

# Disarming Racial Microaggressions: Microintervention Strategies for Targets, White Allies, and Bystanders

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Given the immense harm inflicted on individuals and groups of color via prejudice and discrimination, it becomes imperative for our nation to begin the process of disrupting, dismantling, and disarming the constant onslaught of micro- and macroaggressions. For too long, acceptance, silence, passivity, and inaction have been the predominant, albeit ineffective, strategies for coping with microaggressions. Inaction does nothing but support and proliferate biased perpetrator behaviors which occur at individual, institutional and societal levels. This article introduces a new strategic framework developed for addressing microaggressions that moves beyond coping and survival to concrete action steps and dialogues that targets, allies, and bystanders can perform (microinterventions). A review of responses to racist acts, suggest that microaggression reactions/interventions may be primarily to (a) remain passive, retreat, or give up; (b) strike back or hurt the aggressor; (c) stop, diminish, deflect, or put an end to the harmful act; (d) educate the perpetrator; (e) validate and support the targets; (f) act as an ally; (g) seek social support; (h) enlist outside authority or institutional intervention; or (h) achieve any combination of these objectives. We organize these responses into four major strategic goals of microinterventions: (a) make the invisible visible, (b) disarm the microaggression, (c) educate the perpetrator, and (d) seek external reinforcement or support. The objectives and rationale for each goal are discussed, along with specific microintervention tactics to employ and examples of how they are executed.

*Keywords:* microinterventions, microaggressions, macroaggressions, metacommunication, race

“We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.”

—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

“The world is a dangerous place to live, not because of the people who are evil, but because of the people who don’t do anything about it.”

—Albert Einstein

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These notable quotes echo the sentiment of many social justice advocates regarding the appalling worldwide silence and inaction of people in the face of injustice, hatred, and oppression directed toward socially marginalized group members (Freire, 1970; Potok, 2017; Tatum, 1997). In the United States, the omnipresence of racial bias and bigotry has led many to question the reasons for their persistence in light of widespread public condemnation. Social scientists have proposed a number of reasons for people’s failure to act: (a) the invisibility of modern forms of bias, (b) trivializing an incident as innocuous, (c) diffusion of responsibility, (d) fear of repercussions or retaliation, and (e) the paralysis of not knowing what to do (Goodman, 2011; Kawakami, Dunn, Karmali, & Dovidio, 2009; Latané & Darley, 1968; Scully & Rowe, 2009; Shelton, Richeson, Salvtore, & Hill, 2006; Sue, 2003).

These reasons apply equally to targets of discrimination, White allies, and “innocent” bystanders (Scully & Rowe, 2009; Sue, 2015). In many cases, bias and discrimination go unchallenged because the behaviors and words are disguised in ways that provide cover for their expression and/or the belief that they are harmless and insignificant. Even when the biased intent and detrimental impact are



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unmasked, the possible actions to be taken are unclear and filled with potential pitfalls. The reasons for inaction appear particularly pronounced and applicable to the expression of racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007), and racial *macroaggressions*, a concept to be introduced shortly (Huber & Solorzano, 2014).

The bombardment of racial micro/macroaggressions in the life experience of persons of color has been described as a chronic state of “racial battle fatigue” that taxes the resources of target groups (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). In the stress-coping literature, two forms of managing stress have been identified: emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The former is a strategy utilized by individuals to reduce or manage the intensity of the emotive distress (internal self-care) and tends to be more passive, whereas the latter is used to target the cause of the distress (external). Problem-focused strategies are more long term solutions that are proactive and directed to altering, or challenging the source of the stressor. Although there is considerable scholarly work on general models of stress-coping (Lazarus, 2000; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), there is less research that take into consideration how people of color cope with prejudice and discrimination (Brondolo, Brady Ver Halen, Pencille, Beatty, & Contrada, 2009). Even when race-related stress and coping are discussed, it seldom explores questions about what people of color can do to disarm, challenge and change perpetrators or institutional systems that oppress target populations (Mellor, 2004). We anchor our proposed race-related coping strategies to the more active problem-focused strategies in navigating prejudice and discrimination, preserving well-being, and promoting equity.

Additionally, scholars have largely ignored the role that White allies and well-intentioned bystanders play in the struggle for equal rights (Scully & Rowe, 2009; Spanierman & Smith, 2017). Most research and training have attempted to identify how White Americans become allies, but there is an absence of work on the types of actions or intervention strategies that can be used to directly combat racism (Sue, 2017). In this article, we present a conceptual framework that (a) emphasize the harmful impact of race-related bias on persons of color (b) include a distinction between individual microaggressions that arise interpersonally and *macroaggressions* that arise on a systemic level, (c) acknowledge the central value of self-care in coping used by persons of color, (d) highlight the importance of disarming and neutralizing harmful microaggressions, (e) suggest intervention strategies that can be used by targets and antiracists, and (f) relate them to the goals of social justice.

### The Harmful Impact of Microaggressions

Racial microaggressions are the everyday slights, insults, putdowns, invalidations, and offensive behaviors that people of color experience in daily interactions with generally well-intentioned White Americans who may be unaware that they have engaged in racially demeaning ways toward target groups (Sue et al., 2007). In addition to being communicated on an interpersonal level through verbal and nonverbal means, microaggressions may also be delivered environmentally through social media, educational curriculum, TV programs, mascots, monuments, and other offensive symbols. Scholars conclude that the totality of environmental microaggressions experienced by people of color can create a hostile and invalidating societal climate in employment, education, and health care (Clark, Spanierman, Reed, Soble, & Cabana, 2011; Neville, Yeung, Todd, Spanierman, & Reed, 2011; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yasso, 2000; Sue, 2010). Likewise, the current political climate (Potok, 2017) has been identified as a significant stressor for many Americans, especially to people of color because of its racially charged connotation (American Psychological Association [APA], 2017a, 2017b).

Many critics have downplayed the harmful impact of microaggressions, and have described them as trivial, negligible slights, insignificant offenses and as having inadequate empirical support (Campbell & Manning, 2014; Lillienfeld, 2017). Schacht (2008) believes microaggressions are no different from the everyday incivilities and rudeness in any human encounter. Thomas (2008) called microaggressions “macrononsense” that “hardly necessitate the handwringing reactions” by people of color. Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) asserted that we are teaching people of color to catastrophize and have no tolerance for being offended. In many respects, these assertions minimize the harmful impact of microaggressions and make an erroneous assumption



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tion that nonrace-based offenses are no different from race-based ones (Sue, 2010).

Sue (in press) has made a strong case that racial microaggressions are different from “everyday rudeness” in the following ways. They are (a) constant and continual in the lives of people of color, (b) cumulative in nature and represent a lifelong burden of stress, (c) continuous reminders of the target group’s second-class status in society, and (d) symbolic of past governmental injustices directed toward people of color (enslavement of Black people, incarceration of Japanese Americans, and appropriating land from Native Americans). In one revealing study on Asian Americans, for example, Wang, Leu, and Shoda (2011) found that race-based microaggressions were much more harmful to the targets than nonrace-based insults because their lower social status in society was a constant reminder of their overall subjugation and persecution. They concluded that racial microaggressions differed significantly in quality and quantity from general nonrace-based incivilities.

In a major survey of over 3,300 respondents, the APA (2016) found that daily discrimination experienced by people of color had a profound impact on stress levels and contribute to poorer health. An astoundingly high number of African Americans (over 75%) reported *daily discrimination*; Asian Americans, Latina/o Americans, and Native Americans also all report significantly higher discriminatory experiences than their White counterparts. Among the reported discriminatory treatments were unjustified questioning by police and/or threats, receiving second-class health care treatment, unfair labor practices (being fired or not promoted when otherwise qualified), treated with disrespect, considered less intelligent, having teachers discour-

age them from further education, and unfriendly neighbors who made life difficult for them. According to microaggression theory, these individual forms of discriminatory behavior can be classified as microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations that vary on a continuum from being overt, intentional and explicit to subtle, unintentional, and implicit (Sue, 2010; Sue et al., 2007).

Being burdened with and contending with a lifetime of microaggressions have been found to increase stress in the lives of people of color (APA, 2016), deny or negate their racialized experiences (Neville, Awad, Brooks, Flores, & Bluemel, 2013), lower emotional well-being (Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja, & Sue, 2013), increase depression and negative feelings (Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit, & Rasmus, 2014), assail the mental health of recipients (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008), create a hostile and invalidating campus and work climate (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, & Crosby, 2008; Solorzano et al., 2000), impede learning and problem solving (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007), impair employee performance (Hunter, 2011), and take a heavy toll on the physical well-being of targets (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999).

### The Harmful Impact of (Macro-)Aggressions

In addition to focusing on the detrimental impact of individual forms of microaggressions, some social justice advocates have indicated that institutional and cultural racism forms the foundations of prejudice and discrimination at the systemic levels (Jones, 1997; Tatum, 1997; Sue, 2010). Cultural racism has been identified as the individual and institutional expression of the superiority of one group’s cultural heritage (arts, crafts, language, traditions, religion, physical appearance, etc.) over another group with the power to impose those standards (Jones, 1997). Its ultimate manifestation is ethnocentric monoculturalism (Sue & Sue, 2016), or in the case of the United States, an ideology of White supremacy that justifies policies, practices and structures which result in social arrangements of subordination for groups of color through power and White privilege. Huber and Solorzano (2014) used the term *macroaggression* to refer to the power of institutional and structural racism.

Considerable confusion surrounds the term (*micro*-)aggression regarding its usage, overtness, intentionality, and impact. It appears to be a misnomer when used to refer to people angrily shouting racial epithets, police officers unjustly profiling and shooting an African American suspect, or White parents not allowing their sons or daughters to date people of color. For many, these do not appear to be *micro*- but are instead *macroacts* of bias and discrimination. Microaggression theory, however, considers these acts as one of three forms of microaggressions (*microassaults*) that are conscious and deliberate (like old-fashioned racism) but occur



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on an interpersonal rather than a systemic level. This is not to deny that microaggressions cannot have major harmful impact such as the unwarranted shooting and killing of a Black male suspect (Sue, 2010). However, whether an act is subtle or blatant, deliberate or unintentional, or whether it has a shockingly harmful impact on targets are not criteria used to judge whether it is a micro- or a macroaggression. Chester Pierce (1969, 1970), credited with introducing the term *microaggression*, meant “micro” to refer to “everyday” rather than being lesser or insignificant.

We concur with Huber and Solorzano (2014) that the term *racial macroaggression* be reserved for systemic and institutional forms of racism that is manifested in the philosophy, programs, policies, practices and structures of governmental agencies, legal and judicial systems, health care organizations, educational institutions, and business and industry. Unlike microaggressions which have a more limited impact on an individual level, macroaggressions affect whole groups or classes of people because they are systemic in nature. The philosophy and belief in “manifest destiny,” for example, justified unrestrained 19th century American expansion resulting in the forced removal of Native American from their lands, and provided a rationale for going to war with Mexico. There was a belief that God had decreed to Whites the right to expand and to impose their way of life on indigenous people who were described as heathens, uncivilized and primitive (Cortes, 2013; Sue, 2003). Like their individual counterparts, macroaggressions from a societal viewpoint can also be classified as macroassaults (Jim Crow laws), macroinsults (governmental policies aimed at civilizing American Indians), and macroinvalidations (forced assimilation and acculturation). In contemporary times, for

example, the proposed building of the southern border wall, travel bans from Muslim-majority countries, and voting laws that limit early or weekend voting that disproportionately impacts people of color are examples of macroaggressions. In many respects, racial macroaggressions represent an overarching umbrella that validates, supports, and enforces the manifestation of individual acts of racial microaggressions.

### **The Need to Take Action: People of Color, White Allies, and Bystanders**

Given the immense harm inflicted on individuals and groups of color via prejudice and discrimination, it becomes imperative for our nation to begin the process of disarming, disrupting, and dismantling the constant onslaught of micro- and macroaggressions. In this section, we describe the potential antiracist actions of three major groups—*targets, allies, and bystanders*—in their struggle against racism; we advocate the need for these constituents to take a proactive stance against the discriminatory actions of perpetrators. Through our review of the literature, we extract guiding principles that provide suggestions, strategies and interventions that disrupt, diminish, or terminate prejudice and discrimination at the individual level. Because of space limitations, however, we confine our discussion of micro-interventions to primarily individual offenders. This is not to deny the importance of addressing macroaggressions, as there is a huge need for scholars and practitioners to develop antiracist microintervention strategies directed at biased institutional programs and practices and toward biased societal social policies as well.

### **Targets**

*Targets* are people of color who are objects of racial prejudice and discrimination expressed through micro/macroaggressions. The experience of a microaggression can often feel isolating, painful and filled with threat (Sue, 2010). In the race-related stress-coping literature, the first rule of thumb for targets is to *take care of oneself* (Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015; Mellor, 2004). In this respect, it is important to distinguish between the internal (survival and self-care goals of the target), and the external (confronting the source) objectives in dealing with bias and discrimination. It is often problematic to ask people of color to educate or confront perpetrators when the sting of prejudice and discrimination pains them. A number of coping or self-care strategies in the face of racism have been identified: social support (Shorter-Gooden, 2004), spirituality and religion (Holder et al., 2015), humor (Houshmand, Spanierman, & De Stefano, 2017), role shifting (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003), armoring (Mellor, 2004), cognitive reinterpretation (Brondolo et al., 2009),



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withdrawing for self-protection (Mellor, 2004), self-affirmations (Jones & Rolon-Dow, in press), and directly or indirectly confronting the racism (Obear, 2016). It is this last proactive response that we believe merits much more attention as it is one of the main explanations for inaction in the face of microaggressions.

Little has been done to offer people of color the tools and strategies needed to disarm, diminish, deflect, and challenge experiences of bias, prejudice, or aggression (Mellor, 2004). Although it is important not to negate the functional survival value of self-care for people of color, it represents a defensive or reactive strategy that does not eliminate the source of future acts of bias. The experiences of discrimination can be jarring and can cause a “freeze effect” (Goodman, 2011). Without knowing what to do or how to respond, targets often experience great anxiety, guilt, and self-disappointment. People of color often wish to confront the aggressor but their lack of action or paralysis leads to later rumination about the situation and to negative self-evaluations (Shelton et al., 2006; Sue et al., 2007). Additionally, individuals who do not stand up for themselves often experience feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. The result may be a fatalistic attitude and belief that racism is normative and must be accepted (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000).

Rather than perpetuate a sense of resignation, it would be beneficial to (a) provide targets with a repertoire of interpersonal responses to racism, (b) arm them with the ability to defend themselves, (c) offer guiding principles and a rationale behind using external intervention strategies, and (d) decrease the negative impact on their mental health and well-being. Response strategies provide targets with the

tools to be brave in the face of adversity and to feel dignified, leading to an increased sense of self-worth. They also provide targets with the ability to dispel racist attitudes of perpetrators through educational and action-oriented approaches, leading to a greater sense of self-efficacy. Unfortunately, not responding often leads to internalizing prevalent racist attitudes and negative beliefs about oneself (Speight, 2007).

### White Allies

*Allies* are individuals who belong to dominant social groups (e.g., Whites, males, heterosexuals) and, through their support of nondominant groups (e.g., people of color, women, LGBTQ individuals), actively work toward the eradication of prejudicial practices they witness in both their personal and professional lives (Broido, 2000; Brown & Ostrove, 2013). Allies surpass individuals who simply refrain from engaging in overt sexist, racist, ethnocentric, or heterosexist behaviors; but rather, because of their desire to bolster social justice and equity, to end the social disparities from which they reap unearned benefits, and to maintain accountability of their actions to marginalized group members, they are motivated to take action at the interpersonal and institutional levels by actively promoting the rights of the oppressed (Brown & Ostrove, 2013). Like targets, allyship development involves internal and painful self-reckoning, and a commitment to external action.

The internal component for potential White allies involves soul searching as to who they are as racial/cultural beings, acknowledging and overcoming their biases, confronting their motivations for engaging in antiracism work, and recognizing how their lives would be changed for the better in the absence of oppression (Edwards, 2006; Helms, 1996). As indicated by Helms’ (1996), developing a non-racist White identity is a major step toward social justice work; allies are motivated by an intrinsic desire to advocate for equity rather than by White guilt or to seek glorification as a “White savior.” Her theory of White racial identity development addresses this issue profoundly, and is central to our understanding of the difference between the development of a nonracist identity (interpersonal reconciliation with Whiteness) and an antiracist identity (taking external actions against racism). When individuals expect credit for being an ally, broadcast their self-righteousness to others, or do not accept criticism (especially from persons of color) thoughtfully, their work as an ally becomes questionable (Spanierman & Smith, 2017).

Scholars in the field of racism have been advocating for dialogue, openness, and social action for many years (Helms, 1996; Sue, 2015; Tatum, 1997). These works have often been the basis of colloquial strategies for breaking down racism and developing an “allied” identity for White people. It is a concerted movement from words toward



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action, from privilege toward understanding one's positionality in oppression, and from identifying oppression to making a daily effort to resist that make allies distinct from bystanders, families, or friends (Brown, 2015; Reason & Broido, 2005). Allies possess affirmative attitudes on issues of diversity (Broido, 2000), consciously commit to disrupting cycles of injustice (Waters, 2010), and do not view their work as a means to a measurable end but a constant dismantlement of the individual and institutional beliefs, practices, and policies that have impeded the social growth and wellbeing of persons of color.

The shift from a nonracist identity to an action-oriented approach, however, assumes that activists have in their response repertoire the knowledge and skills to combat racism effectively. This may be a fallacious assumption as most educational and training programs often fall far short of teaching White allies the concrete and direct action strategies needed to influence perpetrators and social systems (Scully & Rowe, 2009; Sue, 2017).

## Bystanders

*Bystanders* can be anyone who become aware of and/or witness unjust behavior or practices that are worthy of comment or action (Scully & Rowe, 2009). In many respects, the definitions of targets, allies, and bystanders may overlap, but research on White allyship suggests that allies are more likely to have an evolved awareness of themselves as racial/cultural beings, and to be more attuned to sociopolitical dynamics of race and racism (Broido, 2000; Helms, 1996). Although anyone can be a bystander, including targets (witnessing discrimination against a member of their

group), we reserve this term for individuals who may possess only a superficially developed or a nebulous awareness of racially biased behaviors, and of institutional policies and practices that are not fair to a person of color or racial group. These individuals do not fall into the classes of targets or White allies but represent the largest plurality of people in society.

Most bystanders experience themselves as good, moral, and decent human beings who move about in an invisible veil of Whiteness (Sue & Sue, 2016), have minimal awareness of themselves as a racial/cultural being (Helms, 1996), and who possess limited experiences with people of color (Jones, 1997). Their naiveté about race and racism makes it very difficult for them to recognize bias or discrimination in others, and/or how institutional policies and practices advantage select groups and disadvantage groups of color. When they witness a discriminatory incident, for example, they may have difficulty labeling it as a racist act or they may excuse or rationalize away the behavior as due to reasons other than racism (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002; Obear, 2016). Even when right or wrong behavior is recognized, inaction seems to be the norm rather than the exception.

Considerable scholarly work has attempted to explain the passivity of bystanders, even in the face of clear normative violations (Latané & Darley, 1968, 1970; Scully, 2005). Diffusion of responsibility, fear of retaliation, fear of losing friends, not wanting to get involved, and other anticipated negative consequences have all been proposed as inhibiting active bystander interventions. A number of social scientists, however, have begun to turn their attention to exploring conditions that would enhance or enable bystanders to intervene (Ashburn-Nardo, Morris, & Goodwin, 2008; Rowe, 2008; Scully, 2005). Four requirements for bystander action seem important: (a) the ability to recognize acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, (b) the positive benefits that accrue to the target, perpetrator, bystander, and organization through taking action, (c) providing a toolkit for active bystander interventions, and (d) the use of bystander training and rehearsal (Scully & Rowe, 2009).

## Responding to Microaggressions

People of Color, White allies, and bystanders would all benefit from being cognizant of concrete strategies to disarm microaggressions. Although our focus is on interpersonal microaggressions, we propose a broader conceptual framework based on intervention strategies directed toward biased (a) individual perpetrator actions, (b) institutional programs, practices, and structures, and (c) social and community policies (see Figure 1). The choice and appropriateness of an action strategy may depend on which group is responding to racism, and whether the intervention strategy is directed toward a perpetrator, institution or societal pol-



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icy. The antiracist techniques and strategies are not meant to be exhaustive, nor are they seen as universally applicable to all groups, populations, or institutional/societal structures, but rather are an attempt to list a few of the strategic goals and objectives that underlie antiracism interventions.

### **Microinterventions**

We define microinterventions as the everyday words or deeds, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicates to targets of microaggressions (a) validation of their experiential reality, (b) value as a person, (c) affirmation of their racial or group identity, (d) support and encouragement, and (e) reassurance that they are not alone. The term *microaffirmation* has occasionally been used to refer to some of these behaviors (Jones & Rolon-Dow, in press), but microinterventions are much broader in scope. In many respects, they have two primary functions. First, they serve to enhance psychological well-being, and provide targets, allies, and bystanders with a sense of control and self-efficacy. Second, they provide a repertoire of responses that can be used to directly disarm or counteract the effects of microaggressions by challenging perpetrators. They are interpersonal tools that are intended to counteract, change or stop microaggressions by subtly or overtly confronting and educating the perpetrator.

Although some may perceive microinterventions to be small and insignificant actions that potentially trivialize the nature of racism, many scholars have suggested that the everyday interventions of allies and well-intentioned bystanders have a profound positive effect in creating an inclusive and welcoming environment, discouraging nega-

tive behavior, and reinforcing a norm that values respectful interactions (Aguilar, 2006; Houshmand et al., 2017; Jones & Rolon-Dow, in press; Mellor, 2004; Scully & Rowe, 2009). In other words, microinterventions can have a *macroimpact* by creating a societal climate in public forums, employment settings, and educational institutions that encourage the positive and discourage the negative (Scully & Rowe, 2009).

Microaggression interventions undertaken by individuals may vary in the degree of subtlety or directness. Unless adequately armed with strategies, microaggressions may occur so quickly that they are oftentimes over before a counteracting response can be made. A review of responses to racism, suggest that microaggression reactions/interventions may be primarily to (a) remain passive, retreat, or give up, (b) strike back or hurt the aggressor, (c) stop, diminish, deflect, or put an end to the harmful act, (d) educate the perpetrator, (e) validate and support the targets, (f) act as an ally, (g) seek social support, (h) enlist outside authority or institutional intervention, or (i) achieve any combination of these objectives (Aguilar, 2006; Brondolo et al., 2009; Houshmand et al., 2017; Joseph, & Kuo, 2009; Mellor, 2004; Obear, 2016).

Table 1 provides a listing of a few of the individual intervention strategies identified in our review of the literature. It has been a monumental undertaking to classify and organize the many tactics suggested by antiracist activists because they are often presented as simple *comebacks* without a clear explication of their rationale. We provide a conceptual framework of microinterventions divided into five categories: *strategic goals*, *objectives*, *rationale*, *tactics*, and *examples*. We elaborate on some of these to illustrate the principles for their inclusion, provide examples of microintervention tactics that can be taken, and discuss their potential desired outcome. It is important to note, however, that developing microinterventions is not only a science but also an art. Implementing or using the tactics can be manifested in many ways and is most influenced by creativity and life experiences (Sue, 2015). The strategic goals of microinterventions are to (a) make the “invisible” visible, (b) disarm the microaggression, (c) educate the offender about the metacommunications they send, and (d) seek external support when needed. It is important to note, however, that almost all the tactics outlined in Table 1 may overlap with one another, depending on the motives of the target, ally, or bystander. Oftentimes, the same tactic may be used either to disarm the microaggression or to educate the offender. In many cases, a microintervention tactic may operate from a combination of these goals.

### **Strategic Goal: Make the “Invisible” Visible**

It is oftentimes much easier to deal with a microaggression that is explicit and deliberate because there is no

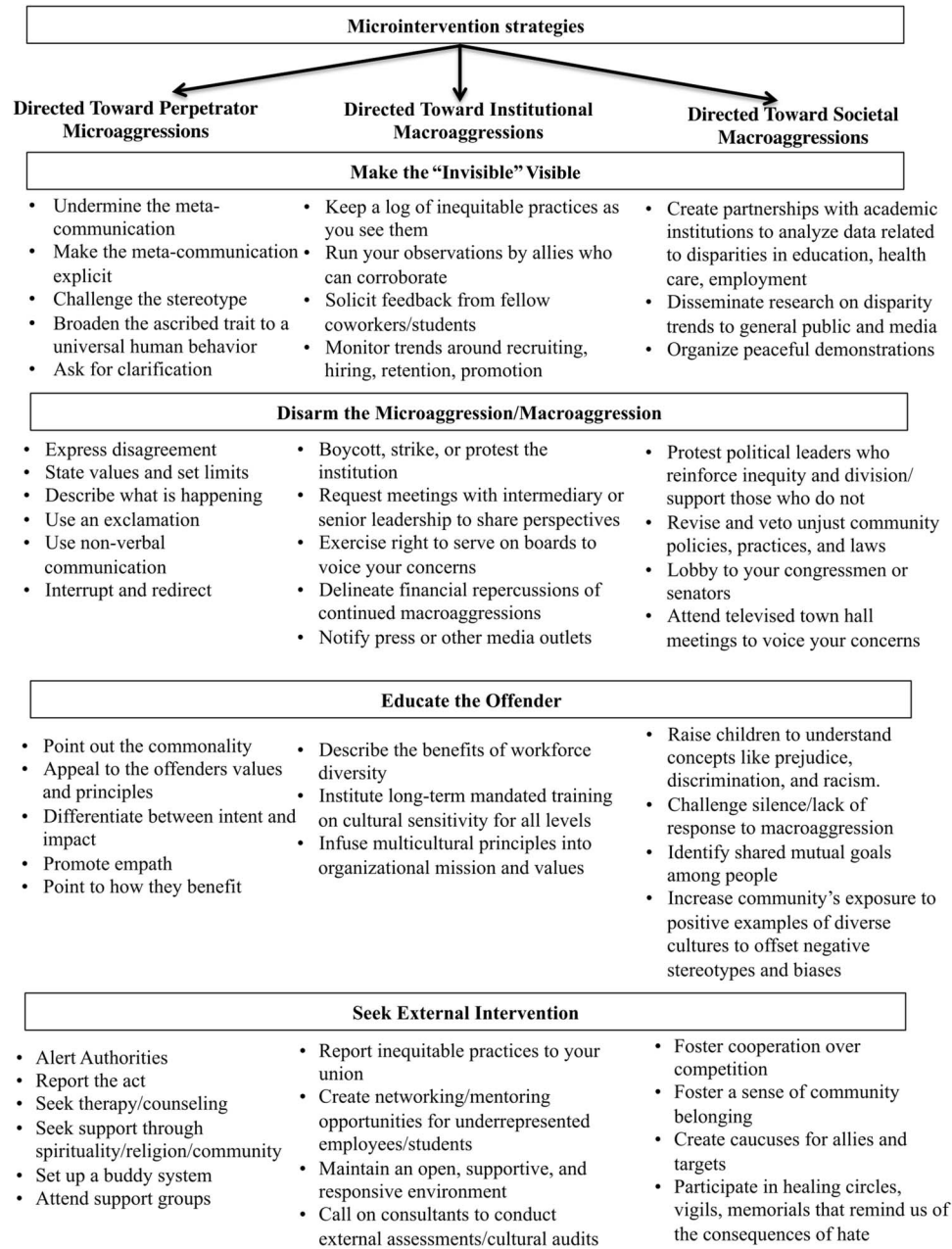


Figure 1. Microintervention strategies.

guesswork involved about the intent of the perpetrator (racial epithets or hate speech). Most microaggressions, however, contain both a conscious communication and hidden or metacommunication that is outside the level of perpetrator awareness (Nadal et al., 2014). Naiveté and innocence make it very difficult for offenders to change, if they perceive their actions as devoid of bias and prejudice (Jones, 1997). Microintervention tactics aimed at making the “invisible” visible can take many forms. Undermining or naming the metacommunication is an example of one of these tactics outlined in Table 1. For

example, a White teacher says to a third-generation Asian American student, “You speak excellent English!” The metacommunication here may be “You are a perpetual alien in your own country. You are not a true American.” In using a microintervention tactic, the student responds, “Thank you. I hope so. I was born here.” This tactic may seem simplistic, but it does several things. It acknowledges the conscious compliment of the perpetrator, lowers defensiveness for the comeback to follow, subtly undermines the unspoken assumption of being a foreigner, and plants a *seed* of possible future awareness of



Table 1  
*Microintervention Strategies*

Strategic goals	Objectives	Rationale	Tactics	Examples
Scenario: <i>African American male enters an elevator occupied by a White heterosexual couple. The woman appears anxious, moves to the other side of her partner, and clutches her purse tightly.</i> Metacommunication: <i>Black men are dangerous, potentially criminals, or up to no good.</i>				
Make the "invisible" visible	Bring the micro-/macroaggression to the forefront of the person's awareness	Allows targets, allies, and bystanders to verbally describe what is happening in a nonthreatening manner	Undermine the metacommunication	"Relax, I'm not dangerous."
	Strike back, defend yourself, or come to the defense of others	When allies or bystanders intervene, reassures targets they are not "crazy" and that their experiences are valid		"Don't worry, John is a good person."
	Indicate to the perpetrator that they have behaved or said something offensive to you or others	When those with power and privilege respond, has greater impact on perpetrator	Name and make the metacommunication explicit	"You assume I am dangerous because of the way I look."
	Force the perpetrator to consider the impact and meaning of what was said/done or, in the case of the bystander, what was not said/done		Challenge the stereotype	"I might be Black, but that does not make me dangerous."
			Broaden the ascribed trait	"Robberies and crimes are committed by people of all races and backgrounds."
			Ask for clarification	"Do you realize what you just did when I walked in?" "Do you feel afraid to be in this elevator with me?" "What was that all about? Are you afraid of him?"
Scenario: <i>Colleague makes the following statement about a new employee with a visible disability: "He only got the job because he's handicapped."</i> Metacommunication: <i>People with disabilities only receive opportunities through special accommodations rather than through their own capabilities or merit.</i>				
Disarm the microaggression	Instantly stop or deflect the microaggression	Provides targets, allies, and bystanders with a sense of control and self-efficacy to react to perpetrators in the here and now	Express disagreement	"I don't agree with what you just said."
	Force the perpetrator to immediately consider what they have just said or done	Preserves targets' well-being and prevents traumatization by or preoccupation with what transpired		"That's not how I view it."
	Communicate your disagreement or disapproval towards the perpetrator in the moment	Allows perpetrator to think before they speak or behave in future encounters with similar individuals	State values and set limits	"You know that respect and tolerance are important values in my life and, while I understand that you have a right to say what you want, I'm asking you to show a little more respect for me by not making offensive comments."

Table 1 (continued)

Strategic goals	Objectives	Rationale	Tactics	Examples
			Describe what is happening	"Every time I come over, I find myself becoming uncomfortable because you make statements that I find offensive and hurtful."
			Use an exclamation	"Ouch!" "Ahhh, C'mon!"
			Nonverbal communication	Shaking your head Looking down or away Covering your mouth with your hand
			Interrupt and redirect	"Whoa, let's not go there. Maybe we should focus on the task at hand."
			Remind them of the rules	"That behavior is against our code of conduct and could really get you in trouble."
Scenario: <i>Student in a chemistry class makes the following comment about an Arab American student:</i> "Maybe she should not be learning about making bombs and stuff." Metacommunication: <i>All Arab Americans are potential terrorists.</i>				
Educate the offender	Engage in a one-on-one dialogue with the perpetrator to indicate how and why what they have said is offensive to you or others	Allows targets, allies, and bystanders the opportunity to express their experience while maintaining a relationship with the offender	Differentiate between intent and impact	"I know you didn't realize this but that comment you made was demeaning to Maryam because not all Arab Americans are a threat to national security."
	Facilitate a possibly more enlightening conversation and exploration of the perpetrator's biases	Lowers the defense of the perpetrator and helps them recognize the harmful impact	Appeal to the offender's values and principles	"I know you really care about representing everyone on campus and being a good student government leader but acting in this way really undermines your intentions to be inclusive."
	Encourage the perpetrator to explore the origins of their beliefs and attitudes towards targets	Perpetrator becomes keen to microaggressions committed by those within their social circle and educates others	Point out the commonality	"That is a negative stereotype of Arab Americans. Did you know Maryam also aspires to be a doctor just like you? You should talk to her; you actually have a lot in common."
			Promote empathy	"The majority of Arab Americans are completely against terroristic acts. How would you feel if someone assumed something about you because of your race?"
			Point out how they benefit	"I know you are studying clinical psychology. Learning about why those stereotypes are harmful is going to make you a better clinician."
Seek external reinforcement or support	Partake in regular self-care to maintain psychological and physical wellness	Mitigates impact of psychological and physiological harm associated with continuous exposure to microaggressions	Alert leadership	Ask to speak to a manager or someone who is in authority
	Check in with self and others to ensure optimal levels of functioning	Reminds targets, allies, and bystanders that they are not alone in the battle	Report	Report the incident in person or use anonymous online portals such as the Southern Poverty Law Center or use a hashtag on social media to make your experience go viral
	Send a message to perpetrators at large that bigoted behavior will not be tolerated or accepted	Ensures situations of discrimination or bias do not go unnoticed	Therapy/counseling	Seek out individual counseling with culturally competent providers for self-care and well-being

(table continues)

Table 1 (continued)

Strategic goals	Objectives	Rationale	Tactics	Examples
			Spirituality/religion/ community	Turn to your community leaders or members for support
			Buddy system	Choose a friend with whom you can always check in and process discriminatory experiences
			Support group	Join a support group such as "current events group" that meets weekly to process issues concerning minorities

false assumptions. With some modification, this type of response can also be made by White allies or bystanders who hear or see the transgression.

For targets, especially, there are other advantages to making the "invisible" visible. Disempowering the innuendo by "naming" it has been advocated by Paulo Freire (1970) in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He concluded that the first step to liberation and empowerment is "naming" an oppressive event, condition or process so it no longer holds power over those that are marginalized. It demystifies, deconstructs and makes the "invisible" visible. Naming is (a) liberating and empowering because it provides a language for people of color to describe their experiences and (b) reassures them that they are not *crazy*. It further forces those with power and privilege to consider the roles they play in the perpetuation of oppression.

Likewise, White allies and bystanders cannot intervene when they are unable to recognize that a microaggression has occurred. The first rule of effective intervention is the quality of *perspicacity* or the ability to see beyond the obvious, to read between the lines, and to deconstruct conscious communications from metacommunications. Being able to decipher the double meanings of microaggressions is often a challenging task. Sternberg (2001) described perspicacity as a quality that goes beyond intellect but encompasses wisdom that allows for a person's clarity of vision, and penetrating discernment. Racial awareness training has been found to be effective in helping individuals recognize prejudicial and discriminatory actions, and to increase bystander intervention in the workplace (Scully & Rowe, 2009).

### Strategic Goal: Disarm the Microaggression

A more direct means of dealing with microaggression is to disarm them by stopping or deflecting the comments or actions through expressing disagreement, challenging what was said or done, and/or pointing out its harmful impact. This more confrontive approach is usually taken because of the immediate injurious nature to targets and those who witness it. One technique advocated by Aguilar (2006) is to state loudly and emphatically, "Ouch!" This is a very simple tactic intended to (a) indicate to the perpetrator that they

have said something offensive, (b) force the person to consider the impact and meaning of what they have said or done, and (c) facilitate a possible more enlightened conversation and exploration of his or her biases. Some examples are the following: "Those people all look alike" ("Ouch!"); "He only got the job because he's Black" ("Ouch!"); and "I'm putting you on the finance committee, because you people (Asian Americans) are good at that" ("Ouch!").

Another tactic found to be useful is to interrupt the communication and redirect it. During the course of a conversation when a microaggression, or a biased, and misinformed statement is made, simply interrupt it by directly or indirectly stopping the monologue, and communicating your disagreement or displeasure. This is very effective when a racist or sexist joke is being told. Examples of verbal microinterventions are these (Aguilar, 2006): "Whoa, let's not go there," "Danger, quicksand ahead!" and "I do not want to hear the punchline, or that type of talk." Nonverbal responses may include shaking your head (disapproval) and physically leaving the situation.

### Strategic Goal: Educate the Perpetrator

Although microinterventions often create discomfort for perpetrators, most are not meant to be punitive, but rather educational (Sue, 2015). When microinterventions are used, the ultimate hope is to reach and educate the perpetrator by engaging them in a dialogue about what they have done that has proven offensive, what it says about their beliefs and values, and have them consider the worldview of marginalized group members (Goodman, 2011). We realize that education is a long-term process and brief encounters seldom allow an opportunity for deep discussions, nevertheless, over the long run, microinterventions plant seeds of possible change that may blossom in the future. This is especially true if they are exposed to frequent microinterventions by those around them, creating an atmosphere of inclusion and an environment that values diversity and differences (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008; Scully & Rowe, 2009). Many brief educational tactics can be taken by targets, allies, and bystanders to educate perpetrators. In Table 1, these include appealing to the offender's values and principles, pointing out the commonalities, increasing the

awareness of professional and societal benefits, and promoting empathy.

One of the most powerful educational tactics is to help microaggressors differentiate between good intent and harmful impact. When microaggressions are pointed out to perpetrators, a common reaction is defensiveness and shifting the focus from action to intention (Sue, 2015). Here, the person who may have engaged in behaviors or made a statement perceived as biased claims that “I did not intend it that way.” In racial dialogues, shifting the topic to intent is tactically very effective because proving biased intent is virtually impossible. To overcome the blockage, it is often helpful to refocus the discussion on impact instead of intent. Some common statements may be the following: “I know you meant well, but that really hurts”; “I know you meant it as a joke, but it really offended Aisha (or me)”; “I know you want the Latinas on this team to succeed, but always putting them on hospitality committees will only prevent them from developing leadership skills”; “I know you kid around a lot, but think how your words affect others”; and “I know you meant it to be funny, but that stereotype is no joke.”

### Strategic Goal: Seek External Reinforcement or Support

There are times in which individual efforts to respond to microaggressions may be contraindicated, and the most effective approach is to seek external support from others or from institutional authorities (Brondolo et al., 2009; Mellor, 2004). Targets, allies, and bystanders oftentimes put themselves at risk by confronting others about their microaggressions, and such efforts are often emotionally draining (Sue, 2017). Although the concept of racial battle fatigue is very applicable to targets, social justice advocates must also be prepared for the huge pushback likely to occur from others around them. Perpetrators may deny a target’s experiential reality by claiming the person of color is *oversensitive*, *paranoid*, or *misreading the actions of others*. For allies and bystanders who choose to intervene, they may be accused as *White liberals*, or *troublemakers*, and consequently isolated or avoided by fellow White colleagues. A family member who objects to a racist joke told by an uncle, for example, may be admonished not to rock the boat for the sake of family harmony, or threatened to be disowned by the family. Antiracism work is exhausting and seeking support and help from others is an aspect of self-care.

Some important actions that can be taken are to find a support group, utilize community services, engage in a buddy system, or seek advice and counseling from understanding professionals. These external sources are meant to allow targets, allies, and bystanders to express their emotions in ways that are safe, to connect with others who validate and affirm their being, and to offer advice and suggestions. In many ways, these actions are meant to better

prepare advocates for the challenges likely to be encountered, and to immunize them to the stresses of social justice work.

On another front, microinterventions often dictate seeking help from institutional authorities, especially when (a) a strong power differential exists between perpetrator and target, (b) the microaggression is blatant and immediately harmful (microassault), (c) it would be risky to respond personally, or (d) institutional changes must be implemented. A discriminatory act by a manager may best be handled by reporting to a higher authority or seeking an advocate with the same social/employment standing as the perpetrator within the company. Reporting racist graffiti and/or hate speech to university administrators, law enforcement agencies, and other community organizations are all possible microinterventions.

### Context Matters

It would be erroneous and even dangerous for anyone to recommend microintervention strategies devoid of context and environmental considerations. Microaggressions do not occur in a vacuum and neither do antiracism strategies. White allies and bystanders who intervene after witnessing racial microaggressions may have a greater impact on the White perpetrator than targets who respond. Yet, it is also possible that a well-intentioned bystander might “make matters worse” by intruding on the privacy of the target (Scully & Rowe, 2009). It is important for all individuals engaging in microinterventions to operate with perspicacity and to understand the repercussions—both positive and negative. A few of these considerations are the following.

First, *pick your battles*. Although applicable to all three groups, this imperative seems more appropriate to people of color. Responding to frequent and endless microaggressions can be exhausting and energy depleting. For the purposes of self-preservation and safety, it is important to determine which offense or abuse is worthy of action and effort.

Second, *consider where and when you choose to address the offender*. Calling out someone on a hurtful comment or behavior in public may provoke defensiveness or cause an ugly backlash that does not end microaggressions but increases them. Determine the place (public or private), or time (immediate or later) to raise the issue with perpetrators.

Third, *adjust your response as the situation warrants*. If something was done out of ignorance, *educate* rather than just *confront*. A collaborative rather than an attacking tone lowers defensiveness and allows perpetrators to hear alternative views.

Fourth, *be aware of relationship factors and dynamics with perpetrators*. Interventions may vary depending on the relationship to the aggressor. Is the culprit a family member, friend, coworker, stranger or superior? Each relationship may

dictate a differential response. For a close family member, education may have a higher priority than for a stranger.

Last, *always consider the consequences of microinterventions, especially when a strong power differential exists between perpetrator and target*. Although positive results can ensue from a microintervention, there is always the potential for negative outcomes that place the target, White ally, or bystander at risk.

## Discussion

In closing, we would like to suggest possible future directions in the study of microinterventions and provide a few general observations. First, although the existing stress-coping literature has identified valuable strategies in dealing with general stress, there is little research on microintervention coping strategies. It is imperative to identify new race-related response strategies, to determine their impact on microaggressive comments or actions, and to establish their effectiveness. It would also be valuable to determine the potency of microintervention training, and whether increasing the arsenal of antiracism strategies for targets have any positive effect on mental health, feelings of increased efficacy, and self-esteem. Likewise, does arming targets, allies, and bystanders with microinterventions increase the likelihood of challenging microaggressions? A reason often given for inaction in the face of bias is “not knowing” what to do. Additionally, “Do targets always want bystanders and allies to intervene?” Are there specific instances when interventions would be harmful to targets by reducing self-efficacy and autonomy, or actually increasing microaggressions? If so what are those situations and conditions? Further, what is the relationship of racial, cultural, and gender differences in responding to racist acts or statements? Do certain coping responses or specific microintervention strategies align better with some cultures or social identities? Lee, Soto, Swim, and Bernstein (2012) found that Asian Americans typically utilize indirect and more subtle approaches to maintain interpersonal harmony, whereas African Americans tend to confront racism more directly. To assume one is more functional than the other is to make an ethnocentric value judgment. It may be better to approach this issue by asking, “What role does race, culture, and ethnicity play in confronting discrimination, and what are the advantages and disadvantages that arise from their culture-specific use?” It is clear, that the concept of microinterventions is a complex issue, and future research is needed to clarify their manifestation, dynamics and impact.

Second, in the arena of education and training, identifying microintervention strategies and skills is not enough to produce actions on the part of well-intentioned individuals. It is clear that active interventions will only occur when other inertia and inhibitions are overcome, and when these skills are learned, practiced, and rehearsed. Some organiza-

tions in the business sector have begun “active bystander” training in confronting prejudiced responses (Aguilar, 2006; Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008; Scully & Rowe, 2009). We believe such training would also benefit targets and White allies, and suggest similar microintervention training programs for psychology, education and other social service professions.

Third, this article has mainly addressed the microaggressions delivered on individual and interpersonal levels. Future research and work aimed at disarming macroaggressions at the institutional and societal levels are equally if not more important to develop. What can targets, allies, and bystanders do to impact macroaggressions that flow from the programs, procedures, practices, and structures of institutions and from societal social policies? We are currently working on delineating microintervention strategies at the institutional and societal levels shown on Figure 1.

Fourth, readers are probably aware that some of our examples and statements are not simply confined to racial microaggressions. Almost any marginalized group in our society can be subjected to microaggressions. Thus, many of our microintervention strategies may be equally applicable to gender, sexual orientation/identity, disability and other group-based micro/macroaggressions as well. We strongly encourage other scholars and practitioners to explore microintervention strategies that may not only share commonalities with other target populations, but also those unique to the group.

Last, it would be a monumental mistake to believe microinterventions alone would cure the omnipresent onslaught of microaggressions, and lead to the enlightenment of perpetrators. It is important to note that microaggressions are reflections of explicit and implicit biases and simply stopping prejudicial actions is not enough, unless serious internal self-reckoning occurs. Although microinterventions are short-term frontline actions that deal with the immediacy of racism expression, we believe they have major potential positive benefits for targets, White allies, bystanders, and ultimately our society.

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