

Racial Microaggressions and Difficult Dialogues on Race in the Classroom

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A qualitative study supports the observation that difficult dialogues on race and racism are often triggered by racial microaggressions that make their appearance in classroom encounters or educational activities and materials. Difficult dialogues are filled with strong powerful emotions that may prove problematic to both students and teachers. When poorly handled by teachers, difficult dialogues can assail the personal integrity of students of color while reinforcing biased worldviews of White students. The success or failure of facilitating difficult dialogues on race is intimately linked to the characteristics and actions of instructors and their ability to recognize racial microaggressions. Implications regarding specific education and training recommendations are presented.

Keywords: racial microaggressions, difficult dialogues, training, aversive racism, multicultural education

Racial microaggressions have been defined as “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” (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007, p. 273). From the perspective of people of color, microaggressions are tinged with explicit and implicit racial snubs, put-downs, or a pattern of disrespect. Being ignored by a sales clerk, told by an employer that “the most qualified person should get the job,” told “I don’t see color,” or even complimented for speaking “good English” may all constitute racial microaggressions because they communicate denigrating hidden messages: “You are not important enough to be noticed”; “People of color are less qualified”; “I don’t notice color, so I can’t be racist”; and “You are not a true American but a foreigner.”

Although any group can potentially be guilty of delivering racial microaggressions, the most painful and harmful ones are likely to occur between those who hold power and those who are most disempowered (Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, & Torino, 2008). Some have argued that racial microaggressions are reflections of an unconscious worldview of White supremacy, superiority–inferiority, and inclusion–exclusion views that are imposed on racial and ethnic minorities (Bell, 2002; Rowe, 1990; Sue, Nadal, et al., 2008). People of color report that their lives are filled with incidents of racial microaggressions and that their well-intentioned White brothers and sisters are generally unaware that they have committed an offensive racial act (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). More important, once these are brought to their attention, Whites deny that they intended to offend, believe the person of color raising the

issue is “oversensitive,” “paranoid,” or has simply misinterpreted the situation. Even when Whites entertain the notion that they unintentionally offended, they are likely to trivialize the slights as banal and “small things” (Rowe, 1990; Sue & Constantine, 2007).

Studies reveal, however, that racial microaggressions, while seemingly trivial in nature, have major consequences for persons of color: (a) They assail the mental health of recipients (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008); (b) create a hostile and invalidating campus climate (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000); (c) perpetuate stereotype threat (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002); (d) create physical health problems (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999); and (e) lower work productivity and problem-solving abilities (Dovidio, 2001; Salvatore & Shelton, 2007). Far from being benign slights, racial microaggressions have major detrimental consequences for people of color.

A point less often explored is the detrimental consequences to Whites who unknowingly engage in offensive racial actions or statements but remain oblivious to their meaning and impact. The invisible nature of racial microaggressions to Whites, for example, lowers empathic ability, dims perceptual awareness, maintains false illusions, and lessens compassion for others (Spanierman, Armstrong, Poteat, & Beer, 2006). In other words, lack of awareness allows many Whites to live in a world of false deception about the nature and operation of racism (Bell, 2002; Sue, 2005).

It has been hypothesized that racial microaggressions often trigger difficult dialogues on race in the classroom because they are found to be offensive to students of color who directly or indirectly confront perpetrators who prefer to avoid the topic or feel falsely accused of racism (Sue & Constantine, 2007). As a result, the dialogues or interactions become emotionally charged, producing misunderstandings, conflicts, and hostility between the parties (Watt, 2007). Unfortunately, teachers and human relations specialists seem ill prepared to deal with the potential, explosive nature of racial interactions; they do not recognize racial microaggressions when they occur, feel uncomfortable with race-related topics, and lack the skills needed to facilitate difficult dialogues on race (Young, 2003).

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Yet the President's Initiative on Race (1998) explicitly stated that the first steps to mutual respect and understanding must begin with educators working effectively to facilitate constructive dialogues and establish opportunities to bridge racial and ethnic divides. Educators and social scientists believe that successful racial dialogues are necessary to reduce prejudice, increase compassion, dispel stereotypes, and promote mutual understanding and goodwill (Willow, 2008; Young, 2003). Seen from this perspective, interracial dialogue can serve as an educational tool to lessen intergroup hostilities and conflict and to foster racial harmony. Yet topics on race and racism often evoke unpleasant emotional "hot buttons" that lead many to avoid, ignore, or dismiss them as taboo topics (Watt, 2007).

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

As classrooms become increasingly diverse, interracial interactions increase opportunities for racial microaggressions and difficult dialogues on race. These interactions have often polarized students and teachers rather than clarified and increased mutual respect and understanding about race and race relations. Poorly handled by teachers, such dialogues may result in disastrous consequences such as anger, hostility, silence, complaints, misunderstandings, and blockages of the learning process; skillfully handled, they present an opportunity for growth, improved communication, and learning (Sanchez-Hucles, & Jones, 2005; Young, 2003).

Most studies on difficult dialogues on race focus on the fears and biases of White students while neglecting the perspective of students of color (Sue & Constantine, 2007). The present study is important in understanding how students of color perceive the relationship between racial microaggressions and difficult dialogues. Because 86% of teachers are White (U.S. Department of Education, 2007), they often do not understand the worldview of racial and ethnic minorities and may be unaware of how racial microaggressions may trigger difficult dialogues in the classroom. This study has four major goals: (a) identify and classify microaggressions and the various forms they take in the classroom from the perspective of students of color; (b) explore how racial microaggressions evoke and often form the basis for a difficult dialogue; (c) identify strategies that allow teachers to successfully facilitate a difficult dialogue; and (d) extract basic principles that may guide the education and training of teachers in their ability to use difficult dialogues as an opportunity for learning and understanding of different racial worldviews.

Method

The present study utilized a qualitative method to explore people of color's experiences of difficult dialogues on race in the classroom. Focus groups were conducted to capture the complexity

of the participants' experiences by allowing the social context to facilitate the development of meaning (Krueger, 1998). In this case, it was hoped that the interactions between the volunteers would serve to stimulate a wider array of incidents than would individual interviews. Furthermore, it has been found that focus groups are effective means of obtaining in-depth information about a relatively unexplored concept (Krueger, 1994; Seal, Bogart, & Ehrhardt, 1998) and are used successfully to explore racial perceptions on a number of topics (Saint-Germain, Bassford, & Montano, 1993; Solórzano et al., 2000), particularly racial microaggressions (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007; Sue, Capodilupo & Holder, 2008; Sue, Nadal, et al. 2008). For the current investigation, we were interested in understanding student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions and events related to experiencing difficult dialogues on race in the classroom.

Participants

The ideal number for maximizing focus group analyses ranges from 4 to 12 people (Kress & Shoffner, 2007; Seal et al., 1998). Informants in our study were all students at Teachers College, Columbia University, self-identified as a person of color—8 Blacks (African Americans, Trinidadian, Bermudian, Caribbean, or Jamaican), 3 Asians or Asian Americans (Korean, Taiwanese, or Chinese), 2 Latinos (Puerto-Rican/Peruvian or Dominican) and 1 biracial (Indian/German) individual—and claimed to have experienced a difficult dialogue in the classroom. Totaling 14 participants, the two focus groups consisted of 3 men and 11 women, with ages ranging from 23 to 47 years. Eleven of the participants were students with at least a bachelor's degree, and 3 were working professionals. Most of the participants preferred English as the primary language of communication and ranged from having spent 2 years to their entire lives in the United States.

Researchers

The research team for the study consisted of 5 doctoral students and 4 master's students in counseling psychology taking a graduate research seminar in racism and antiracism taught by Derald Wing Sue at Teachers College, Columbia University. Specifically, the team consisted of 4 African Americans, 3 Asian Americans (including Derald Wing Sue), 1 Latino, and 2 White Americans. The instructor (Derald Wing Sue) has nearly 40 years of research related to topics of diversity, multiculturalism, racism, and antiracism. Given the advanced graduate status of the research team, cognitive and experiential understanding of racism by the participants was considered an asset that allowed for informed formulation of the study and enhanced awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity to incidents of difficult dialogues experienced by the participants.

Because qualitative research makes the researcher the central means of data collection, identification of personal values, assumptions, and biases are required at the initial onset of the study (Fassinger, 2005; Hill et al., 2005). Making known explicit attitudes and beliefs held by researchers has been shown to be an effective safeguard in controlling potential biases in the research setting, methodology, analysis, and interpretation process (Krueger, 1998; Polkinghorne, 2005). Team members believed, for example, that participants would be able to generate several ex-

amples and discuss personal experiences of difficult dialogues on race in the classroom. We also believed that racial microaggressions oftentimes precipitated incidents of such dialogues. It is also noteworthy to mention that all team members are a part of a research seminar, which might inadvertently influence their work on the project (i.e., pleasing the instructor). As a result, every effort was made to ensure the trustworthiness of the participants' voices and experiences through triangulation (Utsey, Gernat, & Hammar, 2005): (a) Considerable time was devoted to explicating personal values and beliefs of the team; (b) stress was placed on maintaining the integrity of the data as opposed to pleasing the professor; (c) the inherent dangers of "groupthink" and guarding against it was emphasized; and (d) the focus group analysis used three independent analyses (subteams, entire team, and audit) that challenged each and every major domain and core idea identified. It is acknowledged, however, that despite these safeguards, biases may still shape the way data were collected, viewed, and interpreted.

Measure

Two formal means of collecting data were used: (a) a brief demographic questionnaire aimed at obtaining basic information related to race, ethnicity, gender, age, occupation, years of residence in the United States, preferred language, and years of education; and (b) a semistructured interview protocol (available upon request of Derald Wing Sue). The protocol was developed from a review of the literature on difficult dialogues (Blum, 1998; Bolgatz, 2005; Goodman, 1995; Young, 2003) and racial microaggressions (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978; Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue, 2003; Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, et al., 2008). We wanted to allow the participants ample freedom in responding to the questions and prompts. The interviews started with general questions such as, "Can you recall a classroom situation where the issue of race was involved?" and "What makes it difficult to discuss race in the classroom?" All questions were open-ended and aimed at eliciting real-life experiences. Follow-up questions such as, "How are invalidating experiences communicated to you in the classroom?" and "How was the situation handled?" were used to obtain further details when necessary. In general, questions were intended to generate a variety of difficult dialogue examples, explore the impact they had on participants, reveal the meaning participants construed from the interaction, and examine the role of racial microaggressions in these dialogues.

Procedures

Participants were solicited throughout the local university community (campus and neighborhood) through posted flyers, word of mouth, classroom invitations, and a Website asking for volunteers. Recruitment activities provided minimal information about the nature of the study; it simply asked whether students of color had ever experienced a difficult dialogue on race in which they felt "put down," "overlooked," or "insulted," and whether they would be willing to share their experiences in a focus group. Volunteers were placed in one of two focus groups on the basis of their scheduling availability (Group 1 consisted of 2 Asians, 2 Latinos, 1 Black, and 1 biracial, while Group 2 consisted of 7 Blacks and 1 Asian). No financial compensation was offered. Each focus

group lasted for approximately 90 min and was conducted by a two-person team, the facilitator and the observer. Both the facilitator and the observer were persons of color and members of the research team. Group 1 was led by 2 Asian Americans and Group 2 by 1 Asian American and 1 Black. Because Group 2 contained mostly Black informants, we used a Black facilitator and an Asian American observer. Because the topic dealt with difficult dialogues on race, it was believed that facilitators of color would minimize any hesitancy or reluctance to disclose negative sentiment about interactions with White individuals. The role of the facilitator was to lead the discussion, while the observer noted nonverbal behaviors and group dynamics (Krueger, 1998).

Before the interview, both researchers went through a brief behavioral rehearsal related to moderating the focus group discussion and to anticipating and overcoming possible resistances to the flow of the discussion. For example, we were concerned that the focus group discussions might represent difficult dialogues themselves. We believed, however, that the focus of the task (describing microaggressions they personally experienced rather than interactions between one another) minimized any reluctance to share with others. Indeed, the observers in both groups noted that participants seemed very free to describe the incidents and supported one another by head nods, verbal agreements, and encouragements to continue. Immediately after the interview and after the focus group was dismissed, a debriefing session was held between the two researchers related to their own reactions, observations about the group, major themes that arose, climate in the room, and discussion of problematic issues.

The focus group discussions took place in an enclosed private room at Teachers College. All participants were asked to sign a consent form that included permission to audiotape the entire session. The debriefing between the two researchers was audiotaped as well. The tapes were transcribed verbatim, making sure that the identities of participants were removed. Tapes were destroyed after transcription. Transcripts were subsequently checked for accuracy by the two facilitators before they were presented to the team for qualitative analysis.

To qualitatively analyze the transcripts, a two-person subteam (facilitator and observer) performed all of the initial analysis, which consisted of identifying domains. The methodology used was a modified version of Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR), developed by Hill, Thompson, and Williams (1997), that has been proven to be useful and suitable for focus groups (Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Sue, Nadal, et al., 2008). During this phase, members independently reviewed each focus group transcript and developed an initial set of domains, which are broad or general categories. Then members came together to discuss their findings. After consensus was reached, members returned to the transcripts and independently developed core ideas (Hill et al., 2005), which corresponded to the domains. Core ideas further explicate details following each domain. During this process, team members identified corresponding transcript quotes to support the development of the core ideas. Then members met again and discussed their independent findings to consensus.

At this point, findings from the two-person subteam were presented to the entire research team to discuss the results. Team members were all required to read the entire transcripts prior to discussing and deliberating domains and core ideas. Once consen-

sus among all members was reached, the data were presented for auditing. As is outlined in the CQR methodology, (Hill et al., 2005), an auditor is required to preserve the integrity of the data. As such, Derald Wing Sue served as the auditor in this process. To minimize his potential influence, Derald Wing Sue was not involved in the analysis prior to the audit, stressed the need for the organizational task to stay true to the participants' meanings and worldviews, and followed carefully the auditing CQR guidelines. Other than identifying additional passage quotes that exemplified the core ideas, very little of the teams' work was modified.

Results

This section offers descriptions and examples of the domains and themes identified from the combined transcripts of both focus groups. Three broad domains were identified: (a) racial microaggressions as precipitators of difficult dialogues, (b) reactions to difficult dialogues, and (c) instructor strategies for facilitating difficult dialogues. It is important to note that no restrictions were placed upon describing difficult dialogues that involved educators of color, but informants focused exclusively upon White teachers.

Domain 1: Racial Microaggressions as Precipitators of Difficult Dialogues

Although participants did not use the term *racial microaggressions*, the triggers to difficult dialogues on race reflected racial microaggressive content, such as "ascription of intelligence," "alien in own land," "denial of racial reality," and "assumption of criminality" (Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). While a frequency count was not taken, it was clear from the reactions of the informants that they often experienced similar incidents (head nods of agreement, statements such as "me, too," "You said it!" and other such exclamations). More important, none of the participants ever disagreed with one another when incidents were described. More often than not, they seemed to indicate they had either witnessed or experienced similar situations.

Ascription of intelligence incidents described racial microaggressions in which White people attribute a particular degree of intelligence to students of color. One Black participant reported a classroom incident in which a fellow classmate asked her a question:

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.

Ascription of intelligence can also take an opposite twist. For example, several Asian students reported that they were often assumed to be intelligent in math and sciences and that they "study hard." One Asian female informant described how classmates in high school frequently asked her for help in math, which was her weakest subject. She felt offended by the "nerdy" stereotype but felt conflicted about letting down her classmates. Inaccurate attributions of intelligence directed toward Asian Americans may inadvertently cause stress and create pressures to succeed academically,

which could have detrimental effects on one's self-esteem, self-concept, and self-efficacy.

Alien in own land themes were upsetting to an Asian American man who described an incident that depicted his group as perpetual foreigners (an assumption that he could not speak or understand English well):

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.

Denial of racial reality incidents were reported to happen quite frequently in triggering a difficult dialogue. In this theme, racial microaggressions had the effect of rejecting, dismissing, or invalidating the student of color's racial reality. For example, 1 participant stated,

. . . [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 . . .

Another informant describes how bringing up topics of race, culture, or ethnicity in the classroom is met with statements such as "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."

Assumption of criminality was also a common theme, especially for Blacks. Black participants described situations of White classmates not sitting next to them and 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."

Consistent with these findings (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008), racial microaggressions can be manifested environmentally in other mediums such as curricular content (training tapes, readings, etc.). One participant reported getting upset when a counseling session videotape of an African American male client portrayed him as angry and hostile. This reinforced White student beliefs about the potential violent nature of Blacks, as is indicated in the following passage:

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.

Participants spent considerable time discussing how classroom material often portrayed Blacks as being violent and aggressive and thus created an "assumption of criminality" because this trait is often associated with criminals. What angered the Black student most was the implied danger. The message seemed to be that Blacks have the potential to be dangerous and that precautions must be taken, such as in sitting closer to the exit, as was advised by the professor.

In general, our participants reported that microaggressions pushed powerful buttons in them that led to either challenging the perpetrator or deciding to do nothing. Regardless of their actions, they reported tension in the classroom, discomfort among White students and often the professor, and generally an unsatisfactory resolution to any difficult dialogues that ensued.

Domain 2: Reactions to Difficult Dialogues

All focus group participants reported having powerful reactions (cognitive, behavioral and emotional) to the difficult dialogues once microaggressions occurred. In fact, many described how energy depleting such events became and how difficult it was to learn in such an invalidating classroom climate.

1. Cognitive. With respect to cognitive reactions, several participants described an internal dialogue in which they wondered whether to “speak or not to speak.” Participants often assessed how they would be evaluated and perceived by peers and professors before acting in the classroom context. They frequently thought about the level of emotional support in the classroom and whether or not they had been validated during similar situations. They were aware of potential negative consequences such as lower grades, a public disagreement with the professor, isolation by classmates, and ironically, additional microaggressions, as is illustrated by the following example:

... you kind of measure the consequences, especially if you're in a school setting, you know? So that's really the key factor there, what the consequences are going to be if you speak out and say what's really on your mind. . . of either getting, you know, a poorer grade . . .

Psychological consequences were equally powerful and involved being perceived as a source of irritation, annoyance, or “having a bone to grind with White people.” As a result, students of color would curtail expressing their true thoughts or feelings or would not persist in their observations or arguments.

“... after awhile, the teacher would be like um uh [pause] kind of showing like they were getting annoyed because I had a different point of view, so at the end, I was like, well, I don't want to piss them off, I'd rather not say...”

“... whereas I get to then be perceived as the negative naysayer, I must have issues with them, I must not like them . . .”

Consistently, participants indicated that emotional support in the classroom was a crucial factor in deciding whether to confront the racial microaggression or not:

“... [depending on] how you're going to be perceived and who's going to be there to support you . . . who wants to say something if it's just going to be like just tossed away, you know?”

“... so even if I feel like I'm not going to be supported, I might, I might say it anyway, but it certainly is easier, you know what I mean? The fact that I have that contingency there to backup what I'm saying.”

2. Behavior. Participants also reported their conflict about having to change their behavior depending on the situation. When a dialogue on race would occur, participants would immediately assess the environment and believed that they had to behave in a particular way if they wanted to be heard or accepted.

Context matters. For me, I know that if I'm in class with people and I don't want to come across as the angry Black woman . . . I'm not going to stand up and scream. I'm going to look them in the eye, I'm going to have the tone that I want, I'm going to answer your question, you know what I mean? . . . because to me, I think that um, as much as what you say, it's how you say it too . . . In my experiences, it's how messages have gotten across. I'm personally not going to scream and yell and act, you know what I mean? As if I don't have no sense 'cause then it's like that's the thing that they're focusing on and not what I'm saying.

Participants also noted that in order to ensure that their message is received the “right way” they cannot be emotional while speaking up in class. Unfortunately, many admitted to strong psychological costs at having to be “less than authentic,” and their descriptions left little doubt that their sense of integrity often suffered.

Why do you have to put on [be inauthentic]—I'm not going to say a facade because that might be poise, might be a natural reaction that you want to do, but if I get emotional about something that I want to say, that's not fair.

Interestingly, our informants were often very tuned in to non-verbal communications of their White classmates in gauging the degree of threat or receptivity to racial topics in the classroom. Behaviorally, participants also noticed that White students in the class would have various physical reactions during the difficult dialogues. Reports of White students' behaviors included eyeball rolling, shifting or slouching in chairs, doodling, turning red, avoiding eye contact or looking down, fidgeting, becoming quiet, and the most common, crying. Interestingly, crying is frequently interpreted by students of color as an inauthentic reaction and a manipulative ploy by White students to (a) pull for empathy from fellow students and be consoled, (b) avoid the difficult dialogue by deflecting the conversations, and (c) cast the student of color as a “bad guy” (Accapadi, 2007). Students of color felt that these were telltale nonverbal signs of the anxiety, resistance, and lack of honesty of White students. They were either unwilling or unable to dialogue on race and wanted the topic dropped.

3. Emotional. Our informants reported experiencing strong emotional reactions to difficult dialogues in the classroom that seemed to fall into three subcategories: (a) “incensed” when they felt their integrity being assailed (angry, frustrated, insulted, offended, annoyed, and frustrated); (b) anxious when they were concerned about personal consequences (tense, fearful, and uncomfortable); and (c) exhausted at having to constantly deal with a never ending onslaught of microaggressions (tired and drained) during a difficult dialogue. For example, 1 participant remarked,

... We get too incensed, you know? I mean, I don't think you have any room for sorrow and sympathy when it comes to issues like this [race]. I think . . . you get so worked up and so mad . . . it brings back all these memories . . .

In addition to feeling attacked or invalidated by the microaggressions, many found their pain accentuated by the defensiveness and reluctance of White students to honestly dialogue about race. As 1 student of color said, “They just don't get it!” Many expressed strong fears about negative consequences that would ensue should they pursue the dialogue. Interestingly, it appeared that

strong negative reactions were also attributed to how professors ineffectively dealt with racial dialogues.

Participants noted that these racial dialogues were “exhausting,” “sucks [them] dry,” and “unfair” having to “constantly be the one to keep on stepping up to the plate to educate people.” One participant noted,

... I also think it is very exhausting to constantly be the teacher ... to constantly stand up and preach and be singled out just based on your own life experiences ...

Domain 3: Instructor Strategies for Facilitating Difficult Dialogues

Participants were very cognizant of the strategies that helped facilitate difficult dialogues (i.e., support, validation, and comfort level of instructor) versus those that did not (i.e., ignoring, negating, and avoiding). Participants reported the following helpful strategies on the part of the professor: legitimizing the discussion on race, validating feelings of the participants in class, willingness to accept a different racial reality from students of color, comfort in addressing race and racism, and using a direct approach in managing the discussion. For example, student testimonies revealed that

... just saying, how do you feel ... [to know that] you have a right to feel this way ... [it's] just validating to know it is heard ...

... Just for me, I think having professors not get mad at what's being said, just accepting the reality of different students [is helpful] ...

Some of the unhelpful strategies reported by the participants included taking a passive approach (i.e., let the class take over the discussion), disengaging (i.e., not initiating, going with superficial responses, and dismissing the importance of the topic), becoming emotional (i.e., “get mad at what was being said [directed toward the student of color]”), or simply ignoring the dialogue (i.e., switching topics). Professors who look to students of color to be the racial or ethnic experts were often viewed as unhelpful because (a) students of color are placed in an educational role at the expense of their own growth, and (b) it often reflected the lack of awareness, knowledge, and understanding of the instructor on racial matters.

[W]e don't have that opportunity to grow and challenge ourselves because we're looked at as ethnic, we're looked at as knowing and experienced when we come in the door to a certain extent.

[O]ur professor ... doesn't really know what to do, and he completely let us take over the class and talk about what we wanted to talk about.

Participants seemed unanimous in their agreement that professors and White students are often “hung up” because of “not wanting to be perceived as racist/prejudiced.” For example,

... I'm not speaking for you ... but the whole reason why a lot of White people take the [5th], is because they don't want to be perceived as racist, as being prejudiced ...

Discussion

Our four main purposes for undertaking the study seemed to reveal important findings and implications. First, many difficult

dialogues on race, from the perspective of students of color, are linked to particular racial microaggressions in the classroom: ascription of intelligence, alien in own land, denial of racial reality, and assumption of criminality. While racial microaggressions were most often delivered verbally and nonverbally by both White students and instructors, they also made their appearance in the course content as well. Consistent with many studies, participants experienced an institutional and classroom climate of invalidation, insult, and denigration that resulted in strong disruptive emotions (e.g., anger and frustration), feelings of having their integrity attacked, and a consequent depletion of psychic energy affecting their ability to fully engage in the learning process (Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Watt, 2007).

Second, the occurrence of racial microaggressions set cognitive, behavioral, and emotional processes related to challenging the offensive incident in motion (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). If the decision to challenge was made, it inevitably initiated a difficult dialogue on race that proved uncomfortable for many White students, students of color, and even the teacher. Oftentimes, students of color felt caught in a double bind: If they questioned the meaning of the microaggression and initiated a difficult dialogue, the adverse or negative consequences were often painful. However, if they chose to do nothing, they were left with feelings of selling out their integrity (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, et al., 2007).

Considerable evidence exists suggesting that people of color can more readily identify the causes and dynamics of a difficult dialogue on race, while their White counterparts often experience confusion and disorientation in such interactions (Johnson & Longerbeam, 2007; Sue & Constantine, 2007; Watt, 2007). Regardless, however, it was reported by our informants that most White professors and students at some level sensed that something was wrong, that the issue dealt with race, and that tension and discomfort were usually present. The uneasiness encouraged White students to avoid the topic for fear of showing their ignorance or bias (Henry et al., 2007).

Third, our participants believed that whether the difficult dialogue was facilitated or hindered seemed to depend upon the racial awareness, knowledge, and skills of the instructor. When the instructor seemed comfortable with addressing race issues, validated feelings experienced by students of color, legitimized a different racial reality, and exhibited good communication and facilitation skills, difficult dialogues proved a valuable learning experience. When professors were unaware of racial dynamics, appeared uncomfortable with race conversations, or ignored or dismissed race issues, the consequences could be quite devastating to students of color. They often indicated that such an approach tended to invalidate their racial realities via additional racial microaggressions.

Finally, we believe that our findings, along with the existing literature, suggest basic principles that should guide the education and training of teachers in their ability to facilitate difficult dialogues on race (Reason, 2007; Watt, 2007; Willow, 2008; Young, 2003). If it is true that open and honest discussions of race will ultimately lead to greater understanding of race and racism, and if participating in difficult dialogues on race enhances greater racial sensitivity and increases harmonious race relations, then classrooms at all levels (kindergarten through 12 grade, higher education, and professional schools) become one of the primary settings

by which to reach our citizens. Some of these suggestions are outlined below.

1. Educators at all levels would benefit from experience and training in facilitating difficult dialogues on race. A common and recurrent theme in the focus groups was that successful and unsuccessful dialogues on race depended heavily on the racial sensitivities and skills of the teacher. It was clear that focus group members believed that most of their teachers were ineffective facilitators; most were “frozen or paralyzed” when a difficult dialogue ensued, were “obviously uncomfortable and anxious,” seemed “as confused as their students” about what was happening, and either “reinforced the perspectives of White students” at the expense of students of color or sought to end the dialogue.
2. Educators need to acknowledge that they are no more immune from inheriting the biases, fears, and anxieties about race than any other person (Johnson & Longenecker, 2007; Sue, 2005). Indeed, many of our participants mentioned that teachers seemed unaware of racial issues, what their Whiteness (if a White teacher) meant to them, and seemed “uncomfortable in their own skin.” As a result, concerted work in understanding themselves as racial and cultural beings becomes paramount to helping others in difficult dialogues (Carter et al., 2007).
3. Consistently, students of color believed that White students often read the emotive state of their professors and “followed their lead.” If they sensed the professor was uncomfortable with topics on race or preferred to deal with it as strictly an intellectual exercise, it only gave permission for them to avoid the topic. Furthermore, it often fueled their discomfort and defenses (Bell, 2002). For educators to become comfortable with discussing issues of race and racism, it is apparent that education and training needs to move beyond the intellectual and cognitive level of training (Utsey et al., 2005). Comfort in facilitating difficult dialogues on race requires a strong experiential component that cannot be simply achieved through in-service training or classroom experience. Achieving this goal necessitates “lived reality,” such that experiences outside of the classroom involve interaction and dialogue with people (a) who differ in race, culture, and ethnicity and (b) in real-life settings and situations (minority communities, public forums, integrated neighborhoods, etc.; Sue, 2003). It means that education and training must provide opportunities for true interracial interactions that often produce discomfort in educators (Bell, 2002).
4. It is obvious that special skills are required to facilitate difficult dialogues on race. Facilitation skills, as indicated by one informant, were compared to “group therapy.” While we would be unrealistic to require all educators to become group therapists, it is clear that special training and expertise in teaching has to go beyond simply book learning and lecturing. Understanding

group dynamics and group processes, knowing how to distinguish between content and process, getting students to listen and hear one another (monologues vs. true dialogues), and acknowledging and validating the many strong feelings (guilt, anger, defensiveness, anxiety, etc.) likely to arise in a difficult dialogue are all skills important in achieving a successful outcome (Willow, 2008; Young, 2003).

While we hope that these guiding suggestions are helpful, we cannot stress enough the importance of instructor honesty and openness as attributes that ultimately enhance the credibility of professors and has the secondary effect of freeing students to self-disclose and challenge their own beliefs and values (Sue & Sue, 2008). Professors comfortable with acknowledging that they are products of cultural conditioning and have inherited biases and fears about other racial groups have a positive impact on facilitating difficult dialogues on race because it (a) frees facilitators from the constant guardedness and vigilance exercised in denying racism, sexism, and other biases, (b) models truthfulness, openness, and honesty to students on conversations on race, (c) communicates courage in making oneself vulnerable by taking a risk to share with students biases, limitations, and the continuing attempt to deal with racism, and (d) may encourage other students to approach the topic with honesty, because their professor is equally “flawed” (Sue, 2003; Young, 2003).

Finally, it is important to mention the limitations of our study. First, our focus groups contained only 14 persons of color; participants were not gender or race balanced; they were selected specifically because they acknowledged having experienced difficult racial dialogues in classrooms; and they were highly educated. While we believe many of the dynamics and implications of difficult dialogues on race can be applied in a number of different settings (public schools, worksite, and other forums) and across many groups, caution must be used in interpreting and generalizing our findings. Second, the time-limited nature of the focus groups (90 min) did not allow us to sample the total universe of difficult dialogues and microaggressions. In the taxonomy by Sue, Capodilupo, et al. (2007), many more racial microaggressive themes were identified, and other difficult dialogues may not be fully represented in the focus group discussions. Third, the interactive and free-ranging nature of focus group processes did not allow an analysis of how many members actually shared specific aspects of the domains and themes identified. Yet when incidents of difficult dialogues were described by particular individuals, none of the other participants ever expressed any disagreement. In fact, their nonverbals (i.e., nodding of the head and extreme attentiveness) seemed to express shared consensus. Last, our participants did not address or present examples when the professor was a person of color. Thus our findings apply primarily to White faculty. We believe that the dynamics for both White students and students of color would be quite different were their instructors persons of color. Future studies might want to address how the race of the instructor might affect difficult dialogues on race.

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