

# Anatomy of Racial Micro-Aggressions

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## ABSTRACT

*Racial micro-aggressions inevitably occur in on-going groups. Rather than shun these harmful attacks, group leaders respond to opportunities for the group to examine and dismantle the racial myths and beliefs that lead to the violations. This article explains how micro-aggressions are unwittingly committed. Using clinical vignettes, the author illustrates non-verbal and verbal racial micro-aggressions that occurred in a mixed race group. Information from the leader's countertransference and knowledge of racial dynamics are applied to re-examine the vignettes through a race-critical lens. The author recommends how group leaders can expand their skills and confidence to address racial micro-aggressions as learning and healing opportunities when they occur within groups.*

**M**any group leaders are deeply troubled by racism in our society. While we feel committed to interrupting its damage, we often feel inadequately equipped to address racism in our personal and professional lives. Effective group leaders become knowledgeable about the *structural* nature of racism that combines psychological *prejudice* with institutional *power* (Schmidt, 2017). Racial bias is often unconscious and is communicated through micro-aggressive acts. This article offers group leaders approaches to deepen their understanding, recognition, and responses to racial micro-aggressions. The author defines

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racial micro-aggressions and explains how these elusive injuries impede interpersonal connections. Using vignettes from the beginning, middle, and end of a short-term racial literacy group, the author illustrates and then discusses micro-aggressive communications and interventions. Finally, recommendations are made for group leaders to further their knowledge and skills about racial micro-aggressions for their own development and to benefit their groups.

### WHAT ARE RACIAL MICRO-AGGRESSIONS?

“The subtle, cumulative mini-assault is the substance of today’s racism,” wrote Harvard psychiatrist Dr. Chester Pierce in his article “Psychiatric Problems of the Black Minority” (Pierce, 1974, p. 516). Four years later, he coined the term *micro-aggressions* to describe the “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’ of blacks by offenders. The defensive mechanisms used against blacks often are innocuous. The cumulative weight of their never-ending burden is the major ingredient in black and white interactions” (Pierce, 1978, p. 66).

Dr. Derald Wing Sue defines racial micro-aggressions as “the everyday and common verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities and slights directed toward people of color by well-intentioned whites who are unaware that they have committed a transgression against a target group” (Sue, 2015, p. 27). Micro-aggressions are committed by well-intentioned white people who, oblivious to the racialized nature of their communication, subject black people and people of color to denigrating racial messages that are dismissive, hostile, derogatory, and negative.

The power of racial micro-aggressions lies in their unconscious transmittal and is steeped in the ideology of racial color blindness. According to this paradigm, acknowledging racial difference is erroneously equated to being a racial bigot. But being blind to race does not advance racial equality; it simply avoids seeing and addressing racial discrimination and injustice. When the beneficiaries of racial inequality—white people—believe they are race blind, they become unaware of the racialized nature of their actions and responses (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Carter, 1995; Helms & Cook, 1999). Micro-aggressive slights and snubs are fraught with socially enforced racial values of white supremacy that are unconsciously

expressed and consciously denied. The transmitter of the micro-aggression truly and honestly views each communication as inconsequential and insignificant. Even when white people are mildly aware that they said or did something that disturbed a black person, they may attribute the discomfort to the black person's over-sensitivity. Because they didn't *intend* to cause harm, they don't recognize the *impact* of the racial slight (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). Unaddressed micro-aggressions reinforce racial marginalization by dichotomizing the *us* and *them*, *superior* and *inferior*, and the unconscious worldview of white superiority.

The Implicit Association Test (IAT, 1998) was developed by social psychology researchers 20 years ago to measure thoughts and feelings that happen outside of a person's awareness (Project Implicit). The Race IAT, an instrument for identifying racially biased attitudes, has been widely integrated into diversity and implicit bias trainings in universities, corporations, and public institutions where racial disparity is profuse. While the test illuminates unconscious racial prejudice, critics point out that it does not challenge the effects of racial prejudice (Goldhill, 2017).

For many black people and other people of color, the impact of racial micro-aggressions derives from their cumulative effect. Micro doesn't equate to minimal. The accumulation of racial slights and snubs that are delivered in an innocuous manner is disorienting and confusing. While on the surface each communication may *appear* to be minimal, the cumulative effect induces intense psychological and physical reactions as the victim of the aggression deploys emotional, physical, and spiritual energy to maintain their personhood.

Derald Wing Sue has written widely about racial micro-aggressions. He identifies "attributional ambiguity" as the source of psychological confusion in a micro-aggression. It depletes the black person's psychological energy by "diverting attention away from the surrounding environment in an attempt to interpret the motive and meaning of the [white] person's actions" (Sue, 2010, p. 54). The victims of the micro-aggression have to discern the truth, protect themselves from further hurt, and decide whether to respond. For example, when a New York City taxi bypasses the black man hailing a cab from the curb, is the interaction an expression of racial bias? Is it produced by a pattern of driver's behavior? Does only a black person experience harm? Did racial avoidance really happen? In trying to answer these questions, the black

person's attention is further diverted by needing to decide to respond or not. Attributional ambiguity unravels a black person's sense of reality because the perpetrator is oblivious to the racial transgression. These are moments that are visible to one and invisible to the other.

Sue posits two types of unconscious micro-aggression: micro-invalidations and micro-insults. Micro-invalidations are communications that are not intended to inflict harm, but exclude, negate, and quash the feelings and lived experience of a black person or a person of color, such as when a workshop leader overlooks the black woman who raised her hand first. "Color blindness is a major form of micro-invalidation because it denies the racial and experiential reality of people of color and provides an excuse to white people to claim that they're not prejudiced" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 278).

Micro-insults are similarly unintentional communications of racial bias. They demean the black person's racial heritage and are characterized by rudeness and insensitivity, such as when a college security guard assumes the young black man entering the administration building is not a student and demands to see his ID while white students file past.

Unconscious micro-aggressions can be combinations of invalidations and insults. They are difficult to identify because they erupt from multiple racial realities. Today, most white people are encouraged to be color blind—to act as if they don't see racial difference and to believe that discrimination and racism are scourges that have been resolved. Most black people perceive racism as virulent as ever and find white people's denial and ignorance infuriating. Stevens and Abernethy state, "When white therapists commit micro-aggressions toward clients of color, this behavior is typically outside the conscious awareness of the therapists and is considered a form of implicit bias" (Stevens & Abernethy, 2017 p. 2). While not all white people have committed racially discriminatory and violent acts, all white people have historically benefitted from the racialized arrangements of civil society. All of these experiences influence interpersonal dynamics in groups.

### **RACIAL LITERACY CONSULTATION GROUPS**

I co-led racial literacy groups for mental health professionals interested in becoming more adept at dialogue about race dynamics. I am white and my co-leader Rudy is black. We share a commitment to anti-

racism and have participated in many Undoing Racism™ workshops with the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB). Our collaborative experience, however, has been fraught with similarly difficult racial dynamics that we seek to address in our racial literacy groups. During our early encounters, we spoke to each other in coded and overly cautious language that created misunderstandings and psychological injury. The honesty we've developed grew from numerous angry exchanges, miscommunications, and my tears. Our process of injury and repair stirred up unexamined internalized racial stereotypes and has been a valuable learning experience. Although we enjoy a trusting relationship, we still stumble and use these opportunities to demonstrate our ongoing work with each other in the racial literacy groups.

We recognize an urgency to become more racially literate in the mental health field. Stevens and Abernethy encourage development of training groups for therapists to address implicit bias attitudes (Abernethy, 1988; Stevens & Abernethy, 2017). Our co-led groups are a response to colleagues who sought to become more attuned to racial dynamics. We aspire to help them learn about the subtleties of racism that are embedded in our institutions and our psyches and how racism corrupts our relationships.

The racial literacy consultation groups are short-term and racially diverse. Every group has between eight and 14 members. At the beginning of each program, participants identify racial literacy goals they hope to achieve in the following 12 weeks. We provide a curriculum, inspired by "Understanding by Design," that utilizes an Essential Question to frame a brief didactic component at the beginning of each session. The curriculum ensures that we teach about the structural nature of racism, the internalization and projection of racial stereotypes, manifestations of implicit bias, and strategies for interrupting racial bias. These themes give direction to the process component of the session in which we share thoughts and feelings that arise as we interact.

We adhere to fundamental group values that prioritize safety above all else. At the same time, we explicitly encourage risk-taking, bravery, and vulnerability. We don't want participants to confuse safety with comfort because we invite experiences that are uncomfortable (Arao & Clemens, 2013). Our shared goal is to engage with one another in progressive race talk. Racial micro-aggressions are not only expected

but are welcomed as opportunities to learn about ourselves and each other by bringing awareness to the unintentional ruptures. Through examination of our actions and defenses, we expand our capacity to identify and respond to racial injury and to promote constructive racial communication.

The vignettes presented are composites drawn from several groups to illustrate racial micro-aggressions that occurred in an initial, middle, and final session. I informed participants about my intention to write about racial literacy groups, so their names have been changed to protect their privacy.

### VIGNETTE FROM A FIRST SESSION

There are eight participants in the group, ten including the group leaders. We sit in a circle. Rudy and I welcome everyone and provide an overview of the program, including the blended didactic and experiential structure of the sessions and our group contract. We provide a detailed definition of racial literacy and then,

- Me [white, co-leader]: We invite everyone to share the racial literacy goals you want to pursue over our 12 weeks together. Be as specific as you can because we'll revisit these goals.
- Erin [white]: I'm Erin. I want to be able to talk intentionally about race, to be more conscious of race talk, especially with white clients. I need to break through my confusion about being a privileged white person who also feels marginalized because I'm gay—like I want to become clearer about my own racial identity.
- Harriet [black]: I'm Harriet. I want to be braver in conversation with people who are not like-minded and to be better able to manage my own emotions. More specifically, I want to control my anger and to be positive about race talk. I'd like to find ways to talk to white folk and folk of color at the same level.
- Arthur [black]: Arthur, here. I'm with you, Harriet. I want to see others more clearly, beyond their projected veils; to

- notice and name my feelings that come up in conversations about race and the artificial structures that get in the way of honest cross-racial relationships.
- Mark [white]: Harriet, I like what you said, too. I'm Mark and, honestly, my goal is to feel comfortable talking in this room. I look around the room and notice that I'm the only white male. Hmmm. I see this is MY experience to be a minority. And, by the way, I is WOKE.
- (There is a pause.)
- Me: I'm noticing a pause. Any thoughts about this?
- (No one responds.)
- Me: Rudy, do you feel something happening in the room?
- Rudy [black, co leader]: Sure do. I think something's beginning to stir, but we aren't quite ready to put it into words. We'll get there.
- Cheryl [black]: Cheryl, I'm in this group to help me confront my fears from being a mom of black boys. I want to develop the emotional language I need to raise them—language that is strong but not aggressive. Probably that's too much to expect in 12 weeks, but this is where I'm going to start.
- Melanie [white]: I'm Melanie. Develop my own racial identity beyond acknowledging shame and guilt. I want to grow in relationship to myself so I can use this knowledge in my relationships with others. I want to practice that here with Cheryl and Harriet.
- Da' wan [black]: I'm Da' wan. My goal is to be able to speak about what's inside of me, so I'm going to start by asking you, Melanie, why did you single out Cheryl and Harriet to help you learn about race? Also, Mark, I want to know why you feel okay to say, "I is WOKE."
- Melanie: I didn't mean to offend anyone, Dwayne. I was just trying to connect with people in the group, and Cheryl is sitting right next to me.
- Cheryl: Honestly, Melanie, what you said passed right by me, and I felt good to be recognized.
- Me to Melanie: What you said landed on Da' wan and Cheryl differently.

- Melanie: Hmmm. (She nods.)  
Da' wan: The name's Da' wan, by the way, not "Dwayne."  
Okay, I'm sensitive to these things. Like I said,  
I'm going to use this group as an opportunity to  
say what's on my mind instead of holding it in.
- Melanie: Da' wan. Da' wan. Sorry. I'll get it. (She blushes.)  
Mark: Well, I can see that I offended you, too, Da' wan.  
Didn't mean to. I just wanted to let everyone know  
that I'm aware of racial justice issues.
- Da' wan: Yeah. Okay, my other goal for being here is: I want  
to get better at navigating the perception of being  
an "angry black male." So, I'm both trying to speak  
my words while I'm mindful of that angry black  
stereotype.
- Me: In these first few minutes of getting to know each  
other, we're already beginning to see how self-  
concept, projections, and others' perceptions dif-  
fer. We're being honest with our thoughts and  
feelings about race. At the same time, we don't  
want to offend.
- Patty [white]: Well, I'm Patty. I want to NOT put burdens on  
people of color to protect my feelings about racial  
stress. Hmmm ... to shorten the time between a  
damaging racist event and my response; and to be  
able to accept my feelings of anger. I want to know  
when my anger is defensive or justified.
- Rudy: My goal is to inspire others to be interested in  
exploring how racism creates colorism; to not let  
anger be an insurmountable obstacle to conversa-  
tions about race.
- Me: And my goal is to strategically use my anger about  
racism without sounding strident; enhance group-  
learning experience to bring deeper awareness  
about whiteness. I want to write about this experi-  
ence to share with others.

### **ANATOMY OF RACIAL MICRO-AGGRESSIONS IN THE FIRST SESSION**

Using my countertransference radar and my knowledge of critical race theory, I identified three micro-aggressive communications



that occurred during this session. Early in the introductions, Mark joked, “I see this as MY experience to be a minority. And by the way, I is WOKE.” I reacted to his appropriation of two terms: “minority”—the dominant society code word that denotes African American—and “WOKE”—the African-American slang word that means aware of racial injustice. My countertransference said, *Ouch. I’m offended. He’s trying to be funny but he isn’t. He hasn’t earned the right to use racialized humor because he hasn’t developed relationships yet. His words reflect his sense of privilege to speak freely without checking himself. Comparing himself to a minority is a micro-insult because it obscures the lived experience of people to whom the term commonly refers. His use of WOKE is also insulting because he hasn’t earned the right in this group to appropriate African-American slang.* Sometimes racial transgressions are clear and sometimes they confuse me, so I consulted with Rudy about the affect in the room. I decided not to call Mark out on his transgression so early in the group, but I didn’t want the moment to pass unnoticed. Shame is the primary emotional response to being accused of racial bias (Stevens & Abernethy, 2017), and I felt protective in this initial session.

Melanie had said she hoped to learn about her racial identity and “practice that here with Cheryl and Harriet.” My countertransference said, *Uh oh. Does Melanie think that white people need to be taught about racism by black people? Another racial micro-insult if she is implying that it is black people’s responsibility to teach.* At the same time, I didn’t want her to feel shamed, so I pointed out that Da’ wan and Cheryl had opposite reactions to her comment.

Da’ wan spoke to Mark’s and Melanie’s racial transgressions when he introduced himself after saying he would “speak about what’s inside of me.” Melanie’s mispronunciation of Da’ wan’s name was another micro-invalidating rupture that he immediately pointed out and she graciously accepted. Their honest exchange and resulting repair demonstrated potential healing that can happen in a racial literacy group. Rudy and I each named our own anger when we offered our goals. Our intention was to model that feeling angry about racism is normal, healthy, and a subject for examination.

### VIGNETTE FROM A MIDDLE SESSION

The group assembles. Harriet hangs her coat on the hook by the door and strides to the chair between the windows and sits down with a loud exhale. Melanie slides into the chair next to me. She glances at Harriet but averts her eyes just as Harriet looks in her direction. Melanie pulls her scarf snugly around her neck and gazes at the rug. Arthur and Mark enter in animated conversation with each other. They pause to say hello to Harriet and Melanie, then refocus their attention on each other and sit together. Da' wan, Erin, and Cheryl arrive at the same time. Erin folds her coat over the back of the chair next to Melanie, and Melanie raises her head and says hello. Da' wan greets everyone cheerfully and sits next to Harriet. Cheryl sits on Rudy's right and Patty sits on his left. He signals to begin the session by closing the door.

Our focus is on *how* racial oppression is psychologically internalized to support structural racism. We present these concepts and invite group discussion.

- Me: Today's "Essential Question" is: "Why is black anger criminalized and white anger gets therapized?"
- Rudy: We invite you to consider your own experiences and speak from the heart.
- Da' wan: I hate talking to white people about race because I'm always afraid of what they'll say. And if they say something offensive and I get angry—and it shows—well, that can be trouble for me. On the other hand, I look around this room at your silent faces and I start to worry about what's going on in your heads. That makes me anxious, too.
- Patty: Caught between a rock and a hard place, Da' wan! It's hard for me to talk about it because I hate sounding stupid. Also, I feel frightened. Growing up white in an all white community, I never thought about race. Now I'm *trying* to think and talk about it. I have so much to learn, and sometimes I think I'm just better off listening and learning from all of you (she glances at Da' wan and Harriet.) Shit! I didn't mean to do that:

singling you out to be my teachers. To be honest, I don't really even want to be here because this is hard for me. But I hear you, Da' wan, that you both want to know and you don't want to know what's going on in my head.

Da' wan:

Appreciate that, Patty.

Harriet:

Yeah, Patty, I appreciate what you're saying, too. I like your effort but honestly, I don't have a hell of a lot of patience for white folks. I'm glad that you caught that slip because it would have pissed me off. I don't want to be your teacher. (Pauses.) I'm just tired.

Patty:

Feels good that you notice I'm trying.

Me:

Efforts are necessary, especially when they're difficult. Rudy, maybe we're not doing a very good job helping everyone get into the room. Patty said that she really doesn't feel like being here and Harriet said that she's tired.

Rudy:

I think you're right, Christine. I'm sensing some anger and some fear in the room. Those sure are uncomfortable feelings. Cheryl, what do you think Melanie's thinking at this moment?

Cheryl:

She's not sure she wants to be here either.

Melanie:

(Looking at the floor.) That's true. I'm freezing cold. I know I'm not sick and the room's heated, but my body doesn't want to be here. At the same time, I do want to be here.

Cheryl:

Melanie, can't you at least look at me? I feel dismissed when you don't make eye contact.

Melanie:

Sure (looks at Cheryl and offers a slight smile).

Cheryl:

Much better. I was getting tired like Harriet.

Arthur:

Oh, don't get me started with the tired stuff. It's just a cover-up for being pissed off and trying to hold it in.

Harriet:

Okay, y'all. I'm going to tell you straight up about tired. It's exhausting to always be a strong black woman. Exhausting and it's seen as angry. I *am* angry. Angry at not ever getting a break. Angry at not being seen. Angry at having to fight for things other folks take for granted. Angry at always being suspected of less than honorable intentions. Angry at being seen as not working hard enough. That's why I'm angry; that's why I'm tired.

- Me:** Harriet and Arthur are telling us how the accumulation of racial slights day after day takes a toll and makes them angry. Mark, do you have any thoughts about that?
- Mark:** Amen!
- Arthur:** White people don't understand what it's like to be black all the time. Every day. From the minute I wake up until the minute I go to sleep at night. As soon as I start interacting with the world, I put my guard up. I just know that something is going to go wrong. Go wrong. Like I'm a criminal! I put my guard up, and the guards get called in.
- Rudy:** Black anger gets criminalized.
- Harriet:** Don't get me wrong: I'm not always suffering, but when you live with murderous unfairness every day, it takes a toll. And I get pissed when well-meaning white folks don't see that!
- Erin:** Harriet and Arthur, I hear what you're saying and, honestly, I can't imagine what your lives are like, having to live with all that every day. I really can't. I feel kinda responsible to learn from you. Actually, though, I think I do kinda understand. I've experienced discrimination at work because I'm gay. So I think I really do understand what it's like for you.
- Da' wan:** Are you kidding?!!! You DO NOT know what it's like!  
(Erin is noticeably shocked and holds her breath, and a tear appears in the corner of her eye.)
- Me:** Da' wan, you have some huge feelings in those words. I'm not making it easy for you to talk about them.
- Rudy to Da' wan:** Tell me what you want Erin to understand about how you're feeling.

### **ANATOMY OF RACIAL MICRO-AGGRESSIONS IN THE MIDDLE SESSION**

This session focused on a psychological dynamic that stereotypes black people as angry and white people as fragile. In the course of examining these truisms, micro-aggressive examples of these stereotypical behaviors were enacted in the group. I observed the body language at the beginning of the session and saw Melanie avert her eyes to avoid contact

with Harriet. My countertransference alerted me: *Melanie's detachment makes me uncomfortable. Is she avoiding contact with Harriet or is she guarding herself against contact with everyone in the group?* When she visually greeted Erin a few moments later, I concluded, *This is a racial micro-invalidating. Melanie is communicating that she doesn't see Harriet. I wonder if Harriet feels invisible.* I also noticed that Melanie sat next to me, and I considered that this might be an act of seeking security from proximity to the group leader. *Is she feeling delicate and seeking protection under a maternal wing?* I don't say anything because the session hasn't begun. Later, Cheryl gently chided Melanie for not making eye contact with her and told her that she felt dismissed. Melanie's nonverbal response to Cheryl—eye contact with a smile—conveyed her understanding of the impact of the earlier micro-aggression that was repaired by a connection. A few moments later, Patty caught and corrected a micro-aggressive slip in her exchange with Da' wan when she said, "Shit! I didn't mean to do that: singling you out to be my teachers." I thought, *Wonderful. This is evidence that dialogue from the first session was held and remembered. It can be challenging for white people to learn about racism from white people instead of learning from the victims of racism.* I consulted with Rudy because I felt the group was holding back. I hoped we could open a path to talk about anger and fragility and invited Cheryl to make contact with Melanie—I was still holding my earlier impression of Melanie's fragility and wanted to open a space for her to be in the room without feeling shamed. The path also opened for Cheryl, Arthur, and Harriet to describe the exhausting weight of accumulated racial slights and the shadow of criminality. Rudy's statement, "Black anger gets criminalized," put a spotlight on the concept we wanted the group to consider. Cheryl, Arthur, and Harriet continued to speak passionately with each other. Erin made an effort to join their subgroup, when she said, "I've experienced discrimination at work because I'm gay. So I think I really do understand what it's like for you." I felt, *Ouch. She's not aware that she was equating her experience of a micro-invalidating to their lifelong experience of American racism.* Da' wan's reaction was a powerful display of his feelings. He conveyed rage at Erin's comparison, and she was shocked to tears. I thought, *He's enacting his rage. At the same time, I'm both annoyed by her tears and feel protective. I understand that white people generally aren't as attuned to racism as black people and don't expect their efforts to be triggers. Rudy and I need to take some of the energy away from her but keep this important*

*dynamic in the room.* Rudy and I validated Da' wan's feelings but asked him to find language to express them. We also invited him to make an emotional connection with Erin through us.

#### VIGNETTE FROM FINAL SESSION

All of the group members are seated.

- Rudy: Welcome to the last session. But it's not the end. We want to support you and we want you to support each other after our programs ends. We're inspired by the 12-step approach to sponsoring. This room feels alive, doesn't it, Christine?
- Me: I can feel that a lot's going on in here. Rudy, before we move to the next steps, let's check in with everyone about what we've learned as a group and about personal goals.
- Rudy: Am I getting ahead of myself? Okay. That's a sign of my enthusiasm.
- Mark: Well, I haven't said a lot during this program, but I've been completely present, and today's an opportunity I don't want to pass up. At my clinic I feel very isolated. I'm the only male social worker, and the social service staff is pretty racially mixed. We NEVER talk about race even though it's like the elephant in the room all the time. The clientele are all black and people of color, and I hear them talking openly to each other about race. I mean, damn, that's how they refer to us instead of by our names. You know—like "the white man," "that slim sister," or "that young white girl with the braid." (He pauses and looks around the room. Everyone's eyes are on him.) I want to talk about the racism with everyone at work—staff and clients—but I don't know how to get this conversation started. I think it's not up to me, but I'm not sure. I've probably been waiting for the black social workers to bring it up. Is that because I'm scared? Yeah, probably. I

remember that my goal was to feel comfortable in this room. I think I got a little more comfortable, but I'm still not what you'd call COMFORTABLE. I notice that I've spent a lot of time in my head when everyone else is talking. I want to get in the conversation, but I really DO NOT want to be in the hot seat and get confronted with my racial ignorance. I mean, that would really upset the image I have of myself as being WOKE. Ha, I remember how I used that term in our first session and Da' wan got on my case. I...

Da' wan (interrupts): Naw, man, I didn't get on your case. You were asking for some honesty and I'm trying honesty, so I just told you how that term landed on me. You have to be mindful when you say words that might be appropriated from other folks—just be careful until you know who you're talking to.

Me: Da' wan, would you like Mark to tell you how he's feeling right now?

Da' wan: Honestly, I would like to know that. [To Mark:] It seems like you're living in your head and not in your body and your heart. I want to know what's inside.

Mark (visibly moved): Wow, this is hard for me. Da' wan, I'm feeling a whole lot, and they're contradictory feelings. I'm uncomfortable being in the spotlight, and at the same time, I'm enjoying the attention. Especially, I'm enjoying your attention. I want to believe that I'm smart about racial justice, but then—when you tell me your feelings when I use a word that isn't mine to use—I feel both grateful and ashamed. I'm grateful that you've offered me some wisdom, but I'm ashamed that I didn't know it. I hate exposing that side of myself that doesn't know. White male vulnerability? I guess that's what I'd call it. And it masquerades as arrogance sometimes—arrogance that I know the language of racial justice without having to do the emotional work.

Cheryl: I'm having some mixed reactions to what you're saying, Mark. On one hand, I'm glad you're speaking up, but at the same time I'm pissed. You put out a whole lot today after not letting us interact with you for all

of these weeks. I would call it white male arrogance—being able to choose to speak up or to be silent.

Mark:

Yeah, I hear you. This is harder than I thought.

Patty:

I'm with you, Mark, about this being harder than I thought. My goal was to not be a burden on people of color [in order] to learn about racism, but I still find that I'm looking to them for approval to be sure I'm using the right words.

Erin:

I feel like a baby. Sort of developmentally immature when it comes to race because I didn't begin to recognize that I HAVE a race until I was in high school.

Harriet:

Erin, I'd like to ask you a question. Early on you said that you felt you could identify with the black experience because you're gay. So you've experienced oppression. When you said that, I wasn't sure if I could trust you. So I want to know how you're feeling about that now.

Me to Rudy:

Rudy, we haven't helped our group bring out some big uncomfortable feelings about race. Harriet has been sitting with a distrustful feeling for some time. What do you think we should do?

Rudy:

Invite it now. Harriet and Mark are sharing feelings they've been holding and that's good. We believe that these short sessions are going to enhance your courage to have difficult and productive race talk.

Erin:

I want to respond to Harriet. Harriet, I really like your reaching out to me. I feel the courage it's taking you to say this to me because you don't know how I'm going to answer. I HAVE experienced discrimination because of my sexual orientation—like when I wasn't selected to be valedictorian of my high school graduating class. But I don't live with generations of discrimination and I don't face it when I walk out on the street in NYC. I know I'm going to be attended to when I walk into a high-end store, a fancy restaurant, or when I walk into a bank.

Harriet:

Glad I asked you, Erin. I definitely feel safer knowing that.

(The group is silent.)



- Rudy to Arthur: Arthur, you look like you're sitting with something so weighty that your eyes won't lift from the carpet.
- Arthur: I want to say something to Mark. (Addressing Mark) You sure did talk a lot today. I'm feeling a little pissed that you didn't talk more in earlier weeks, and I'm a little pissed that you talked so much about your work and not to us in this room. You're basically telling us how you want to get a conversation about race started, but you didn't even start it in here until today. Then you have so much to say that it's almost too much. So, there you go. My goal was to lift the veil and talk more honestly about race.
- Mark: Thanks, Arthur. I'm not offended—more disappointed at myself for holding back, and yeah, I did sort of vomit out a lot about work. I wish I'd said more in here earlier. I would have learned more and maybe could have helped you learn something new about yourself.
- Melanie: I'm going to join you, Mark, about wishing I'd said more in here. My goal was to get beyond my white guilt. I'm so glad to have shared the opportunity to talk about race, but I'm seeing that my guilt still gets in the way. It runs deep.

### ANATOMY OF MICRO-AGGRESSIONS IN THE FINAL SESSION

Rudy and I anticipated the group's ambivalence about ending. As participants reflected on their initial goals and expressed both achievements and regrets, we drew out more opportunities for collective learning. I noticed two micro-aggressions that were woven into the final conversation. Mark, who was very reticent about contributing in earlier sessions, "vomited," in Harriet's words, onto the group in the final session. As he spoke, my countertransference radar informed me, *Ugh, this is too much at one time. He holds it in for all of these weeks and lets it go on the last day. That's entitlement.* The amount of time he took in the final group had a micro-aggressive quality because he acted from his need to be heard and be seen in a dominating manner. Both Da' wan and Cheryl told Mark how they felt dumped on by his long emission. His non-defensive response

showed his expanded capacity for managing racial stress. I was satisfied that their exchange was helpful to Mark and to the group. They exhibited a level of emotional honesty and care for each other that wasn't present at the beginning. The second moment that caught my attention occurred when Harriet questioned Erin about conflating racism with anti-gay bias. I was concerned that Harriet had been holding onto her feeling of distrust for 12 weeks. I feared it could cause a major rupture during the final session. I consulted with my co-leader about the potent quality of unspoken feelings in the room. A few moments later, he contacted Arthur about unspoken feelings that were evident from his body language. We knew there would be much unfinished work; however, we wanted every person to leave the racial literacy consultation group with progress towards their personal goals. We also wanted the group to know that racial literacy is a process and hoped that group members would feel inspired to continue developing. When Erin's response prompted Harriet to say, "I definitely feel safer," I thought about the ironic concept of racial safety that undergirds many micro-aggressions. White safety from black aggression has been the rationale for laws and practices that have controlled black bodies, yet it is the people with black bodies who have been the victims of racial violence. The group provided an opportunity for all members to put into words the sensations they experienced in their bodies.

### **DISCUSSION FOR GROUP LEADERS**

We humans are drawn to groups because we are social beings seeking connections with others. Psychotherapeutic and psychoeducational groups offer members venues to examine, understand, and heal impediments to healthy and mature relationships. Slavson (1956, p. 163) recognized that "not only does the family pattern and 'rituals' characteristic to each family determine behavior in therapy groups and the content of communications and discussions, but also the total culture molds response." Race, a predominant social construct, will invade our groups as long as racism exists in our society.

### Understanding the Psychological By-Products of Racism

Racial bias seeps into our relationships. Defensive emotional reactions vary in accordance with members' racialized and gendered identities. Members of the group who are black may express anger, fatigue, defeat, or disgust while members of the group who are white may express denial, minimization, anger, fear, or confusion (Stevens & Abernethy, 2017). As group leaders, it is helpful to understand the concepts of white fragility and black anger, two dynamics that were illustrated in the vignettes.

*White fragility*, a term coined by Robin DiAngelo (2011; DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014), is a defensive psychological state in which white people experience even a small amount of racial stress as intolerable. DiAngelo (2018) describes racial stress as "an interruption to what is racially familiar. In turn, whites are often at a loss for how to respond in constructive ways, as we have not had to build the cognitive or affective skills or develop the stamina that that would allow for constructive engagement across racial divides" (1st paragraph).

Black anger erupts from the accumulation of racial slights, racial discrimination, and racial violence. Frederick Douglass reminds us, "Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe" (Douglass, 1950/1886 p. 434). To be treated as invisible or to have one's name mispronounced are aggressive acts. Group leaders should be attuned to verbal and non-verbal behaviors that saturate a black person with denigrating experiences.

Leaders too may be puzzled when unintentional racial bias produces a gaslighting effect—the psychological experience in which denial is so strong that the victim begins to doubt that the experience happened. Rather than attempt to discern if the injury is "real," the leader's attention should first be directed towards the member who felt injured by a racial slight. Sue writes, "the most accurate assessment about whether racist acts have occurred is most likely to be made by those most disempowered rather than by those who enjoy the privileges of power" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 278). Leaders protect against

scapegoating while at the same time making space for the expression of honesty and righteous anger.

### **Responding to a Racial Micro-Aggression**

The impact of a racial micro-aggression is often dissociated and resides in the body, inaccessible to words. Yet in a group, words are our mandate. Group contracts prescribe members to put thoughts, feelings, fantasies, and bodily sensations into words. As Ormont reminds us, the group leader “does not expect members to adhere to the contract: on the contrary, he expects deviations” (1968, p. 168). As group leaders, we expect and look for moments when the contract is broken—when members are flooded with feelings but silence their words, when affect differs from the words that express them, when a body movement is the communication.

The group leader actively supports the group to understand micro-aggressions as degradations made by a member of a dominant group towards a member of a marginalized group. Racial micro-aggressions are unconsciously generated assaults by white people against blacks and other people of color. When a micro-invalidation or micro-insult has been communicated in the group, the leader assesses whether the group is responding adequately to the transgression or if he/she should decode the interaction. Silence should not be an option. Suzanne Phillips writes that silence “precludes the safety, remembering, grieving and connection necessary to heal from traumatic events” (2015, p. 65). Schlapobersky refers to silence as the domain of “the unspeakable...that can carry the weight of despair and futility, the not knowing how to communicate, rage against the very presence of others and sometimes against life itself” (2016, p. 140). Bonilla-Silva describes “rhetorical incoherence” as a form of silence (2013, p. 102). The speaker’s awkward syntax is a result of avoiding direct racial language that expresses racial views. These verbal parachutes are a manifestation of color blindness in language.

White people often expect black people to teach them about racism even though white people constructed racism. However, the burden of explaining a micro-aggressive dynamic should not fall solely to black people and other people of color in the group. We know the unsatisfying experience of confronting someone who remains in

denial. It's disorienting, and the exposure of vulnerability that is met with denial could become another trauma. As a result, black people often choose not to be vulnerable to a second micro-invalidation or insult. If a white group member doesn't step forward to explain, the leader should take on this responsibility.

The leader, taking care to not shame, helps the white person who has committed a racial slight understand it as a micro-aggression with significant impact. When the person understands that they've caused harm but fervently asserts the insignificance of their communication because it has not been part of *their* pattern (Sue et al., 2007), the leader explains the behavior in a societal context. In this way, the leader prevents the transgressor from dismissing the micro-aggression as an isolated incident. The leader normalizes the confused reaction a white person has when confronted with a micro-aggressive act and illustrates that white people have been socialized to be color blind. Because white people erroneously conflate racism with prejudice and believe they aren't prejudiced, it is normal to deny accountability for racial injury because it isn't a result of conscious prejudice. The leader validates white responsibility for learning about racism from other white people. After all, racism is a white invention.

When the leader or group responds to a racial micro-aggression, the victim feels seen and validated. Other group members witness the acknowledgement as progressive racial communication. By helping the group confront and dissect racial micro-aggressions, leaders foster individual growth and group healing. Both the group members and group leaders become better prepared as members of our complex society.

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