

Overcoming Microaggressions: Toxic Rain in Higher Education

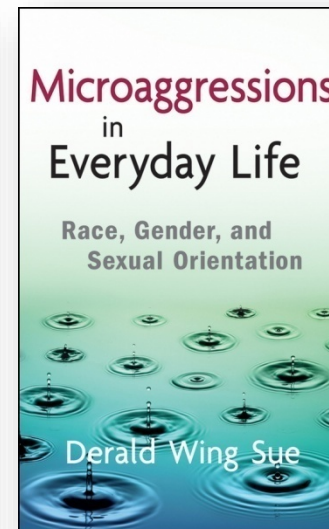
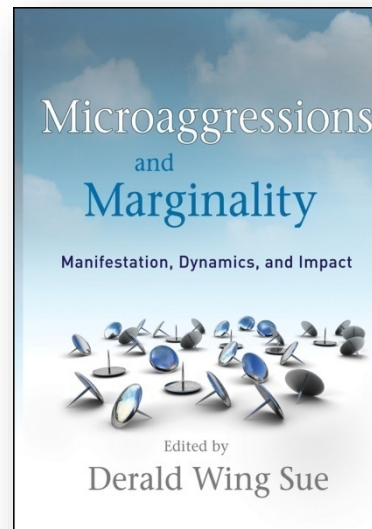
Southwestern Ohio Council for Higher Education

By

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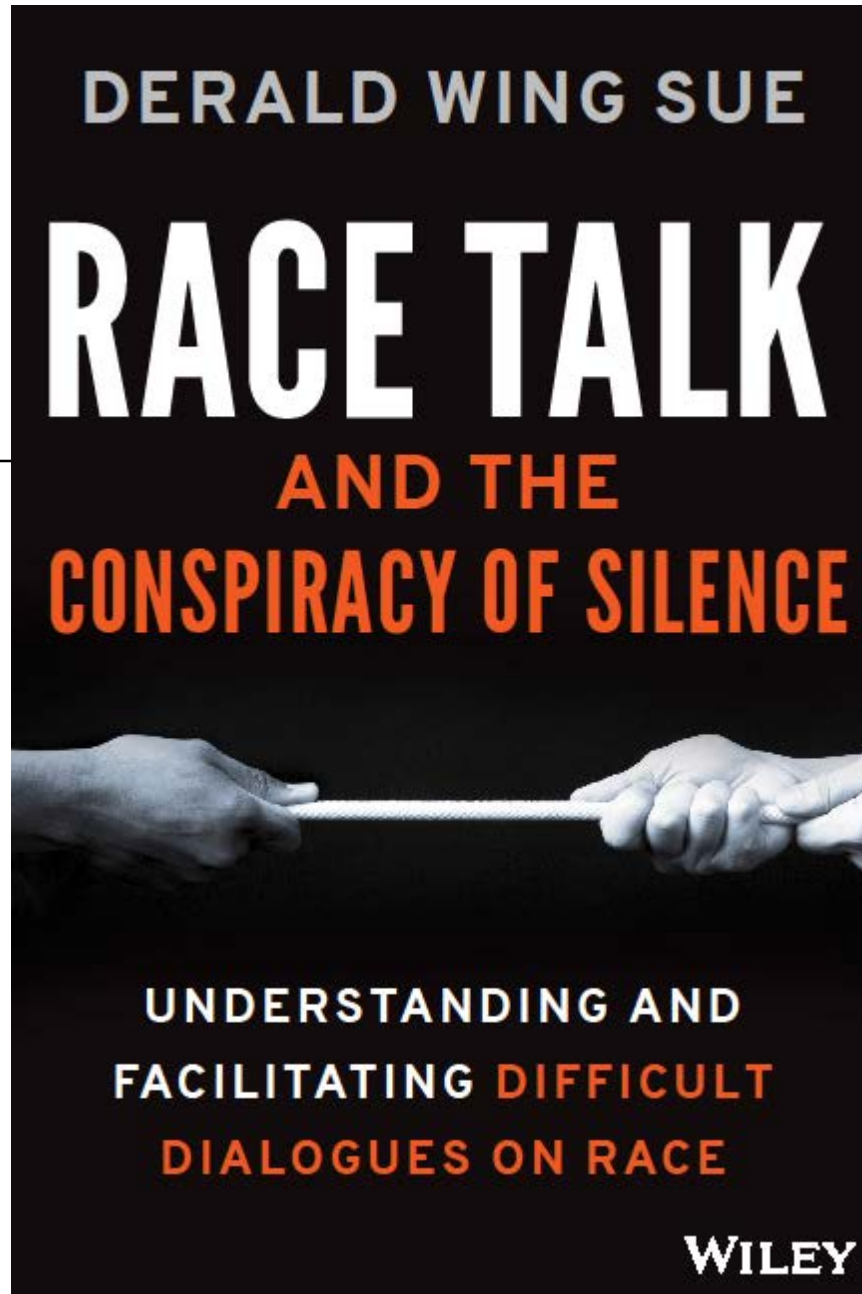
April 15, 2016





Race Talk

January
2015



In Memory of Maya Angelou





Dedication

Maya Angelou
1928-2014

Still I Rise

**"You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may tread me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise."**

**"You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise."**

Racial Microaggression Impact

- *“It gets so tiring, you know. It sucks you dry. People don’t trust you. From the moment I [Black male] wake up, I know stepping out the door, that it will be the same, day after day. The bus can be packed, but no one will sit next to you.....I guess it may be a good thing because you always get more room, no one crowds you. You get served last...when they serve you, they have this phony smile and just want to get rid of you....you have to show more ID to cash a check, you turn on the TV and there you always see someone like you, being handcuffed and jailed. They look like you and sometimes you begin to think it is you! You are a plague! You try to hold it in, but sometimes you lose it. Explaining doesn’t help. They don’t want to hear. Even when they ask, ‘Why do you have a chip on your shoulder?’ Shit...I just walk away now. It doesn’t do any good explaining.” (Sue, 2010, p. 87).*

Gender Microaggression Impact

- ▶ *“I don’t know what it was...I should have felt excited and honored to be at (Ivy Institution), one of the top universities in the country. The Program Chair made me feel welcomed during the interview process and during my job talk. But during my first week here, I felt unwelcome, isolated, unsafe and alienated. It started with the new faculty orientation. We were all standing during a tour of the main conference room, and I noticed that every single past president of the university were White men. When I scanned the group of new faculty, I also noticed that there was only two other women in the group. The men in the group, even though they not know one another, seemed to make friends quickly. They were talking about sports and especially “Linsanity.” I tried to enter the conversation but was ignored. At least, that’s what I felt. Was I being oversensitive?”*

Gender Microaggression Impact

- *Later that week, I was introduced to a senior faculty member in the Department. ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘you must be the new female faculty member we hired to replace Jess. Welcome, but I always believe a hiring decision should be based upon competence and not gender or race. I hope you are up to the task. Men don’t stand a chance these days. We take pride in being on the cutting edge of scholarship, and don’t tolerate slackers.’ He was very abrupt and unfriendly. I couldn’t believe it! His comments made me so angry. It was insulting! Does he think I’ll sit in my office and eat bon bons all day? I thought, what have I gotten myself into?”*

A Clash of Racial/Gender Realities

Questions:

- **Is life as hard as this Black man describes, and is the female faculty member justified in her reactions?**
- **Are they both exaggerating or misreading the action of others? Are they both oversensitive or even paranoid?**
- **Is the Black man right in concluding that others don't want to listen to his explanations?**
- **Is the female faculty member being purposefully excluded from the group of men?**
- **Why are they so angry and resentful?**
- **Do you believe the Black man and female faculty member? If not, what are your reasons?**



Some Personal Examples

- **“You speak excellent English!”**
- **“Where were you born?”**
- **Campus Climate –
Environmental Microaggressions**

Microaggressive Examples

- Racial Microaggressions

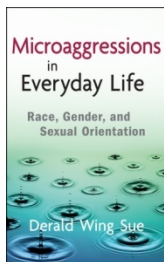
A Black male student is complimented by the teacher for being so articulate and bright. (**Hidden Message: Most Blacks are inarticulate and lack intelligence.**)

A third generation Asian American is complimented by a new White neighbor for speaking such “good English.” (**Hidden Message: Asian Americans are perpetual aliens in their own country.**)

- Gender Microaggressions

A female resident (physician) wearing a stethoscope is mistaken by patients for a nurse. (**Hidden Message: Women should occupy nurturing and not decision-making roles. Women are less capable than men.**)

Male workers in private refer to a female supervisor as “bitchy” while their male counterparts are described as “decisive and confident managers.” (**Hidden Message: Women should be passive and allow men to be decision makers.**)



Microaggressive Examples

- Sexual Orientation Microaggressions

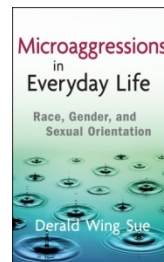
Students in class refer to a fellow straight student as “gay” (“That’s so gay!”) who is socially ostracized. (Hidden Message: People considered weird, strange, deviant or different are “gay.”)

A lesbian client reluctantly discloses her sexual orientation to a straight counselor trainee by stating that she was “into women.” The counselor indicates he is not shocked by the disclosure because he once worked with a client who was “into dogs.” (Hidden Message: Same-sex attraction is abnormal and deviant.)

- Other Socially Devalued Group Microaggressions

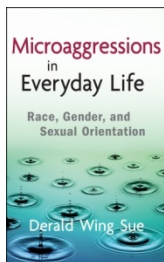
When bargaining over the price of a used book, one student says to the other “Don’t try to Jew me down.” (Hidden Message: Jews are stingy and money-grubbing.)

A blind student reports that teachers, staff, and fellow students raise their voices when speaking to him in the school. He responds by saying “Please don’t raise your voice; I can hear you perfectly well.” (Hidden Message: A person with a disability is defined as lesser in all aspects of physical and mental functioning.)



Microaggressions

- **Microaggressions can be defined as**
 - **brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities,**
 - **whether intentional or unintentional,**
 - **which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights, invalidations, and insults**
 - **to an individual or group because of their marginalized status in society.**



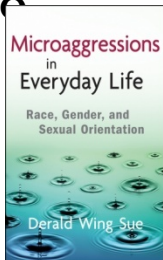


Microaggressions

- **Microaggressions are “subtle, stunning, often automatic verbal and non-verbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’.**
- **They have also been described as subtle insults delivered through dismissive looks, gestures and tones (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) toward people of color, women or LGBTpersons often automatically or unconsciously.**

Microaggressions

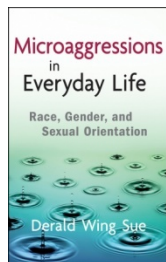
- **Simply stated, microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to marginalized groups.**
- **At work, employees of color and women, for example, often describe microaggressions as a pattern of being overlooked, under-respected and devalued because of their race.**
- **When racial microaggressions occur, they present a highly charged racial situation that challenges workers and their bosses.**
- **The perpetrators (whether coworkers or superiors) are often unaware that a microaggressive event, incident or communication has occurred. They may, however, sense that something is brewing but be unable to identify or articulate it.**



Microaggressive Themes Among Employees of Color and Women

People of color and women often

- experience the **work or campus climate** as isolating, alienating, extremely stressful, risky and invalidating (Harlow, 2003; Stanley, 2006; Turner, Gonzalez & Wood, 2008);
- more likely experience being **"the only one"** that leads to feelings of isolation and loneliness (Alexander & Moore, 2008);
- **lack mentors, advisors, teachers** who possess knowledge of marginalized groups in the institution (Stanley, 2006);
- have their work, work products, and **competence devalued** and considered illegitimate (Guzman, Trevino, Lubuguin, & Aryan, 2010);
- have their **racial or gender identities** assailed (Harlow, 2003);
- experience elevated levels of **stress and distress** (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2008);
- be subjected to biased **performance appraisal decisions** (Fenelon, 2003), and
- have many more coworkers and superiors question their **qualifications or credentials** to hold the status of "professor or administrator" (Harlow, 2003)."





Six Basic Assumptions

- **1. We have been socialized into a society in which there exists individual, institutional and societal biases associated with race, gender and sexual orientation.**
- **2. None of us are immune from inheriting the biases of our ancestors, institutions and society.**



Six Basic Assumptions

- **3. It is not “old-fashioned” racism, sexism and heterosexism that is most harmful to people of color, women and LGBT persons but the contemporary forms known as *microaggressions*.**

Disparities: Old Fashioned Bigotry or Microaggressions

White EuroAmerican males are only 33% of the population:

1. They occupy 80% of tenured positions in higher education.
2. 80% of House of Representatives
3. Over few years between 80%-90% of the U.S. Senate
4. 92% of Forbes 400 Executive CEO level positions
5. 90% of Public School Superintendents
6. 99.9% of Athletic Team Owners
7. 97.73% of U.S. Presidents

Six Basic Assumptions

- **4. The characteristics of these forms of bias are their invisible, unintentional and subtle nature; usually outside the level of conscious awareness.**
- **5. Racial, gender and sexual orientation microaggressions create psychological dilemmas for the perpetrator and recipient because they represent a clash of racial, gender and sexual orientation realities.**
- **6. Microaggressions create a hostile and invalidating climate for marginalized groups, saps their spiritual and psychic energies, and their cumulative nature can result in depression, frustration, anger, rage, loss of self esteem, anxiety, etc.**



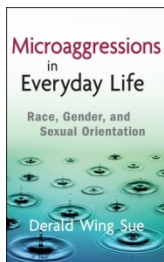
Harmful Impact Controversy

1. Microaggressions are constant and continual without an end date (an everyday hassle may be time limited).
2. Microaggressions are cumulative and any one may represent the feather that breaks the camel's back
3. Microaggressions must be deciphered because they contain double messages (especially microinvalidations)
4. Microaggressions are constant reminders of a person's second class status in society
5. Microaggressions symbolize past historic injustices (enslavement of African Americans, incarceration of Japanese Americans and the taking away of land from Indigenous peoples).

Harmful Impact

Studies reveal, that microaggressions, while seemingly trivial in nature have major consequences for marginalized groups in our society because they:

- (a) assail the **mental health** of recipients (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008),
- (b) create a hostile and invalidating **campus climate** (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000),
- (c) perpetuate **stereotype threat** (Steele, Spencer, & Aronson, 2002),
- (d) create physical **health problems** (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999),
- (e) saturate the broader society with cues that signal devaluation of **social group identities** (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, & Dittmann, 2008),
- (f) lower **work productivity** and **problem solving** abilities (Dovidio, 2001; Salvatore & Shelton, 2007).
- (g) and are responsible for creating **inequities in education, employment and health care** (Purdie-Vaughns, et al, 2008; Sue, 2010).





Harmful Impact: Conclusions

- **Far from being benign and small slights, microaggressions have “macro” impact.**
- **1. Psychological, Emotional and Physical Consequences.**
- **2. Create disparities in education, employment and health care.**



Targets: Survival Strategies

- **1. Perspicacity: Accurately Perceive the Situation – Unmask Meaning**
- **2. You're Not Crazy**
- **3. Take Care of Yourself First**
- **4. Seek a Support Group – Validation**
- **5. To Act or Not To Act: That is the Question?**
- **6. To Act but How to Act: That is Another Question?**
- **7. What are the Consequences for Action or Inaction?**
- **8. What Are the Most Effective Responses?**

Educating Perpetrators

Taken from *Ouch! That Stereotype Hurts*. Sunshower Learning (2007).

- **1. Explain Good Intent and Explain Impact.**
- **“I know you mean well, but that hurts.”**

- **2. Ask a Question.**
- **“What do you mean?”**

- **3. Interrupt and Redirect.**
- **“Let’s not go there.”**

Educating Perpetrators

- 4. Broaden to Universal Human Behavior.
 - *"I think that applies to everyone."*
- 5. Make it Individual.
 - *"Are you speaking of someone in particular?"*
- 6. Say Ouch.
 - *"OUCH!"*



Race Talk

Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race: For Educators and Administrators

Ineffective Strategies:

1. **Doing Nothing**
2. **Sidetracking the Conversation**
3. **Appeasing the Participants**
4. **Terminating the Discussion**
5. **Becoming Defensive**



Race Talk

Successful Strategies: “Courage is being honest when it is unsafe to do so.”

- 1. Understanding one’s racial/cultural identity.**
- 2. Being open to admitting racial biases.**
- 3. Being open and comfortable in discussing topics of race and racism.**
- 4. Understanding the meaning of emotions.**
- 5. Validating and facilitating discussion of feelings.**



Race Talk

- 1. Control the process and not content of race talk.**
- 2. Unmask the difficult dialogues through process observations and interventions.**
- 3. Do not allow difficult dialogue to be brewed in silence.**
- 4. Understand differences in communication styles.**
- 5. Forewarning, planning and purposefully instigating race talk.**
- 6. Validate, encourage and express appreciation to participants who speak with it is unsafe.**



Characteristics of Culturally Competent Institutions of Higher Education

- **1. Culturally competent and inclusive universities are ones which evidence multicultural commitment from the very top levels.**
- **2. Culturally competent and inclusive universities have a written policy, mission or vision statement which frames the concepts of multiculturalism and diversity into a meaningful operational definition.**
- **3. Culturally competent and inclusive universities have developed a multicultural and diversity action plan with clear objectives and timelines.**
- **4. Culturally competent and inclusive universities have created a superordinate or oversight team/group which is empowered to assess, develop and monitor the organization's development with respect to the goals of multiculturalism.**
- **5. Culturally competent and inclusive universities actively solicit feedback from students and employees related to issues of race, culture, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.**

Characteristics of Culturally Competent Institutions of Higher Education

- **6. Culturally competent and inclusive universities build multicultural accountability into the system.**
- **7. Culturally competent and inclusive universities infuse multiculturalism into evaluation criteria used for hiring and promotion of faculty, administrators and staff.**
- **8. Culturally competent and inclusive universities recognize that mentoring and support networks for minority faculty and staff are vital for success and that the presence of an “the old boy’s network” may adversely impact them.**
- **9. Culturally competent and inclusive universities encourage coalition building and networking among minorities and women.**
- **10. Culturally competent and inclusive universities have a systematic and long-term commitment to educate the entire workforce concerning diversity issues, to address barriers which block multiculturalism and to increase the sensitivity of workers.**
- **11. Culturally competent and inclusive universities are viewed as both part of and a reflection of the wider community.**