Professional Challenges Facing African American Psychologists: The Presence and Impact of Racial Microaggressions

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**Racial discrimination has evolved** to occur on a continuum ranging from constant yet covert experiences to very explicit and blatant hate crimes and assaults (Williams et al., 2014). Researchers argue that a modern form of racial mistreatment, termed *racial microaggressions*, is more subtle, frequent, and can include daily racial slights or insults directed towards racial minorities (Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010). Such mistreatment can be detected in nonverbal or verbal expression, can seem unintentional or intentional, and appear vague or specific, thereby generating a variety of experiences that place the responsibility on the racial minority to decipher whether a given experience was racially motivated or not (Torres et al., 2010). Within these interactions, there is variability regarding one's awareness of racial microaggressions as influenced by the individual's level of racial consciousness (Constantine & Sue, 2007; Helms, 1984). There are commonly three categories of such experiences: microsaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. This paper will focus on the latter two categories (Sue et al., 2007).

Microinsults are subtle messages that demean and debase the racial heritage or identity of minorities. Such racial microaggressions can include a peer/colleague expressing skepticism regarding an African American's qualification for a prestigious position or their ability to obtain a prestigious position or their ability to obtain a prestigious position, which may unintentionally communicate that the intellectual contributions of the racial minority are not important or valued (Sue et al., 2007). Additionally, microinsults can include the unintentional endorsement of both positive and negative stereotypes. For example, a peer may interact with a Black male exclusively to discuss recent sporting events. Within an academic environment, limitation of conversational content to sports, may reinforce the idea the Black male solely possesses expertise in sports, despite having rich and varied domains of intellectual ability and interest. Moreover, this example becomes more nuanced if the Black male is not personally interested in sports, but must appear knowledgeable about sports to preserve the vitality of his social interactions with his non-Black colleagues. Importantly, this example demonstrates that (a) microaggressions do not necessarily encompass malicious intent towards racial minorities, and (b) seemingly innocent attempts to socially interact inadvertently incite unwanted social pressure.

Similar to microinsults, microinvalidations are covert messages that may result in the unconscious mistreatment of racial minorities. Sue and colleagues (2007) define this category of racial microaggressions as messages that “exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological feelings, or experiential reality of people of color” (p. 274). Commonly, microinvalidations include statements and/or broad social interactions that minimize the importance of one's racial/ethnic heritage. For example, though

the apparent goal of statements such as “I don’t see race or color when I talk to you” is to communicate acceptance and inclusion, such statements also have an underlying message that the racial minority's acceptance and inclusion is in spite of their physical appearance or racial/cultural experiences. Such statements devalue the minority's racial/ethnic heritage. Another example of microinvalidations can include the dismissal of a racial minority's belief that negative or uncomfortable life events may have resulted from racism (e.g., “Let’s hope you weren’t treated that way due to racism”). Extant literature has demonstrated that there are social costs for making causal attributions to discrimination, which include being rated less likeable, viewed as a complainer, and viewed as attempting to avoid personal responsibility (Garcia, Reser, Amo, Redersdorf, & Branscombe, 2005; Stangor, Swim, Van Allen, & Sechrist, 2002). Therefore, racial minorities must attempt to resolve dissonance between their personal reality of encountering race-based stressors and microinvalidations which communicate racism is not a valid explanation for their experiences.

**Microaggressions in Academia/Professional Settings**

In an attempt to illustrate the impact of racial microaggressions on the daily experiences of Black psychologists in academia and other professional settings, we will utilize a conceptual model that is inspired by the stress-coping literature (Torres et al., 2010). Broadly, the model conceptualizes racial microaggression as a potentially stressful life event commonly experienced by Black psychologists which requires ongoing cognitive appraisal and coping to manage cognitive, emotional, environmental, and physiological consequences associated with such experiences. According to Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, Delongis, and Gruen (1986), when negative life events are encountered, an individual engages in cognitive appraisal, which entails a determination of the potential threat and overall impact the life event can have to an individual's well-being. The individual engages in a primary appraisal (or the rating of how affecting or meaningful the event is) and a secondary appraisal (or the contemplation of the availability of resources to assuage the potential impacts of the stressor). For Black psychologists, there are a number of potentially stressful events within professional settings, such as...
time management of various responsibilities spanning teaching, mentorship, clinical supervision, or publishing. However, microaggressions generate an added stress that minorities are required to manage. Extant literature has demonstrated that racial discrimination (which subsumes racial microaggression) is predictive of negative health outcomes beyond solely accounting for perceived life stress, thereby demonstrating the unique source of stress that racial microaggressions can have on Black psychologists (Clark et al., 1999; Pieterse, Todd, Neville, & Carter, 2012; Torres et al., 2010). As such, the amalgamation of the already taxing demands of one’s professional setting with the race-based stress of microaggressions engenders a distinct experience for the Black psychologist.

Race-based stress may involve interactions with superiors, colleagues, administrative staff, and students (Pittman, 2010, 2012; Torres et al., 2010). Several studies investigating such experiences in graduate students and faculty have captured an array of racial microaggressions commonly encountered in this environment. Torres and colleagues assessed the experiences of Black individuals who had obtained or were in the process of obtaining a degree in various disciplines (i.e., physical sciences, health sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities) and found three primary themes descriptive of their encounters with racial microaggressions. First, the theme of “assumptions of criminality/second-class citizen” described race-based negative experiences in which a Black individual was confronted as if he/she were doing something illegal or treated in a demeaning fashion. For example, a professor in this study reported that a distinct obstacle in the academic environment is “getting past peoples’ expectations and perceptions of what it is to be a young Black man. . . . Once while working towards my master’s I was told by a woman that worked at the university that I should not shave my head because I looked like a criminal and looked like other Black people” (Torres et al., 2010, p. 1085). This man’s statement is characteristic of a microinvalidation in that it communicates there is something wrong with resembling other African Americans; it conveys that the standards of an academic setting require the abandonment of one’s racial/ethnic heritage (e.g., African style of dress) to belong and be respected. Potentially more concerning is that this statement also labels Black men with shaved heads as criminal, communicating that if this Black scholar were to wear such a hair style, then he looks like a “thug.” As a result of such messages, Black scholars may become hypervigilant of their image, which can come in the form of monitoring their style of speech, emotional expression, and style of dress. For example, a Black male scholar reported that he is “very cognizant” of how others may perceive him and attempts to avoid confirming pathological stereotypes often associated with being a Black male (Constantine, Smith, Redington, & Owens, 2008). Specifically, he acknowledges that by simply being a Black male, he “may be intimidating to some people,” which translates into combating such perceptions by “dress[ing] in a certain way” and not saying “anything grammatically incorrect or anything that might perpetuate stereotypes about Black people” (Constantine et al., 2008, p. 353).

Additionally, a commonly endorsed microaggression included interactions that communicated an “underestimation of personal ability”—the encountering of messages regarding how others perceive a person’s ability or capacity to succeed in a professional setting. This type of microaggression can be in the form of a microin-sult or microinvalidation (e.g., feeling as if others in your department do not value your scholarly work, especially when it focuses on race/ethnic/gender issues; Constantine et al., 2008), and can foster a motivation to constantly prove one’s ability. For example, a Black graduate student explained, “most of the time, I get the feeling that others do not feel that I belong. That the only reason I am there is to fill a quota. I have overheard comments about the concern for my lack of ability to perform as others. This is nothing new. When I finish this degree and get in the real world this mess will continue to exist” (Torres et al., 2010, p. 1085). This illustrates that racial microaggressions are a common and expected obstacle to be overcome as an individual continues to grow in their career.

Along these lines, Constantine et al. (2008) found a similar theme among African American scholars, which she described as “Alternating Feelings of Invisibility/Marginalization and Hypervisibility.” Specifically, these participants perceived that they were invisible to the members of their department until cultural matters became a department priority (e.g., multicultural requirements for accreditations, minority recruitment). For example, Black faculty and students often become hypervisible when there is a need for someone to serve on race-related committees, to lead race/culture-related classes, and to attend race-related meetings. On the surface, the expectation for African American scholars to fulfill such responsibilities seems intuitive, especially if race or culture-related topics are a focus of their scholarly work. However, the disproportionate expectation for these individuals to fulfill these roles in addition to the typical demands of their academic work, can communicate that Black psychologists are solely valued as experts on “all things Black” (Pittman, 2012). Collectively, these findings describe that African American scholars can be confronted with contradictory messages that question, demean, and devalue their intellectual ability until moments where their expertise as a member of the Black community is a high priority. Such experiences can contribute to a sense of not belonging, isolation, and poor support.

Aside from comments inciting feelings of isolation or not belonging, there are often contextual dynamics (e.g., few African Americans in various professional settings) that also bolster a sense of cultural/racial isolation. For instance, a Black scholar reported that, “By being [one of] only a few of the minority or Black students in my program, I have had increasing paranoia over the years about people’s perceptions of my academic performance. My anxiety and stress levels have hindered my performance in classes and in my research production” (Torres et al., 2010, p. 1086). This statement highlights how being a visible minority in a professional setting can create an added pressure to perform, which can come at the expense of one’s emotional well-being. Moreover, aside from being the only “one” of your race or ethnicity within a department, institution, or even in the classroom, the theme of cultural/racial isolation can be exacerbated when Black scholars perceive that the racially homogeneous academic environment is unwelcoming or excludes their racial/ethnic heritage (Pittman, 2012).

Additionally, Black members of academia, especially faculty members, encounter racial microaggressions from their students; this experience has been tied to amplified emotional management demands (Harlow, 2003) both within the classroom and outside it. Black professors are also rated lower on student evaluations compared to White faculty, rated as less intelligent relative to White faculty, and
encounter a lack of respect from White students (Dipietro & Faye, 2005; Hamermesh & Parker, 2005; Rubin, 2001). In a recent article published in the New York Times, Dr. Carolotta Berry (2014), an African American professor, explained that "in class, I have my derivations questioned. I feel as if everything I have learned is wrong. I cannot trust anything that I have been taught." Moreover, she noted that "I once had a student who would write notes that I had taken while I was asleep. I once had a student who would review notes with me that he had taken on my lecture, and then offer tips on how I could improve." Her students' actions blatantly communicated she was not qualified to lead the course despite her doctoral-level training and 6 years of expertise. Altogether, these accounts from qualitative research provide an illustration of race-based stressors that Black scholars may encounter within the academic. It should be noted that the summary of these experiences are not deemed universally applicable to all scholars, but should be considered a sampling of how such experiences can generate an added stress or even barriers for Black scholars.

Another professional setting where African American psychologists may encounter racial microaggressions is within clinical practice. As a racial minority in the field of psychology, the odds of working with non-Black clients are relatively high; however, the majority of studies have only examined the presence of racial microaggressions within White therapists–Black client dyads (Bronstein, 1986; Comas-Diaz & Jacobsen, 1995; Jones & Seagull, 1977). Comas-Diaz and Jacobsen uniquely brought to light the power reversal seen in Black therapist–White client dyads in that the relationship is incongruent to the historical racial divisions of class and power in Western society. As a result, a Black therapist may encounter client mistrust, racial guilt or shame, hypercritical interactions (e.g., overemphasizing therapist mistakes), and even have their competency questioned by the non-Black clients (Comas-Diaz & Jacobsen). Among the few studies discussing how such race-based stressors might impact Black therapists, Kelly and Greene (2010) unearth microaggressions that may be unique to female African American therapists. The authors describe that clients might endorse gender-specific stereotypes, such as perceiving Black female therapists as characteristically nurturing and maternal (i.e., the "Mammy" stereotype), overly sexual and seductive (i.e., the "Jezebel" stereotype), or easily angered (i.e., the "Angry Black Woman/Sapphire" stereotype). The authors broadly explain how a client's endorsement of these stereotypes can result in subtle behaviors (e.g., seductive statements directed towards the therapist; client avoiding confrontation in therapy due to fear of therapist's excessive anger) that jeopardize rapport building and overall progression toward treatment goals.

Besides interactions with non-Black clients, Black therapists may also experience racial microaggressions when engaging in clinical supervision. Specifically, Constantine and Sue (2007) surveyed the experiences of Black supervisees and found several broad themes of microaggressions encountered within the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Such themes included microaggressions directed towards Black clients during the supervision period (i.e., communicating stereotypic assumptions about minority clients; heavily emphasizing clinical deficits rather than acknowledging clinical strengths; blaming the clients for their unfortunate circumstances that are rooted in oppression). For example, a Black supervisee recalled that her European American supervisor stated, "You shouldn't expect a lot of African American clients to be in touch with their feelings and do some real intrapsychic work. Sometimes you have to be more directive and problem-focused in dealing with Black people" (Constantine & Sue, p. 146). Also, racial microaggressions were directed towards the Black supervisee in the form of exhibiting stereotypic assumptions about the supervisee, such as making statements like "Don't be late for supervision" and noting that "I don't want [Black people's different time orientation] to turn into some kind of cultural thing" (Constantine & Sue, p. 146). Altogether, these statements illustrate how stereotypes about Black culture distort the quality of supervision as well as influence the rapport within supervisor-supervisee relationship. Such racial microaggressions result in feelings of frustration, anger, and occasionally led to the Black supervisees avoiding discussions of their Black clients as well as broader discussions of racial-cultural issues.

In summary, racial microaggression can impact Black psychologists across diverse professional settings, which most notably includes the academic and clinical arenas. In many of these encounters, it is often unclear that these experiences are attributable to racial biases, which requires the scholar to determine the most realistic cause of their experience. Such ambiguity can result in an array of emotional responses and contribute to stress within the academic environment. For example, Torres et al. (2010) found that racial microaggressions experienced in the academic setting were positively related to future perceived stress, which subsequently predicted depressive symptoms a year later. Also, Black psychologists may feel an added pressure to prove competence and experience anger, resentment, and anxiety following exposure to racial microaggressions (Comas-Dias & Jacobsen, 1995). More broadly, a preponderance of literature has conveyed that the severity, temporality, and chronicity of exposure to discrimination are associated with poor physical and psychological health outcomes across both genders and diverse ethnic groups (Pascoe & Richman, 2009). In particular, evidence supports the harmful effects of discrimination across a multitude of mental health outcomes (e.g., depression, anxiety, psychological distress, well-being: Clark et al., 1999; Paradies, 2006; Soto et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2003). Given its potentially harmful effects, it is imperative that Black psychologists are equipped with resources to manage the onset and emotional responses related to racial microaggressions.

Coping With Microaggressions in Academia

When confronted with stressful situations, an individual's emotional responses are often the impetus that initiates the coping process (i.e., the selection and implementation of coping strategies). When coping with racial microaggressions, the perceived availability and suitability of coping resources in one's environment can influence the overall appraisal of the event and the general perception of life stress (Clark et al., 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), which highlights the importance of having knowledge of accessible resources when confronted by race-based stress.

Torres and colleagues (2010) found that the relationship between racial microaggressions (i.e., the underestimation of personal ability) and perceived stress a year later was moderated by coping style. Although Torres and colleagues did not assess the specific coping strategies utilized to manage the stress associated with racial microaggressions, their findings suggest that certain coping strategies can serve as a buffer against racially stressful
events. As such, we provide a brief summary of the coping strategies implemented by African American psychologists to address race-based stress in academia. However, it is important to acknowledge that no singular coping strategy is thought to be universally effective for all African American scholars, nor is a sole strategy effective across all possible academic situations. To effectively navigate racial microaggressions in academia, one must consider individual goals, desired outcomes, available coping resources, and specific demands of the situation (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

In terms of coping with microaggressions at one’s academic institution or department, ethnic minority female faculty members provide several coping options intended to overcome an unsupportive and unfriendly environment within the department/institution (Thomas & Hollenhead, 2001). For instance, a faculty member described how exhausting and self-defeating such an environment can be and noted that she has observed “talented” scholars begin doubting their abilities. In turn, she recommended that Black scholars establish a social network (either within or beyond one’s academic environment) that will allow them look objectively at their own work and provide a safe place for the personal reflection regarding one’s talents and overall experiences. Moreover, she suggested that scholars utilize this social network “to tell [their] horror stories to one another so [they are] not afraid that it really is [their] problem” (Thomas & Hollenhead, 2001, p.171). In other words, seeking social support can become a source of objective feedback and validation to combat experiences within an unsupportive environment (Constantine et al., 2008). Black psychologists struggle with securing effective and supportive mentorship (Constantine et al., 2008), but the participants in the Thomas and Hollenhead study alluded to the “creative strategies” that African American students, faculty members, and even therapists must employ in order to manufacture the mentorship needed to pursue personal career goals and cope with the stress resulting from microaggressions. Specifically, it is recommended that Black psychologists seek mentorship from others outside of one’s department, institution, or even beyond one’s professional setting as needed. In summary, establishing a social network can provide an emotional outlet, validation and support, and mentorship in pursuit of career goals. Additional strategies include religious coping (e.g., prayer, church group), avoidance of perpetrators of racial microaggressions, and “choosing one’s battles carefully” (e.g., selectively determining when to confront race-based stressors; Constantine et al., 2008).

Regarding coping with microaggressions in the classroom, Pittman (2010) utilized the responses from 16 African American, award-winning faculty to describe potential strategies for managing exposure to racial microaggression from students. Specifically, many of these Black scholars endorsed contemplating whether a student’s openly expressed racial biases could be redirected into a positive teaching opportunity. This approach minimizes the one-on-one confrontation between the instructor-student and instead conveys a broader message about the implications of racial assumptions as it may relate to the course’s material. Along these lines, these scholars generally supported the importance of providing students (especially those who exhibit racial biases towards stigmatized groups) with a safe space to challenge and encounter experiences that disconfirm their preconceived notions about African Americans. A specific strategy for facilitating a safe space is to utilize nonreactive questioning: for example, “Why do you believe that?” or “What enables you to know this about that person or group?” (Pittman, 2010). A similar recommendation was made for coping with racial microaggressions in a clinical setting. Particularly, Kelly and Greene (2010) note that the therapist should be sensitive to the emergence of racial microaggressions within the therapist-client relationship and, when deemed vital to the client’s treatment goals, the authors recommend exploring the client’s racial assumptions of the therapists and setting boundaries when appropriate (e.g., in response to a male client’s seductive advances towards a Black therapist).

Finally, Pittman (2010) found that African American faculty members coped with microaggressions in the classroom by using both assertive actions to establish authority and through the use of anticipatory actions (e.g., discussing expectations for classroom discussions about race; presenting educational credentials at beginning of semester to challenge assumptions of not being qualified). Such coping strategies offer options for addressing the inappropriateness of classroom microaggressions without singling out the racial biases at the foundation of the racially microaggressive behavior (Pittman, 2010).

Conclusion

Racism in the form of racial microaggressions is commonplace and African American psychologists must navigate these experiences in nearly all professional domains. Such experiences are inherently stressful and anxiety producing and can lead to discouragement and feelings of isolation. The negative sequela of such events can be mitigated with proactive coping and judicious handling of select experiences. Nonetheless, additional energies are required to manage the problems that result from pervasive stereotypical beliefs about African Americans and their fitness as scholars and professionals. We need a cultural shift within our own ranks to celebrate African American scholars, not only as worthy fellow psychologists, but as fighters, survivors, and victors in the war against racism.

References


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