Microaggressions and Social Work Practice, Education, and Research

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While blatant forms of racism and discrimination have largely been "condemned" in our society, systematic oppression and racism can be manifested in less obvious forms as microaggressions. The term *microaggressions* was originally coined by Chester Pierce in the 1970s (Pierce, 1970, 1974) to describe ways that Black people were put down by their White counterparts. Pierce (1974) stated "one must not look for the gross and obvious. The subtle, cumulative mini-assault is the substance of today's racism" (p. 516). Sue and colleagues (2007) define microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward persons of color" (p. 271). Current definitions have expanded the scope of microaggressions to describe both conscious and unconscious acts that reflect superiority, hostility, discrimination, and racially inflicted insults and demeanors to various marginalized groups of people based on such identities as race/ethnicity, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, religion, class, and age (Nadal, 2008; Sue, 2010). Although the literature on microaggressions has proliferated over the past decade, the social work literature has been relatively quiet. This special issue provides a platform for social work researchers, educators, and practitioners to exchange their research, ideas, and practices pertaining to ways in which microaggressions and other subtle, but powerful, forms of discrimination impact marginalized populations within social work and human services.

This special issue is timely for a number of reasons. We need to look no further than the current political landscape to observe how microaggressions play themselves out in our everyday lives. Certainly, gains have been made and we must thank our ancestors who have always demonstrated various forms of resistance against what Young (2004) notes as the five faces of oppression: violence, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism. In fact, today, we have greater equity and opportunity, more representation in

leadership, and just laws and policies in place to protect underrepresented individuals from discrimination than ever before. Yet, we still see evidence of interpersonal and structural inequality as discrimination has evolved from overt to implicit forms. Disparities continue to exist in health and access to resources and underrepresentation persists with our institutions, including the academy.

From the cases of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin and 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, which spurred the #BlackLivesMatter movement, to flyers circulated around the University of Michigan campus titled "Why White Women Shouldn't Date Black Men," we see the work that is ahead of us. From a presidential candidate's Twitter account that proclaims, "If Hillary Clinton can't satisfy her husband what makes her think can she satisfy America?" to a skeleton hanging from a noose wearing a dashiki on a college campus, we see the work that is ahead of us. However, as heinous as these events may be, they do not represent the numerous microinsults (i.e., verbal or nonverbal behaviors that send denigrating messages) and micro-invalidations (i.e., unconscious verbal statements in which the perpetrator may be well-intentioned but convey negative messages) that marginalized people face on an everyday basis (Sue, 2010). These microaggressions are often most harmful when they are perpetrated by loved ones, trusted friends, and progressive-minded people, like many in the social work profession. They occur in our research, our practice, and in our classrooms.

In my own life and practice as a Native Hawaiian researcher, I am also keenly aware of the microaggressions that I encounter on a daily basis that seem so innocent to others, but remind me of the oppression that my people face.

> What? There are poor people in Hawaii? I never saw them when I visited.
> Aren't you afraid of island fever? I could never live on an island!
> You're Hawaiian? Do you surf [haha]?
> Oh, I love Hawaii! My family has a timeshare on Kauai and we visit every year!
> What language do you speak there? Can you say something in your native tongue?

On bad days, I usually smile and answer in the most courteous way I know how. On better days, I try to educate. But as much as I feel the sting of their comments, I must understand that as a light-skinned, highly educated, middle-class, able-bodied, male Native Hawaiian, my story is different, and I can have bad days because in the grand scheme of things I am protected by a shroud of privilege. I do not have to confront or challenge these individuals, because oppression does not require me to actively discriminate to perpetuate it; it just requires that I do nothing to stop it. And this is how microaggressions flourish.

Although microaggressions can occur out of pure ignorance and misunderstanding, ironically, the insidious nature of these microaggressions often

originates in what we are taught. They are the conversations that happen at our dinner table, college parties, and workrooms among our family members, friends, and co-workers. They are represented in the memes on the Internet, the mascots for the teams we root for, television and movies, classrooms, and billboards. Microaggressions are learned through the dominant culture, which subtly teaches us to suspect, distrust, fear, and claim superiority in morals, behaviors, values, beliefs, and rationale over others. It is what some call "common sense," which is validated by their shared worldview with other members of the dominant group. As social workers, when we intervene, we often assume that we are doing so with good intentions and in the best interest of clients. We use our worldview in making this assumption. However, what we may not understand is that there are costs and benefits for making this assumption. As a Native Hawaiian, my ancestors were colonized and acculturated into the dominant culture. The intention of the colonizer was to tame the savage beast and make the Native more like them, perhaps even with good intention, to integrate us into their new society or perhaps for our own salvation. Today, most Native Hawaiian people do not speak their language or practice their culture, but are still not fully integrated into society and instead witness their culture appropriated for profit by the same dominant group that hoped to extinguish it.

Thus, even in the year 2017, we are still in need of education and research in the area of microaggressions and discrimination. I am proud to serve on the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work* (*JECDSW*) and as Guest Editor for two special issues on microaggressions. I would like to thank Dr. Mo Yee Lee (*JECDSW* Editor in Chief), Nancy Yates, Taylor and Francis, and the Editorial Board of *JECDSW* for their support and assistance in creating the space for these special issues. The goal of the JECDSW is to develop knowledge and promote understanding of the impact of culture, ethnicity, and class on the individual, group, organization, and community on the delivery of human services. Published since 1990, it is one of the only major journals dedicated to examining diversity issues in social work and human services. Since our call for papers, we received an overwhelming number of manuscripts that were outstanding. To accommodate as many of the papers as possible, we divided the special issue into two issues: the current double issue, which focuses on conceptual, theoretical, and research studies, and a second forthcoming issue that focuses on social work education. The articles in this special issue cover a range of social identities and examine various physical, psychological, and social consequences of microaggressions. The first section organized by articles focused on physical and mental health is led by a study by Kevin L. Nadal and colleagues, which focuses on the relationship between microaggressions and various physical health conditions. The study uses the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS), developed by Nadal (2011), one of the most prolific and influential scholars in the

microaggression literature. The second article, by Shinwoo Choi, and colleagues demonstrates the moderating role of ethnic identity as a buffer for the relationship between microaggressions and depressive symptoms among Asian-Americans. The next article, by Katie Johnston-Goodstar and Ross VeLure Roholt, presents a community-based, mixed-method study, which documents microaggressions against Native students in schools and its impact on school climate and "push-out." Alana M. W. LeBrón and members of the REACH Detroit Partnership coauthor the next article, which uses data from my REACH Detroit Family Intervention to examine correlates of discrimination among Latinos with type 2 diabetes. The final article in this section is led by Dawne M. Mouzon and members of the National Survey of American Life team from the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research. The study found that among African-Americans, everyday racial discrimination had an adverse impact on physical health outcomes while non-racial discrimination did not.

The second section of this special issue focuses on gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation and microaggressions. The first article, by Paul R. Sterzing and colleagues, emphasizes an intersectional lens when examining microaggressions across social identities, including gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Michael R. Woodford and colleagues examine environmental microaggressions in a mixed-method study of trans* collegians using data from the National Study of LGBTQ Student Success. The authors found that trans* environmental microaggressions had a negative impact on academic outcomes and that systemic microaggressions exist for advancing trans* inclusion in the university. The next article, by Kristie L. Seelman and colleagues, draws from a survey of 497 gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLBTQ) college students and demonstrates that microaggressions can lead to lower self-esteem and greater anxiety and stress among GLBTQ students. The study also explores the moderating role of gender identity on this relationship.

The final section of this special issue examines emerging research on social identities less common in the literature, but growing in their relative importance. The first article, by Rita Dhungel, provides an important qualitative case study of female sex-trafficking survivors in Nepal. She documents how these women were called terms like *beysa* (i.e., whore), treated as other, rejected, and objectified and how this impacted their daily lives. The second article, by Altaf Husain and Stephenie Howard, builds off the literature on religious microaggressions (e.g., Nadal et al., 2012) and offers implications for social work practice, policy, and education. Finally, this special issue concludes with an article by Gina C. Torino and Amanda G. Sisselman-Borgia on homeless microaggressions and posits several themes, including subhuman status; aesthetically unappealing; criminal status/

dangerous; assumption of mental illness; assumption of substance abuse; laziness; and intellectual inferiority.

While I had hoped that a wide range of social identities could be represented in this special issue, those included are not meant to be inclusive of all possible groups that experience microaggressions. This issue also does not cover all possible forms of microaggressions or forms of implicit discrimination that may exist, including color blindness and post-racial attitudes. Although focused on the negative outcomes of microaggressions, this special issue does not amplify the strengths, instinct for survival, resistance, and resilience of oppressed groups to the extent that it perhaps should. Rather, I hope it is a starting point for dialogue and discussion among social work researchers, educators, practitioners, and students as to how social power and privilege continue to perpetuate inequity within our society. Perhaps it will lead to further reflection on how we too perpetuate microaggressions in our daily lives through our thoughts and actions. I close with a quote from the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, who said the following:

> Watch your thoughts; they become words.
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> Watch your words; they become actions.
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> Watch your actions; they become habits.
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> Watch your habits; they become character.
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> Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.

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