), but also environmentally (foods served in cafeterias, music played at school events, what and how events are celebrated, how classrooms or buildings are decorated, etc.).
- Teaching and learning styles may clash with one another because of differences in how groups learn.
- The types of support services offered by the school may come from a primarily White European perspective that may be antagonistic to the life values and experiences of certain groups (student personnel services, counseling and guidance services, etc.).
- The programs, policies, and practices may be oppressive and unfair to many marginalized groups and serve to oppress rather than liberate.

MICROAGGRESSIONS AND DIFFICULT DIALOGUES ON RACE IN THE CLASSROOM

One of the most important educational forums in understanding how *microaggressions* affect learning is in the classroom, where students spend a large portion of their time. Some have made a distinction between schooling and education (Cokley, 2006; Shujaa, 2003), in which the former is the process and activities of going to and being in school while the latter is the by-product

of the experience. To people of color, it is believed that schooling can either serve the interests of the group or betray it. These scholars have observed that the educational curriculum has become racialized (Sue, 2003) and that schooling can often be used as a tool to perpetuate and maintain the prevailing power arrangements and structures, whereas education is a means of transmitting eurocentric values, beliefs, customs, traditions, language, and arts/crafts of the dominant society (Ford, Moore, & Whiting, 2006; Shujaa, 2003). The ultimate result is the (mis)education of students of color, in which education becomes a form of "domestication" (Cokley, 2006). These statements have considerable support when one realizes the many inaccuracies taught in our curriculum and imposed upon students of color as well as their White classmates: Columbus discovered America, the internment of Japanese Americans was necessary for national security, and the enslavement of Black people was justified because "living under unnatural conditions of freedom" made them prone to anxiety.

Earlier, we indicated that power is in a group's ability to define reality and that schooling/education is a major socialization portal (Sue, 2003). Through omission, fabrication, distortion, or selective emphasis, the history and contributions of White Western civilizations are reinforced and elevated to superior status and imposed upon all students. The result is perpetuation of myths and inaccuracies about persons of color. Microaggressions are reflections of a worldview of superiority-inferiority, normality-abnormality, and desirable-undesirable ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. If we address the issue of race and racism, schooling and education may unintentionally reflect racial biases and oppress students of color while elevating the status of their White classmates and White teachers. When left unchallenged, they reinforce the attitudes, beliefs, and Eurocentric knowledge of Whites, while denigrating, demeaning, and invalidating those of students of color. When challenged, however, they can lead to difficult dialogues on race and represent a clash of racial realities. Many educators believe that classroom dialogues on race may represent a major tool in combating racism and helping to make racial microaggressions visible (Blum, 1998; Bolgatz, 2005; Sue & Constantine, 2007; Watt, 2007; Willow, 2008; Young, 2004; Young & Davis-Russell, 2002). We turn our attention now to analyzing the meaning and significance of difficult dialogues on race, but it is important to note that dialogues on gender and sexual orientation may share very similar manifestations and dynamics.

RACIAL DIALOGUES IN THE CLASSROOM

The increasing diversity in the United States is perhaps reflected most in our classrooms, where students of all colors represent a microcosm of race relations in our society. The increased interracial interactions often means greater opportunities for microaggressions to occur between students of color and their White classmates, between professors and their students, and in exposure to biased curricular topics and orientations. In a revealing study (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009), researchers found that these interactions often polarized students and teachers rather than contribute to mutual respect and understanding about race and race relations.

Many educators believe that effectively facilitating difficult dialogues on race in the classroom represents a golden opportunity to reduce and dispel prejudice and stereotypes, bridge ethnic divides, decrease mistrust and misunderstandings, increase empathy and compassion for others, and promote goodwill and understanding (President's Initiative on Race, 1998; Willow, 2008; Young, 2004). Unfortunately, racial dialogues in classrooms have frequently produced directly the opposite effect. They have resulted in disastrous consequences such as hardening of biases and prejudices; evoking strong feelings of anger, hostility, and rage; increasing misunderstanding; and blocking learning opportunities (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009; Sue, Rivera, et al., 2009). Yet, skillfully handled by enlightened teachers, difficult dialogues on race can prove to be an opportunity for growth, improved communication, and learning (Young, 2003; Sanchez-Hudes, & Jones, 2005).

Given the potential educational importance of being able to effectively facilitate difficult dialogues on race, the following questions may be imperative for educators to address: (1) What triggers (causes) a difficult dialogue on race? (2) Why is it so difficult for us to honestly dialogue about race, gender, and sexual orientation? (3) What makes a dialogue on race difficult? (4) Why do students and teachers alike become so guarded and uncomfortable when racial topics are raised in and outside of the classroom? (5) How can educators learn to become comfortable when addressing race issues, and what effective strategies can be used to facilitate a difficult dialogue?

Microaggressive Triggers to Difficult Racial Dialogues

Studies seem to suggest strongly that many difficult dialogues on race are caused by racial microaggressions that make their appearance in the classroom

(Solorzano et al., 2000; Sue, Lin, et al., 2009). In many cases they are delivered by White students and professors, either through a comment, tone of voice, nonverbals, insinuations, or the content of the course (curriculum). The microaggressions are found offensive by students of color, who may directly or indirectly confront perpetrators who attempt to avoid the topic and/or react defensively because they feel falsely accused of racism. While difficult racial dialogues can be triggered by other causes, it seems that racial microaggressions are the most common and prevalent instigator. Some of the most common racial microaggressions identified in the classroom are consistent with the thematic ones found in other formulations and studies in general (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, & Torino, 2008; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007). Examples in classroom situations for four of them—"ascription of intelligence," "alien in one's own land," "denial of racial reality," and "assumption of criminality"—are given below. The following student quotes are taken from Sue, Lin, et al. (2009).

1. *Ascription of intelligence*—The following was reported by a Black student about a classroom incident where a fellow classmate asked her a question. She relates the following:

"I started to explain, and the White girl said, 'Well, what she means is'-and she tried to talk for me. That I don't know what I'm talking about. I can't even articulate my own, my own idea. And I had to tell her, I can speak for myself, I can articulate my idea better than you can, you know? And only-I could not believe that she tried to speak for me." (p. 186).

The Black student was outraged and insulted because the White student assumed she was incapable of expressing her own ideas and wanted to do it for her.

2. *Alien in one's own land*—Although he did not show it, one Asian American male expressed controlled rage at another White female student because she assumed he could not speak or understand English well (perpetual foreigner association).

"But she looked at me and spoke extra slow, like to explain what the professor had just said. And I was kind of like, okay. So when I spoke and I spoke in regular speech, she was kind of shocked . . . um, like wondering if I actually speak English."

3. *Denial of racial reality*—The following classroom incidents were reported to happen continually and would often trigger a difficult dialogue.

As in our opening case example, the student of color's racial reality is negated or invalidated:

"... [They] keep rejecting whatever you say in class, it doesn't matter what you say, [they'd] disagree. They'll say [racial related matter] it's either irrelevant, it's not clear enough, um, I don't understand what you're saying, stuff like that..."

Many students reported how when bringing up topics of race or culture, they would be met with responses from White classmates like *"not everything is racial, you know"* or nonverbals (rolling of the eyeballs) that *"scream at you, here we go again."* Another informant states, *"When I share personal experiences of discrimination in class, they always want to find another reason for the behavior"* (p. 186).

4. *Assumption of criminality*-This was a common experience for African Americans students who witnessed White classmates not sitting next to them, or becoming extra vigilant with their personal belongings when they approached. They felt that White students communicated a fear of them, or that they might steal: *"They don't trust us, we're criminals, dope pushers and thieves"* (p. 186). Another Black student reported becoming angry at comments from White classmates after watching a counseling session with a Black client.

"Some of the students started to comment automatically on... like, well, what if he gets violent? Like, it just was kind of like entertained by the professor, like, oh, well, you need to make sure where you sit is close to an exit, and you gotta do this and you gotta do that. But I thought to a larger picture as to like this man, he was older and he just was resistant, but he wasn't violent." (p. 186)

Impediments to Honest Racial Dialogues

If racial dialogues are often caused by microaggressions, it becomes important to understand why it is so difficult to clarify communications between the participants. As we indicated earlier, students of color find such communications offensive. Yet, it would be beneficial to understand how White students perceive, interpret, and react when difficult dialogues on race present themselves. Why do many White students find it so difficult to honestly dialogue on racial topics? What are the barriers that get in their way? What are they afraid of? Likewise, these questions can also be addressed to White teachers as well. Understanding the dynamics of racial dialogues can have many educational benefits: (1) it will aid educators to recognize and anticipate their appearance

in classrooms and other settings; (2) recognition of the intense emotions of White students may allow educators a deeper understanding of affective resistances; and (3) knowledge and understanding of difficult dialogues on race may lead to the development of intervention strategies that prove successful and unsuccessful in overcoming resistances, thus making such experiences a learning opportunity for all students (Sue, Torino, et al., 2009).

In a series of studies exploring the perspective of both White students and White educators on why difficult dialogues on race are difficult, it was found that both students and teachers shared similar fears (Sue, Rivera, et al., 2009; Sue, Torino, et al., 2009). We first discuss difficult racial dialogues from the perspective of White students and then from that of White teachers.

White Students' Perspectives

It has been hypothesized that many Whites find dialogues on race difficult for four primary reasons: (1) fear of being perceived as racist, (2) fear of realizing one's racism, (3) fear of confronting White privilege, and (4) fear of taking actions to end racism (Sue & Constantine, 2007; Watt, 2007; Willow, 2008). While they may unintentionally deliver a microaggression during an interracial encounter, the challenge from the target group evokes anxiety and dread in Whites who attempt to deny the implications for their actions. Unwittingly, the form of the denial may result in additional microaggressions (denial of individual racism or denial of the racial reality of targets). In one study designed to investigate these conclusions, it was found that White students identified several reasons about why racial dialogues were difficult for them (Sue & Constantine, 2007; Sue, Rivera, et al., 2009).

Fear of Appearing Racist

One of the most dominant fears expressed by White students was that whatever they said or did in a racial dialogue might give people the mistaken impression that they were racist. The fear was quite overwhelming and hindered their abilities to participate in an honest and authentic manner, made them tentative in their responses, and more often than not they either remained silent or took a very passive approach to the topic. In classroom interactions they would refuse to participate or make only superficial observations. Some quotes from students illustrate their concerns and feelings: *"... if I talk about race, I'm going to reveal my racism," "... fear of revealing my own biases,"* and *"... if I express any confusion or if I have any questions, they're sometimes construed*

as close-mindedness or an ignorance on my part." . . . "I wanted to say something, but I also felt very nervous. When I did finally speak, my thoughts weren't clear and I am sure difficult to follow" (Sue, Rivera, et al., 2009). Ironically, rather than making themselves appear less biased, their behaviors were read by students of color as indicating attempts to conceal racist attitudes and beliefs. It has been conjectured that the fear of appearing racist is only a superficial level of defense by Whites because it really masks a deeper fear-fear of actually being racist (Sue & Constantine, 2007). This conclusion seems supported by another dominant concern of White students.

Denial of Whiteness and White Privilege

White students expressed resentment toward being blamed for racism and the association of Whiteness with privilege, power, and advantage. They appeared to react defensively to being called "White" and seemed aware of the negative associations with light skin color. Some even disavowed being White by claiming to identify with only an ethnic group: "I'm not White, I'm German." "I'm not White, I'm Irish Catholic." One White female student expressed her strong objections to such associations: "*White people this and White people that, because honestly, I don't really identify with-I definitely feel like I need to almost justify myself wizen those things come up . . . societal problems are out of my hand s.*" Defensiveness seemed central to their reactions.

White students had considerable difficulty entertaining the notion that their light skin color automatically advantaged them in this society and that darker skin color disadvantaged others. They would often ward off such suggestions with statements like, "Don't blame me, my parents didn't own slaves." "Don't blame me; I didn't take land from Native Americans." It was difficult for many White students to realize that despite not being the primary culprits in perpetrating these wrongs, they still benefited from the historical injustices and structural arrangements of their ancestors. The anger, resentment, denial, and guilt expressed by White students made them want to avoid conversations on race. Again, a deeper exploration of these resistances revealed an additional level of discomfort many had difficulty facing: If indeed they benefitted from White privilege, then two challenges confront them. First, they must now question the myth of meritocracy and the likelihood that their lot in life was attained not just through their own efforts, but by a biased system that favored them. Second, if one accepts the notion of "unfair advantage" due to White privilege, what implications does it have for one's life and what will Whites do about it?

Color Blindness

As we have indicated earlier, the issue of color blindness is a double-edged sword (Purdie-Vaughns, Davis, Steele, & Dittmann, 2008; Thomas & Plant, 2008). In an attempt to appear unbiased, many Whites have adopted the stance that the color of one's skin is unimportant in American society. To see and acknowledge race or color is to potentially appear prejudiced and bigoted. Yet, many people of color find such a philosophy not only disingenuous, but an indicator of bias on the part of the person making such a claim. In classroom situations, White students may find topics on race difficult and uncomfortable because it may run counter to their beliefs that "we are all God's children," "we are all the same under the skin," and "we are all human beings or Americans." Professing color blindness has several perceived advantages for White students. First, it allows them not to acknowledge race and racial differences in classroom dialogues. Second, they can maintain the illusion that they are unbiased and do not discriminate against others. Third, if race is unimportant, then everyone has equal access and opportunity.

No Right to Dialogue on Race

Many students felt they had not experienced racism as students of color did, and thus had no right or credibility to talk about race matters. When asked about their reluctance to engage in racial conversations, many indicated that speaking to racism requires having been a victim. Others indicated they had limited contact with people of color, their knowledge was limited, and they felt uncomfortable speaking on such a topic. They indicated they did not possess a "valid voice" on the topic and were reluctant to participate: ". . . *if you haven't experienced racism, you know, as a victim, then you don't necessarily have a right to talk about race.*" Again, this rationale seemed to be protective rather than real. It allows students to avoid exploring their own thoughts and reactions related to race issues, and to deceive themselves into believing that they play no role in the creation and maintenance of racism.

These four barriers to difficult dialogues on race were often accompanied by intense and extreme debilitating emotions that interfered with students' ability to attend, participate, and be open about their thoughts and feelings. An overwhelming number reported feeling anxious and intimidated about classroom conversations on race. They described fear and dread when racial topics were raised: "*I tried hard to say something thoughtful and it's hard for me to say, and my heart was pounding when I said it.*" Another reaction was that of helplessness. This feeling very much related to an inability to understand

or cope with feelings evoked from a classroom dialogue. A White student describes her reaction: *"And then it sort of turned into, you know, a lot of the Students of Color kind of venting their frustrations, which is, you know, completely understandable, but at the same time, I felt so helpless, like, I really don't know what to do right now."* These students were likely to acknowledge the existence of racial injustice, but felt at a loss of how to speak to it. Consistent with the fear of appearing racist, some students felt misunderstood when they made comments. When addressing the topic of "antisocial behavior and violence," one White student recalls listing risk factors and mentioned the Black community. She reports being confronted by Black students and unfairly accused of stereotyping. The incident was so upsetting that she failed to participate during the rest of the class.

White Teachers' Perspectives

Teachers and educators are in a unique position to help students understand racial issues, especially when such interactions arise in the classroom (Young, 2004). When difficult racial dialogues occur in the classroom, they are no longer purely abstract intellectual constructs, but their appearances are concrete and real for students and teachers alike (Bell, 2003). They represent a microcosm of race relation difficulties in our society. In the hands of a skilled facilitator, difficult dialogues on race can represent a potential learning opportunity for personal growth and understanding, improved communication, and racial harmony (Young & Davis-Russell, 2002). Because the majority of teachers in the United States are predominantly White, their roles are crucial in facilitating successful racial dialogues in the classroom. Unfortunately, studies seem to suggest that White educators are often (1) ill-prepared to recognize and understand the dynamics of racial microaggressions as causes to difficult dialogues, (2) confused as to what constitutes a difficult dialogue, and (3) at a loss of how to intervene when they occur (Sue, Torino, et al., 2009; Sue, Rivera, et al., 2009).

Teacher Fears

One of the greatest fears and concerns for teachers around race dialogues is loss of classroom control and the emotionally charged nature of the interactions. The loss of control is often related to the feeling of helplessness, inability to determine the nature of the conflict, and the lack of knowledge of how best to properly intervene (Sue, Torino, et al., 2009). These three are compounded

by an acknowledgment by teachers about their own personal limitations and intense anxieties, similar to those expressed by White students (fear of appearing racist, fear of realizing their biases, and resistance to recognizing their own prejudices). In addition, they noted the following concerns.

1. *Inability to recognize racial microaggressions and uncertainty and confusion about the characteristics of a difficult dialogue.* When a difficult racial dialogue is occurring, many White teachers admit to being mystified and uncertain about the interactional dynamics. They know something is amiss, that tension has increased in the classroom, and that students of color and White students have taken a confrontational stance. They are at a loss to explain the dynamics and often misdiagnose the problem.

2. *Trouble understanding and dealing with intense student emotions and their own.* In many respects, White teachers overidentify with the feelings of White students because many of the emotions expressed are similar to the ones they experience. Fear, anxiety, anger, defensiveness, guilt, and helplessness can occur quickly and in a "garbled fashion" that interferes with understanding and teaching. The teacher may become overwhelmed and flooded with feelings that constrict their perceptions and ability to respond appropriately. The teacher may try to dilute, diminish, or "cut off the dialogue" for fear that it will turn into a physical fight among students.

3. *Fear of losing classroom control.* Teachers are expected to manage classroom interactions, to maintain a conducive learning environment, and to make sure proper respect exists among all students. Difficult dialogues on race can produce intense confrontations between students and result in intense hostility. Several teachers spoke about being paralyzed when students became so upset that they leave the room, or burst into tears.

4. *Deep sense of personal failure and inadequacy.* Avoidance by teachers of race topics is often motivated by past experiences of failure and personal questioning about one's teaching competencies. The sense of disappointment in themselves occurred because of their unsuccessful attempts to facilitate racial dialogues.

5. *Feeling of incompetence and lack of knowledge and skills to effectively intervene.* A very common admission from teachers was that of not possessing the experience, knowledge, or teaching strategies to facilitate a difficult dialogue on race. In coping with race topics, they admitted to ignoring it in class, making sure it was discussed only on a cognitive level, or playing a passive role in class and "letting students take over."

Disturbingly, these overall findings indicate that White educators are no more immune to having difficulties with racial dialogues than their White students. In one study, it was found that even the most experienced teachers were ill-prepared to productively and successfully facilitate racial discussions and interactions (Sue, Torino, et al., 2009). It is important to note that both students of color and White students were unanimous in attributing a successful or failed facilitation to the cultural awareness, knowledge, and skills of the teacher (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009; Sue, Rivera, et al., 2009).

The Way Forward

What Must Educators Do to Become Effective Facilitators of Difficult Dialogues on Race?: Overcoming Microaggressions

If the above conclusions are correct, then it bodes ill for race education in the United States unless educators seriously explore their own biases and prejudices, confront their own fears and apprehensions, and actively develop the awareness, knowledge, and skills to successfully facilitate difficult racial dialogues. A number of personal/professional developmental issues and strategies have been identified as potentially helpful (Bell, 2003; Bolgatz, 2005; Sue, Lin, et al., 2009; Sue, Rivera, et al., 2009; Sue, Torino, et al., 2009; Watt, 2007; Willow, 2008; Winter, 1977; Young, 2004).

1. Possess a Working Definition and Understanding of Racial Microaggressions and Difficult Dialogues

When critical consciousness and awareness of race issues, racial microaggressions, and racial dialogues are absent, it leads to disorientation, confusion, and bafflement that prevent problem definition and intervention. Thus it is imperative that educators possess a working definition and enlightened understanding of the cases, manifestation, and dynamics of racial microaggressions and difficult dialogues on race. As we have already spent considerable time on the former, I briefly supply one on the latter. Note, however, that the following definition of difficult dialogues is complex and must be understood in terms of lived reality to have true meaning.

Broadly defined, difficult dialogues on race represent potentially threatening conversations or interactions between members of different racial or ethnic

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groups when they (a) involve an unequal status relationship of power and privilege, (b) highlight major differences in worldviews, personalities, and perspectives, (c) are challenged publicly, (d) are found to be offensive to others, (e) may reveal biases and prejudices, and (f) trigger intense emotional responses (Sue & Constantine, 2007; Young, 2003). Any individual or group engaged in a difficult dialogue may feel at risk for potentially disclosing intimate thoughts, beliefs or feelings related to the topic of race. (Sue, Lin, et al., 2009, p. 184)

2. Understanding Self as a Racial/Cultural Being by Making the "Invisible, Visible"

Being an effective facilitator cannot occur unless the person is aware of her or his own values, biases, and assumptions about human behavior. Questions that he or she must constantly work on exploring include: What does it mean to be White, Black/African American, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Latino/Hispanic American, or Native American?

3. Intellectually Acknowledge One's Own Cultural Conditioning and Biases

On an intellectual/cognitive level, teachers must be able to acknowledge and accept the fact that they are products of the cultural conditioning of this society and, as such, they have inherited the biases, fears, and stereotypes of their ancestors.

This honest acknowledgment does several things: (1) it frees the teacher from the constant guardedness and vigilance exercised in denying their own racism, sexism, and other biases; (2) the teacher can use it to model truthfulness, openness, and honesty to students on conversations about race and racism; (3) it can communicate courage in making the teacher vulnerable by taking a risk to share with students their own biases, limitations, and attempts to deal with racism; and (4) it may encourage other students to approach the topic with honesty, because their own teacher is equally "flawed."

4. Emotional Comfort in Dealing with Race and Racism

On an emotional level, it is to the advantage of teachers if they are comfortable in discussing issues of race and racism, and/or being open, honest, and vulnerable to exploring their own biases and those of students. If students sense teachers are uncomfortable, it will only add fuel to their own discomfort and defenses. Attaining comfort means practice outside of the classroom, lived experience in interacting with people or groups

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different from the teacher. It requires experience in dialoguing with people who differ from the teacher in terms of race, culture, and ethnicity. It ultimately means the teacher must be proactive in placing himself or herself in "uncomfortable" and new situations.

5. Understanding and Making Sense of One's Own Emotions

Because very few teachers can have experiences with all groups who differ from them in worldviews, they will always feel discomfort and confusion when different diversity/multicultural issues arise. These feelings are natural and should not be avoided; rather making sense of them is important. Being able to monitor them and infer meaning to feelings and emotional reactions and those of students are important in facilitating dialogues. It has been found that emotive responses often serve as "emotional roadblocks" to having a successful difficult dialogue. Feelings have diagnostic significance. For example, these feelings often have hidden meanings:

- I FEEL GUILTY. "I could be doing more."
- I FEEL ANGRY. "I don't like to feel I'm wrong."
- I FEEL DEFENSIVE. "Why blame me, I do enough already!"
- I FEEL TURNED OFF. "I have other priorities in life."
- I FEEL HELPLESS. "The problem is too big . . . what can I do?"
- I FEEL AFRAID. "I'm going to lose something" or "I don't know what will happen."

Unless a teacher gets beyond his or her own feeling level or that of students, blockages in learning will occur. If a teacher experiences these feelings, it helps to acknowledge them even when they do not make immediate sense. Teaching and encouraging students to do so as well will lessen their detrimental impact.

6. Control the Process and Not the Content

When a heated dialogue occurs on race, the duel between students is nearly always at the content level. When referring to dreams, Freud took the stance that the manifest content (conscious level) is not the "real" or latent content of the unconscious. Some common statements when racism is discussed, expressed by both White students and students of color, are:

- "So what, we women are oppressed too!"
- "My family didn't own slaves. I had nothing to do with the incarceration of Japanese Americans or the taking away of lands from Native Americans."

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- "Excuse me, sir, but prejudice and oppression were and are part of every society in the world ad infinitum, not just the United States."
- "We Italians (Irish; Polish; Koreans) experienced severe discrimination when we arrived here. Did my family harp on the prejudice? We excelled despite the prejudice. Why? Because the basic founding principles of this country made it possible!"
- "I resent you calling me White. You are equally guilty of stereotyping. We are all human beings and we are all unique."

These emotive reactions are defensive maneuvers used to avoid feelings of guilt and blame. Unmask the difficult dialogue by (1) acknowledging the accuracy of statements (when appropriate), (2) intervening in the process rather than the content, (3) helping students see the difference between intention and impact, and (4) moving to the feeling tone level of the communication.

While these statements are to the greatest extent "true," they can hinder a successful dialogue by covering up the real dialogue. By agreeing with the statement, it no longer becomes the distraction and allows the facilitator to focus on the real issues, feelings, and conflicts in worldview. Avoid being "sucked into the dialogue" by taking sides in the debate of content. Rather intervene in the process by directing students to examine their own reactions and feelings. Encourage them to explore how their feelings may be saying something about them.

The blame game creates monologues. Help students differentiate between their intention and the impact. When a White female student says "So what, we women are oppressed as well!" Help them distinguish between intention and impact. Refocus the dialogue to feelings. "I wonder if you can tell me how and what you are feeling." Teacher: "John (Black student) has just agreed with you that women are an oppressed group. Does that make you feel better? (Usually the student says "no".) "No, I wonder why not?" (Try to help the student to explore why the feelings are still there. If there is continued difficulty, enlist speculation from the whole class. The last option is that you, the teacher, make the observation or interpretation.)

7. Do Not Be Passive or Allow the Dialogue to Be Brewed Over in Silence

When a difficult dialogue occurs and an impasse seems to have been reached, do not allow it to be brewed over in silence. The facilitator has

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three options: (1) tell the class that you want the group to take it up at the next meeting, after everyone has had time to process their thoughts and feelings; (2) personally intervene by using interpersonal recall, microtraining, or any number of relationship models that attempt to have students listen, observe, and reflect or paraphrase back to one another; or (3) enlist the aid of the class members. This latter technique is very useful because it actively involves other members of the class by asking: "What do you see happening between John and Mary?"

8. Express Your Appreciation to the Participating Students

It is important to recognize, validate, and express appreciation to students for their courage, openness, and willingness to risk participating in a difficult dialogue. This strategy should be employed throughout the class.

- "Mary, I know this has been a very emotional experience for you, but I value your courage in sharing with the group your personal thoughts and feelings. I hope I can be equally brave when topics of sexism or homophobia are brought up in this class."
- "As a class, we have just experienced a difficult dialogue. I admire you all for not 'running away' but facing it squarely. I hope you all will continue to feel free about bringing up these topics. Real courage is being honest and risking offending others when the situation is not safe. Today, that is what I saw happen with several of you and for that, the class should be grateful."

These suggestions for dealing with racial microaggressions in the classroom and for successful facilitation of difficult dialogues on race may be equally applicable to conversations on gender, sexual orientation, and other difficult topics. Education holds one of the primary keys to combating and overcoming the harm delivered to people of color, women, LGBTs, and other marginalized groups. Unfortunately, few teachers or educators are sufficiently trained in antiracism, antisexism, and antiheterosexism strategies. If our society is to become truly inclusive and allow for equal access and opportunity, then our educational systems must reflect a multicultural philosophy and stance that is operationalized into the policies and practices of schools, the curriculum, teaching/learning styles, and in the teachers who educate our children.

