

# Protocols in Practice: Racial Microaggressions Text-Based Discussion

Wendy Brannen, New York, and Kim Feicke, Oregon

**W**e are a group of African-American and white NSRF facilitators actively striving to build alliances across race in our work. As a part of learning how to work together in new and different ways, we structured a dialogue around this focus question: What do we need from each other across difference in order to sustain and deepen our alliances and work in the face of aversive racism and racial microaggressions?

“Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color. Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities.”<sup>1</sup>

We used the article “Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life, Implications for Clinical Practice” by Wing Sue, Derald et al and the Save the Last Word for Me Protocol. Since members of our group live in different locations, our discussion occurred over the phone. We asked folks to post their selected quote from the article online before the discussion to make it easier to follow along and respond. The following are edited excerpts from our discussion.

Participants: Camilla Greene, Wendy Brannen, Debbie Bambino, Mary Hastings, Kim Feicke, RoLesia Holman

**Quote:** *The fact that people of color have had to face daily microaggressions and have continued to maintain their dignity in the face of such hostility is a testament to their resiliency. What coping strategies have been found to serve them well? A greater understanding of responses to microaggressions, both in the long term and the short term, and of the coping strategies employed would be beneficial in arming children of color for the life they will face.* (D. W. Sue, 2003)

## Discussion

Kim: This is not only detrimental for kids of color but for white kids as well. What are the microaggressions that are reinforced for them and taught right now and they don't even know they're being taught? When do we get to a place when the work isn't about teaching coping strategies to kids of colors, but about educating and preventing racial microaggressions from taking place?

RoLesia: Fortunately, some Blacks have been taught and know the counter-narratives explained

by Lisa Delpit in “Young, Gifted and Black: Promoting high achievement Among African-American Students.” When taught by knowledgeable/culturally aware Blacks, we know the truth in addition to what's been told/said/shown about us by Whites. We have a foundational knowledge that counters the negative images and inferiority perpetuated upon us by Whites. It's imperative that we teach our children how to navigate these two worlds.

Camilla: This passage pointed to the fact that kids and people of color have these coping strategies that in the face of racial microaggressions help them maintain their dignity and help them persevere. I'm wondering what it is that we need to know about this and study it and figure out how people of color (cope). A lot of people in the dominant culture say they're fearful and I think partly our coping strategies make us courageous. They make us face fear many, many, many, many times and push through it. So that becomes a strength for African-Americans and people of color.

**Quote:** *Minorities, on the other hand, perceive Whites as (a) racially insensitive, (b) unwilling to share their position and wealth, (c) believing they are superior, (d) needing to control everything, and (e) treating them poorly because of their race. People of color believe these attributes are reenacted everyday in their interpersonal interactions with Whites, oftentimes in the form of microaggressions.*

## Discussion

Mary: My reaction to that was, yeah, the sense of the superiority and the need to control and that being in and of itself, a microaggressive attitude toward people of color and even people of the same culture in some cases. And I guess when I read that too I think about, wow, that's how I am perceived by people of color in general. I'm part of that culture that has those qualities or appears to have those qualities.

Wendy: It's sad in terms of the oppression and unfortunately the anger and stress that the kids have reacting to this and possibly not knowing and also knowing why. And I think because of the privilege of my white colleagues here it's just been so ingrained. It's a work in progress but it's still basically within our group. It's going to be an ongoing process to work towards it and I respect that fact that there's growing awareness amongst

(continued on page 13)

you to look at how you are perceived by people of color.

RoLesia: Yeah! To some extent I believe these to be true for all/most whites. I believe they would agree for the most part. I also think some people of color feel likewise after assimilating to a certain level of status. Internalized oppression is what comes to mind.

Debbie: Getting it in one instance doesn't necessarily mean getting it in the next instance. There's always that tension of trying to understand but trying to be vigilant and not feeling like my progress is the responsibility of my colleagues of color but wanting to make sure that we have the kind of honesty where people don't feel that they have to continually make the choice of whether we are worth telling the truth to, because we may come back with "oh no it was something else" or "oh no you misunderstood."

**Quote:** *Microaggressions are often unconsciously delivered in the form of subtle snubs or dismissive looks, gestures and tones. These exchanges are so pervasive and automatic in daily conversations and interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocent and innocuous. Yet, as indicated previously, microaggressions are detrimental to persons of color because they impair performance in a multitude of settings by sapping the psychic and spiritual energy of recipients and by creating inequities.*

### Discussion

Camilla: I think about sitting in meetings, often when you're the only person of color and someone from the dominant culture will roll their eyes at you and say something. That is an image I have in my mind of when I've touched the nerve of someone in the dominant culture. People may not even be aware that they have that kind of reaction. I think an ally is someone who has stopped not knowing and someone who is on guard and is trying to reverse a lot of this.

RoLesia: Attending to our intellectual, physical, spiritual and emotional selves. This education is necessary to consciously, deliberately, intentionally interrupt derogatory comments and behaviors. We must interrupt them whenever we can. Important that we do it in tandem with others. If not, it is overwhelming to have to carry this burden alone. This is some of the reason our students check out and behave in non-productive ways in our schools

and communities.

Debbie: I think all of us have been in situations where people of color get quiet and we know people have something to say. Or where one of you said something and it doesn't get followed up on and then becomes our idea or some other white person's idea a few moments later, as if you didn't say something in the first place. I think it's our responsibility not to let that go and not to always make it the responsibility of the person who's being given the look or being passed over.

Mary: I just saw myself in this quote. I saw it loud and clear and it's not that I'm that much better at it but it is something I feel I'm getting more conscious of; and I agree with Kim, it is something we have to be in together and be conscious of it all the time.

**Quote:** *In essence, the catch-22 means you are 'damned if you do, and damned if you don't.'*

### Discussion

Wendy: This takes me back to how much power silence has. We give the power to the person who has launched the microaggression and for me it becomes more difficult if I choose to ignore it.

Camilla: I also see from this point in my life and throw caution to the wind more often than not and just do...for all the people who cannot find their voices, for all the people who are not at the table, and so I think I can take whatever's going to be handed or dished out in certain environments. However, I think in our allyship it's not an either or. That it's an understanding, I don't know how to explain it, so that I can actually say I don't choose to address this right now and that would be okay.

Kim: How are we pushing that for ourselves, how can we at least, for ourselves, create the space where we're not damned if we do and damned if we don't? Some way that we can begin to unpack this for ourselves in a way that provides a different way to work together and a different level of honesty about the work that we're doing? ■

<sup>1</sup> Wing Sue, Derald et al. "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life, Implications for Clinical Practice." *American Psychologist*. May-June 2007.

Wendy Brannen can be reached at [windchimer357@aol.com](mailto:windchimer357@aol.com), and Kim Feicke can be reached at [feicke@clark.edu](mailto:feicke@clark.edu).

