MICROAGGRESSIONS BETWEEN THE RACES

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The racial climate in the United States has once again taken a negative turn. Ideas of the nation being a post racial society unfortunately have been proven to be over exaggerated; most recently reported in our nightly news a young Muslim family was executed in their apartment by a white Christian male neighbor and the race riots in Ferguson and even here in Cleveland protesting the shooting of young Black males by White police officers. There also seems to be a breakdown in communication between individuals of different races and creeds. Drummond and Orbe (2010) explain: “Almost without exception, White participants in our study appear to have the lowest level of understanding regarding the sociopolitical constructions of race” (p. 380). The hegemonic or White communities in the U.S. seem to share a mutual misunderstanding of just how much race affects minority groups.

Sue (2010) describes blatant racial discrimination events;

Individual racism is best known to the American public as overt, conscious, and deliberate individual acts intended to harm, place at a disadvantage or discriminate against racial minorities. Serving Black patrons last, using racial epithets, preventing a White son or daughter from dating or marrying a person of color, or not showing clients of color housing in affluent White neighborhoods are all examples (p. 7).

Throughout the nightly news, and littered in both local and national headlines, the idea of racial discrimination is still unfortunately running rampant in the U.S. Along
with the blatant or overt examples and situations of racial aggression, the idea of microaggressions has become more popular within the mainstream vernacular. Sue (2010) defines microaggressions as “the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to a target person or group” (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007, as cited in Sue, 2010, p. 5). Microaggressive acts become harmful as they undermine the equality between individuals of different backgrounds, race, sexual orientation and genders.

Vega (2014), in a New York Times on-line article, explains the growing microaggressive communication happening within the borders of U.S. colleges and universities: “an avalanche of blogs, student discourses, campus theatre and academic papers, they all reflect the murky terrain of (sic) used to describe the subtle ways that racial, ethnic, gender and other stereotypes can play out painfully in, increased diverse culture” (Web). Microaggression awareness is moving from scholarly discourse into the everyday consciousness of U.S. citizens.

A popular web page, microaggressions.com, allows individuals to share examples of the microaggressions they experience in their everyday lives: “But you look so Aryan . . . you so would have made it through the holocaust.’ A class mate on finding out that I am Jewish. I genuinely think he saw it as a compliment” (2015). This is an example of microaggressive behavior that is shared through the many blog posts and web pages. This example demonstrates how microaggressions are not just a Black/White dichotomous racial phenomenon.
Some microaggressions are a type of verbal aggression. Aggressive communication acts have been previously studied. Rancer and Avtgis (2006) describe two destructive aggressive communication traits as “hostility and verbal aggressiveness” (p. 18). Hostility is further defined as “Destructive symbolic aggression” (p. 19), while verbal aggressiveness is defined as, “the tendency to attack the self-concepts of individuals instead of, or in addition to, their positions on topics of communication” (p. 20-21). Both of these aspects of aggression, especially verbal aggressiveness, break down relationships between individuals as well as groups of individuals.

According to Rancer and Avtgis (2006), the main difference between the acts of blatant verbal aggressive communication and microaggressive acts is that blatant verbal aggressive communication acts are created through hostility, and are done with complete understanding and intentionality of the acts by the perpetrator. The acts of verbal aggressiveness are also not necessarily racially motivated; rather verbal aggression is part of negative human communication behavior. Some acts of microaggressive behavior, on the other hand, are subtler, and in many ways more insidious in the harm they cause, because some microaggressions are not consciously intended to be destructive to the self-construct of the other.

Individuals who openly believe in their superiority over others based on race or other personal beliefs practice intentional discrimination and bigotry. Sue (2010) states, “In the area of racism, for example, they vary from people who privately harbor racial animosity but do a good job of concealing it, to those who are more overt and publicly demonstrable, and finally to those who might be labeled White supremacists” (p. 23).
White supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and various skinhead groups are the extreme examples of intentional racial bigots.

Unintentional microaggressive communication acts are considered motivated through prejudice. Sue (2010) explains: “The power of [these] microaggressions lies in their invisibility to the perpetrator, who is unaware that he or she has engaged in a behavior that threatens and demeans the recipient of such a communication” (p. xv). Microaggressions are largely defined as being unintentionally negative communicative acts. “Because no one is immune from inheriting the bias of the society, all citizens are exposed to a social conditioning process that imbues within them prejudices, stereotypes, and beliefs that lie outside their level of awareness” (Sue, 2010 p.p. 23-24). Human equality is an issue for all, and it is not always just a White versus everyone else phenomenon. All peoples need to be aware of the hurt and problems that negative and aggressive actions can cause. Both verbal and non-verbal negative communicative acts can be harmful, regardless of intent. The United States has a vast and devastating history of racial disparity.

Sue (2010) reports: “Studies reveal that racial reality of White Americans is very different from the people of color” (p. 44). Many White people feel that affirmative action, and the election of a “Black President” has fixed the problem. “When asked how much discrimination still exists against Blacks, only 10% of Whites said ‘a lot’ while 57% of Blacks said ‘a lot’” (p. 44). Sue (2010) explains that some Whites blame the Black community for the racial tensions still in existence however the majority of Blacks feels that it is not their fault. Racism is not a new or novel phenomenon to the current generation, rather there is an unfortunately long and varied history of racist attitudes.
The History of Racial Tensions in the United States

Racial disparity and harmful effects of ethnocentric attitudes based on the belief of a superior race can be traced back throughout the history of the world. Common knowledge holds that the founding of the United States of America and the abomination of the slave trade that helped to create this country was an unfortunate catalyst of racial unrest that has resonated throughout our country’s history.

One of the most significantly impactful scientific theories was created by Charles Darwin. Banton (1960) states, “. . . his demonstration that plant, animal – and therefore human- species were not fixed but subject to a process of natural selection . . . In Britain and America this new line of thought was applied most readily to social relations . . .” (p. 33). He continues to explain that the understanding of the theories of Darwinism had a direct effect on the justification of racial inequality:

First, social Darwinism contends that whether or not pure races had ever existed in the past, they would exist in the future because natural selection would lead to emergence of specialized interbreeding populations. Second, racial prejudice had an evolutionary function: by causing members of one group to hate those of another and identify with their own, it accelerated the process of race-building (p. 33).

These beliefs continued throughout the post-Civil War era that saw the end of the legalization of slavery in the United States. This also led to a continued situation of racial unrest into the beginning of the 20th century, which continues to influence modern twenty first century cultural disparities. “In the United States the social Darwinist theory also fashioned the arguments advanced in favor of the immigration quotas of 1922 onwards” (Banton, 1960, p. 34). The legacy of Darwinism and those that believed or used the theory to push their own agenda is a legacy of harm and hurt.
Darwinism is a theory that was used to justify the advancement of one cultural group over others, and perpetuated the justification of racism.

Fredrickson (2002) says “The word ‘racism’ first came into common usage in the 1930s when a new word was required to describe the theories on which the Nazis based their persecution of the Jews” (p. 5). Fredrickson expands on the concept of racism as he explains it in a more modern ideal as today: “Racism, therefore, is more than theorizing about human differences or thinking badly of a group over which one has no control. It either directly sustains or proposes to establish a racial order, a permanent group hierarchy that is believed to reflect the laws of nature or the decrees of God” (p.6). One of the most damaging acts of racial segregation started in the early twentieth century, (post-legalized slavery) was the creation of laws historically known as Jim Crow laws. The first of these particular laws was enacted in 1900 by the State of Virginia to segregate train cars. Throughout the early twentieth century, similar laws were enacted to further segregate other forms of public mass transit, especially buses and airport terminals (Wynes, 1967). The segregation laws that were on paper to provide separate but equal accommodations for both African Americans and their White American counterparts continued to be enacted throughout the early twentieth century until the Civil Rights Act of 1964. By 1912, area segregation had been passed into Virginia law. Areas were now legally labeled as White or Colored neighborhoods. Individuals who ignored the segregation of areas were subject to fines and lawful removal from segregated areas. This segregation law remained in effect and on the Virginia state books, despite Supreme Court rulings against such laws, until 1950. Other southern states also enacted such segregation laws. Following the abolishment of the Jim Crow laws, racial
tensions in the United States, particularly in the Southern states, became more and more strained. By the 1950’s the Black population, along with many Whites in the United States particularly in the southern states, started to “revolt” against the injustices of the Jim Crow laws and other negative racially motivated indignities.

In December of 1951, Rosa Parks refusing to give up a front bus seat to a white person set off the 381 day bus boycott from December 1951- 1952. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. organized the boycott in opposition of Rosa Parks' forceful removal from the bus and subsequent imprisonment for her “offense.” Following the boycott, further civil rights protests were organized and carried out by those who opposed the unfair treatment of Black Americans in the United States (History.com).

The fifties and sixties were a time of turmoil and upheaval. One of the strongest leaders of the Civil Rights movement was Dr. Martin Luther King who further led the charge towards change. He felt that a more civil, less violent way of protesting would garner more respect for the cause than any form of militant actions: “I had come to see early that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to the Negro in his struggle for freedom” (King, as cited in History.com).

King was soon voted in as the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). This group of southern clergy used various peaceful tactics to gain the attention of local, state and national government. The work of the SCLC inspired the forming of other peacefully organized groups and protests. One such group consisted of four young black men who organized a sit-in at a Woolworth lunch counter on February 1, 1960. The sit-in was in protest of the segregation in restaurants. The sit-in inspired
many more such protests throughout the south by college students, and the formation in April 1960 of the Student Non Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) (History.com).

This particular sit-in was so important in the civil rights movement that you can now visit the actual lunch counter and four stools in the National Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C.

Not all the protests ended peacefully and the nightly television news was full of images showing young people across the country fighting the police and rioting. The media had a strong influence in the civil rights movement of the 1960’s. People were getting a firsthand look at the riots and police retaliations every evening in the comfort of their living rooms thanks to evening news channels. Individuals who lived in areas where the action of civil rights movement was not as pronounced, were made aware of what was going on beyond their own backyard. This in turn drew sympathy towards the movement.

The civil rights movement of the late 1950s and all through the 1960s brought many positive changes in regards to laws at the national level. One of the laws put into place included Affirmative Action, according to NCSL (2014):

“In 1961, President Kennedy was the first to use the term "affirmative action" in an Executive Order that directed government contractors to take "affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin. Critics of affirmative action claim it is no longer needed, that rather than create the equal opportunities for minorities, it has worked as a reverse discriminatory practice.

In the 1970’s many White Americans thought the Civil Rights movement was successful and so racial injustice was over. Not only was this not the case, but the 1970’s also brought an understanding that there was much more work to do in regards to the Civil Rights movement. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2012),
Critical race theory sprang up in the mid-1970 as a number of lawyers, activists, and legal scholars across the country, realized more or less simultaneously, that the heady advances of the civil rights era of the 1960s had stalled and, in many respects, were being rolled back…. new theories and strategies were needed to combat the subtler forms of racism that were gaining ground (p. 2).

The study of racial issues did not stop in the 1970’s but seemed to take on a different tone to that of the two previous decades. Scholars and writers who influenced the study of race relations and the creation of critical race theory during this time included, “Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman and Richard Delgato . . . They were soon joined by others” (p. 2). The study and work toward a more actively equal United States continued into the 1980’s. “The group held its first conference . . . in the summer of 1989” (p. 2). However, racial tension is still apparent today. One of the most conspicuous forms of negative racial prejudice are shown today in the form of microaggressions.

According to Sue and Constantine (2007), influencing factors that make discussing the topic of race for the dominant White culture in America difficult include:

1. Fear of appearing racist; the majority population prefers to set limits on how or what is discussed, it serves to protect White Americans from disclosures of hidden biases through allowing continued concealment.
2. Fear of realizing their racism; many Whites find it difficult to realize that they may hold unconscious racial biases, prejudices and stereotypes that unintentionally make their appearance in interracial encounters.
3. Fear of confronting White Privilege; Whites are more than willing to entertain the notion that people of color suffer from prejudice and discrimination; they find it difficult to accept their own complicity in the current state of affairs and that they directly and indirectly benefit from racism.
4. Fear of taking personal responsibility to end racism; the ultimate White privilege is the ability to acknowledge its existence and do nothing about it. (pp. 139 – 142).

The study of microaggressive behavior at the college or university level is important to students as an aspect of attending college. The chance to not only attain a higher education degree, but just as importantly enjoy a time of self discovery of who
students are as individuals will influence society for the rest of their lives. A safe and positive campus climate is important for the development of self-reliant individuals who have positive self-confidence in who they are.

Students themselves are using examples of microaggressive behavior in papers and to educate their fellow students through speeches and class presentations. In a recent speech given in an introductory speech class, entitled Colorism, a female African American student described an incident where an older African American man told her “she sure was pretty for such a dark skinned woman.” The student took this as an insult rather than a compliment as she wanted to know why the darkness of her skin would determine her beauty. She shared in her speech that she realized the man was trying to compliment her but instead in true microaggression fashion she walked away offended and even hurt from the exchange. The idea of Colorism could easily fit as a type of microaggression within racial boundaries.

McWhorter (2014) in an online article from Time, acknowledges that an interpretation of the study of microaggressions can be seen negatively:

. . . some might see this whole microaggression concept as just a way to keep grievance going in an America where it gets ever harder to call people on naked bigotry. “Life is tough for everybody” you might think. “When does all this poor me stuff stop?” One does not need to be a racist or sexist to have that sentiment (para. 7).

It is important to understand just how subtle microaggressions are as well as how harmful they can be as perceived by the recipient of the verbal aggression.

Political correctness has become a catch phrase in the United States over the past decade. However, this idea has also brought to light the occurrences of microaggressions. The increase of microaggressions is a very serious phenomenon. “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” (Sue, et al., 2007, p. 271).

These behavioral aggressive acts can be overt, intended to be aggressive acts toward a victim, or could be considered aggressive by the victim without the offender being aware that they even committed the offense. Regardless of the intent, microaggressive acts are racist acts. Microaggressive acts also fall under the umbrella of gender and sexual orientation prejudice (Sue, 2010). Verbal microaggressions can consist of individuals claiming that they don’t see in color, but rather that they see everyone as equal. This may seem like a positive or harmless comment; however a person of color may perceive the comment as meaning their cultural heritage is not important. By ignoring someone’s ethnicity or trying to lump everyone together, in turn what is accomplished is a devaluing of that person. Further examples of microaggressive acts can include nonverbal behavior, such as someone crossing the street when they see a stranger of different ethnic background coming toward them. Sue et al. (2007) describe verbal microaggressions committed by White female therapists when they tell ethnically diverse patients that being a female they too can relate to being judged and discriminated against. This again is an instance of someone trying to relate to a cultural issue, but in actuality the therapist is devaluing the life experiences of culturally diverse individuals.

Dr. Sue (2007) describes a personal experience of microaggressions as he recounts the story of traveling with “an African American colleague on a plane flying from New York to Boston” Sue describes the incident of a White female flight attendant informing Dr. Sue and his associate they could sit anywhere they wanted to. Soon after
they chose their seats, three described White men entered the plane and were also told by
the flight attendant they could sit anywhere they wanted. They sat in front of Dr. Sue and
his associate. Right before the plane was ready to taxi to the runway, the flight attendant
approached Dr. Sue and his associate and asked them to move to the back of the plane to
help with weight distribution. Both men moved, however Dr. Sue was upset, and
confronted the attendant with the question “Do you know that you just asked two
passengers of color to move to the rear of the bus?” The flight attendant disagreed and
defended her action as for the safety of the flight, however Dr. Sue felt that since he and
his associate had been seated first, all of this could have been avoided by telling the next
passengers to sit toward the back, or to ask them to move since they boarded last. The
attendant responded rather harshly as she exclaimed: “Well, I have never been accused of
that! How dare you? I don’t see color! I only asked you to move to balance the plane.
Anyway, I was only trying to give you more space and greater privacy.” Dr. Sue uses this
example of a possibly unintentional slight that was perceived as a way to single out the
two people of color on the flight and to demean them. When he tried to explain his
feelings of being singled out due to his racial heritage the flight attendant became
defensive and angry, showing the intentionality or lack of awareness in the communicator
of the microaggressive act (Sue et al. p. 275).

Research shows that microaggressive acts are daily occurrences in a multitude of
environments, including inside one’s own family. Examples of familiar microaggressive
acts can be anything from encouraging a son over a daughter, to showing favoritism
toward the grandchildren who are not biracial in multiracial families. Previous
microaggressions studies such as Yosso, Smith, Ceja and Solórzano (2009) and Sue et al.
focus on just one cultural group. These groups can be made up of certain ethnic, racial, gender, or sexual orientations. However, there has not been much research on various groups within one study. Sue (2010) also studies the microaggression phenomenon from the field of Psychology. There is a clear gap in the research looking at whether the White majority is alone in perpetrating microaggressive communication acts or if various racial and ethnic groups are just as guilty of perpetrating this communication phenomenon.

I believe that it is not just White males that are guilty of perpetrating acts of microaggression. We have all been in situations where we may say something offensive to someone of another race or culture thinking that it is a compliment. No matter the social location, we can all unintentionally perform microaggressive acts. Thus the focus of this study is to explore this phenomenon further by considering how microaggressive acts occur between and within various cultures. Understanding the intentionality versus unintentionally of microaggressions can help to bridge the gap in acceptance.

Sue (2010) describes “conscious-deliberate bigots” as “people who are aware of their racial, gender, and sexual-orientation biases” (pp. 22-23). These individuals take advantage of opportunities to show their superiority. The level of conscious- deliberate bigots can vary from those individuals who quietly hold their prejudice as personal feelings to those who consider themselves White supremacists. Sue (2010) explains the intentionality of one kind of microaggressive act termed microassaults as “environmental cues, verbalizations, or behaviors” (p. 28). Examples of environmental cues are situations such as individuals displaying the confederate flag, hanging a noose, or swastika, or even displaying a Ku Klux Klan hood in a position of prominence. The intent of these
nonverbal messages “. . . is to threaten, intimidate, and make the individuals or groups feel unwanted and unsafe . . .” (p. 28). The use of these types of memorabilia can be seen as blatant and intentional racial aggression.

An intentional verbal microaggression can be shown through racist individuals’ use of negative descriptive words such as *nigger, boy, chinks, bitches, gays, fags*. The use of these types of words shows an intentionality of belief or feeling that certain ethnic individuals are less important than the individuals using the words. Other examples of intentional microaggressions can be seen when parents refuse to allow their children to play with or date individuals of other ethnicities. Also individuals refusing to serve a customer based on ethnicity or showing preferential treatment toward individuals of shared ethnicity over those who are different, also qualify as intentional microaggressions.

Sue (2010) describes microassaults as being the form of microaggressions most closely related to the more blatant forms of verbal and racial aggression. Microinsults and microinvalidations are better described as being more unconscious in their perpetration. However they can be just as harmful to the psyche of the individuals who are on the receiving end of these communicative acts. For this particular study the focus is the subtler, unintentional forms of microaggressions, rather than on microassaults.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory contends that racism is still alive and well in the United States. While racism has changed since the 1960s and 1970s, it is still as harmful. The use of Critical Race theory will provide a lens to understand racism in all of the facets it encompasses while looking at the phenomenon of microaggressive behavior.

According to Delgado and Stefancic (2006), “The critical race theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism and power” (p. 3). Critical race theory contends that racism still exists. The theory guides researchers who want to have a better understanding of underlying racial issues. “Critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law” (p. 3). Critical race theory gives a picture of the subtler, yet still detrimental forms of racism. Microaggressions fit perfectly under the definition of subtle forms of racist actions. “Many modern day readers believe that racism is declining or that class today is more important than race . . . Still by every social indicator, racism continues to blight the lives of people of color, including holders of high-echelon jobs, even judges” (Delgado, & Stefancic, 2006, p. 6). This also fit in with
the idea that perpetrators of microaggressive acts do so without realizing the harmful effects of other individual actions.

The study of critical race theory has evolved from being just used in a legal setting to prove racism exists into the mainstream study of racial issues by researchers in sociology, psychology, communication, education and many other fields. In looking at educational curriculum through the lens of critical race theory, researchers look at the cultural aspects that can affect education and how students learn.

According to Ladson-Billings (1996), it is apparent that “official school curricula as a culturally specific artifact is designed to maintain a White supremacist master script” (p. 18). Where is the voice of the marginalized and people of color? As Ladson-Billings further explains “this master scripting means stories of African Americans are muted and erased when they challenge dominant cultural authority and power” (p. 18). It is not only the histories and stories of African Americans, but also most people of color who helped to shape the forming of the United States. All of their voices deserve to be heard.

Furthering the idea of providing a voice for the minority students in the classroom, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) present research that shows how the use of critical race theory can “provide a tool to ‘counter’ deficit storytelling” (p. 23). Using the lens of critical race theory, delving into the stories and histories being taught in schools and the community can provide an understanding of how the dominant race justifies their control. The use of the dominant races’ form of majoritarian stories that create a feeling of privilege based on their race, as well as class and even gender, supports the idea that the current privileged hierarchy is normal and justified.
Critical race theory is the lens used to look at these written histories and see the racial inequalities and themes that have traditionally permeated our nation’s history books. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) explain, “Currently, many teacher education programs draw on majoritarian stories to explain educational inequity . . .” (as cited in Kretovics & Nussel, 1994; Persell, 1977). Rather than working on a solution to fix the inequality, they use the excuse of cultural norms or barriers from these stories to justify the inequality of grades and educational advancement of minorities. “Critical race methodology in education focuses research on how students of color experience and respond to the U.S. educational system” (Solorzano & Yosso 2002, p. 37). For the minority student, it is important that they are able to learn about events and individuals that reflect who they are.

Solórzano (1997) describes five basic themes of critical race theory: “1. The centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, 2. The challenge to dominant ideology, 3. The commitment to social justice, 4. The centrality of experiential knowledge, 5. The interdisciplinary perspective” (pp. 6-7). Solórzano also defines stereotypes and the harm they do to people of color. The main emphasis of the research is the harm stereotypes cause in education. Certain stereotypes about people of color perpetuate negative attitudes in the educators themselves. In a review of the emerging findings from critical race theory, Solórzano also discusses the harmful effects of microaggressions within the article, as well as explaining how often individuals perpetuate microaggressions against someone without even realizing what they have done or how harmful the comment or action was. Solórzano’s (1997) paper
highlights the lack of equality for people of color in classroom situations and the
effect it has on the students.

With regards to the current study of unintentional microaggressive acts, it is
important to understand where we, as a society, are coming from to better understand
how to make sure the future we are headed into is racially equalized. For educators it
is imperative that all students are given the same and equal chance to learn.
Understanding what microaggressions are, along with the stereotypes and hegemonic
views that influence the basis of those stereotypes, and the harmful effects they
create, is imperative to creating a world of stronger equality.

Co-Cultural Theory

The co-cultural phenomenon is defined by Orbe (1998) as an:

. . . approach to communication… situated in the belief that the United States is a
country of many cultures, each of which exists simultaneously within, as well as
apart from other cultures. The term co-culture is embraced over other terminology
to signify the notion that no one culture in our society is inherently superior (but
may be dominant) over other co-existing cultures. (p. 2).

Orbe (1998) describes basic premises of co-cultural theory as follows:

Although representing a widely diverse array of lived experiences, co-cultural
group members- including women, people of color, gays/ lesbian/bisexuals,
people with disabilities, and those from a socioeconomic status- will share a
similar societal position that renders them marginalized and underrepresented
in dominant structures; and (2) in order to confront oppressive dominant
structures and achieve any measure of success, co-cultural group members
adopt certain communication orientations when functioning within the
confines of public communicative structures (p. 7).

Co-cultural theory is an intercultural communication theory. The basic focus
of co-cultural theory, according to Orbe (1996) “was on specific practices that co-
cultural groups used during their interactions with dominant group members” (as
cited in Gundynkunst, 2005, p. 175). Furthermore, Orbe’s co-cultural theory “assists in
understanding the ways in which persons who are traditionally marginalized in dominant societal structures communicate in their everyday lives” (Gudykunst, 2005, p. 174).

Co-cultural theory is founded through the basis of standpoint theory (e.g. Smith, 1987), muted group theory (e.g. Kramarae, 1981) “and cultural phenomenology” (Husserl, 1964; Lanigan, 1988; Orbe, 200; as cited in Gudykunst 2005, p. 174). Co-cultural theory is important to the current research as it provides a lens to understand how marginalized individuals (i.e. individuals of color, physically disabled, LGTB orientation) work through the minefield of prejudiced situations in modern society.

The idea of microaggressions perpetrated by unknowingly fits within the idea of co-cultural theory as a theory of cultural communication understanding, especially when using the aspect of standpoint theory as part of the explanation of the detrimental effects of the phenomenon. “Standpoint theory, as it contributes to co-cultural theory, is guided by several tenets. First, research must begin from a person’s concrete lived experiences and must include the experiences of marginalized group members within the process of inquiry in meaningful ways” (Orbe, 1998, p. 5). Microaggressions are detrimental to both the perpetrator as well as the person victimized by the situation. Co-cultural theory creates a way to understand why certain communication situations are in fact aggressive acts. Camara and Orbe (2010) argue “How one responds to discrimination establishes the following: (1) interactional improvement as a way to change discriminatory practices; and (2) individual consciousness or self-introspection to prevent subsequent contact or increase resistance to minimize discriminatory impacts” (p. 84).
The second influence in the creation of co-cultural theory, muted group theory, “suggests that in every society a social hierarchy exists that privileges some groups over others. Those groups that function at the top of the social hierarchy determine to a great extent, the communication system of the entire society” (Orbe, 1998, p. 4). The perpetrators of microaggressive acts are those considered the dominant group in America: the European “White” Americans, traditionally males, who have also created and enforced the policies and laws that influence relationships in this country.

The last influence on co-cultural theory is phenomenological methodology. Phenomenological methodology “included a three-step process of discovery: (1) collection of descriptions of lived experiences, (2) reduction of capita into essential themes and (3) hermeneutic interpretation of themes” (Nelson, as quoted in Orbe, 1998, p. 6). Phenomenological methodology, or qualitative research, goes beyond the idea of statistics. Rather, this methodology embraces the importance of hearing about and learning from the lived experiences of the research participants.

Glenn and Johnson (2012) discovered through their co-cultural phenomenological research that black males, while studying at a university made up of a white majority student body, select three distinct outcomes of their educational experiences: “assimilation, separation, and accommodation, in varying degrees when making difficult choices regarding how they communicate their identity across distinct contexts of the university environment when interacting with dominant group members” (p. 356).

Glenn and Johnson (2012) discovered through their research that many participants believed that due to racist and negative stereotypical feelings from their
White counterparts, the Black student body had to work hard for acceptance. “Despite this perception as a permanent outsider, several participants strive to assimilate into White culture on campus” (p. 356). Co-cultural theory, as previously discussed, is based on the combination of other communication theories. This particular study relies heavily on the aspect of standpoint and how it influences co-cultural communication interactions.

As described in Glenn and Johnson’s research, many Black students hold the standpoint that they either need to “mirror” or follow White students’ examples, or they must make a conscious effort to avoid any behavior or communication style that would perpetuate negative stereotypical thoughts about themselves from the White students. Glenn and Johnson’s research exemplifies the importance of co-cultural theory as a lens to use while researching interracial communication phenomena. This particular study does not delve specifically into the realm of racial microaggressions, but subtly alludes to the practice of microaggressions being an influence on Black students’ negative experiences in a campus environment.

The ignorance of the offense by the perpetrator creates further opportunities to continue the offense beyond the initial communication. Gaining a stronger understanding of appropriate communication behavior and being able to understand the standpoint of the victim can in turn provide opportunities for perpetrators to avoid similar situations.
As a result of this study, I hope to add to the awareness of the detriment microaggressions cause in the university setting both in the classroom and socially within the campus community. This research will also add to the growing communication literature on the effects of microaggressions.

Verbal Aggression

Verbal aggression, as defined previously, is a form of blatantly thought out aggression against another person using language. Infante (1988) gives an example of verbal aggression. “Once different positions on the topic of communication were recognized, the individuals began attacking one another’s character and never let up. This is a destructive form of communication”(p. 18). Verbal aggression has unfortunately been practiced throughout the history of the United States to enforce and reflect racial inequality. Verbally aggressive behavior is harmful when used against anyone for any reason. “A verbal aggressive message is designed to produce psychological pain, to have the person feel less favorable about self. Such a message is sometimes called a ‘putdown’” (Infante, 1998, pp. 20-21). The old adage, sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me is a fallacy. Some words can cause lasting scars and create dissention within a group or between individuals. The main difference between blatant verbal aggressive acts and microaggressive acts is the idea that microaggressive acts are a more unconscious phenomenon, where blatant verbal aggressions are used consciously to inflict harm or create a feeling of superiority for the perpetrator.
Microaggressions

As previously defined, microaggressions can be enacted through both verbal and nonverbal behaviors. According to Sue et al. (2007), microaggressions can be broken down into subsets of aggressive acts. Three forms of microaggressions can be identified: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation. *Microassaults* are conscious aggressive behaviors aimed at culturally different individuals. These assaults can be either verbal or nonverbal in nature. Microassaults are “explicit racial derogations characterized primarily by a violent verbal, nonverbal, or environmental attack meant to hurt the intended victim” (Sue, 2010, p. 29). Examples of microassaults include purposely discriminating against a person of color, derogatory name calling, and even avoidance of someone due to their race. *Microinsults* are subtler in nature. They are verbal and incorporate racially motivated snubs, comments, and innuendoes. Microinsults are also more often than not perpetrated without the offender realizing that they were insulting to the person of color. According to Sue (2010) an example of a microinsult would be a comment such as “You are a credit to your race” (p. 35) taken as meaning that a person of a different race is not as productive or smart as a White person. A *microinvalidation* occurs when comments are made to make an individual feel invalid, such as telling a US born individual that they speak English well for someone from their country based solely on their looks. This invalidates the fact that the ethnic person actually is a legitimate citizen of the country. Rather than getting to know them, the perpetrator assumes they are foreign. As with microinsults, the perpetrator of the offense may not realize their action is aggressive.
Sue et al. (2007) studied the phenomenon of microaggressive behavior between therapists and their patients of different ethnicities to bring awareness of microaggressions to the forefront of the social science field. These researchers came up with a table of examples of microaggressive behavior, and statements citing how the victim perceives the behavior. For instance, “There is only one race,” is a statement that may seem like an anti-racist statement to a member of the dominant culture, however, the message behind this statement for the marginalized culture is “Denying the individual as a racial/cultural being” (p. 276). An important outcome of the Sue et al. (2007) study is further awareness that cultural communication training is important not only to the medical and therapy fields, but to society in general.

Another aspect of microaggressions is that they do not only happen to individuals based on race and ethnicity. Microaggressions also happen within families. A study that addresses this issue by Nadal, Sriken, Davidoff, Wong and McLean (2007) analyzed the offense of microaggressions against multiracial children within their family circle. Five main themes came out of this particular focus group study including: “(a) isolation within family (b) favoritism within family (c) questioning of authenticity, (d) denial of multiracial identity and experiences by monoracial family members and (e) feelings about not learning about family heritage and history” (p. 195). This particular study shows just how detrimental microaggressions are to a person’s self-esteem and psychological wellbeing. The idea that microaggressions happen within the supposed safety of one’s own home shows just how serious this problem is. Findings show the microaggressions that the participants experienced throughout their childhood still affect them as adults. “For
example, one aforementioned participant discussed how she felt less favored by her grandfather, which eventually had a negative impact on her mental health” (Nadal et al., 2007, p. 198). Grandfathers traditionally are expected to be loving and supportive of their grandchildren, not pick favorites. The researchers brought to focus the need for parents of biracial children to have honest and open conversations with their children about racial issues, and arm them with the ability to internally as well as externally deal with this negative phenomenon (Nadal, et al., 2007).

It is important to understand the detrimental effect of microaggressions within the general population, in medical fields, and also within one’s own home. It is just as important for educators to realize that microaggressions are also a detriment to the ability of people of racial and ethnic minorities to gain an education within the confines of the university. Yosso, Smith, Ceja and Solórzano (2009) used the lens of critical race theory to guide their qualitative research on how Latina/o students are faced everyday with the task of dealing with microaggressions aimed at them from multiple sources, including their classroom professors. The researchers conducted focus groups to discover how the Latina/o population of students “experience campus racial climate” (p. 665). The researchers analyzed the experiences of this ethnic group while pursuing a college degree. The themes that emerged included interpersonal microaggressions, racial jokes as microaggressions, and institutional microaggressions. The findings showed that “Latinas/os engage in very different stages: rejection, community building, and critical navigation between multiple worlds.” (p. 674). Yosso et al. brought to light the difficulties Latina/o students face in their daily struggle to reach their higher education goals.
Blume, Lovato, Thyken, and Denny (2012) researched the increase of alcohol use in minority students attending a predominantly white university. The researchers’ particular study analyzed “the relationships of self-reported microaggressions with alcohol use behavior and with symptoms of anxiety in a historically white institution” (p. 46). The researchers also surveyed white students to gain a comparison of both alcohol use and the types of situations different ethnicities consider stressful. Through the use of a quantitative online survey, the researchers found that students of color experienced more microaggressive acts than European American students within the same time frame. “Results suggest that college students of color who experience a greater number of microaggressions may be at increased risk for alcohol use as well as the adverse consequences of drinking alcohol” (Blume, et al., 2012, p. 49). This research further brings to light the importance of understanding what causes microaggressions, along with the importance of learning to communicate in positive and competent ways. Professors, teachers and instructors need to understand that the traditional hegemonic views and practices of instruction alienate many of their non-white students, and form a gap in their ability to gain the full advantages of their education experiences.

It is important to understand that though individuals of color deal daily with the stress and harmful effects of microaggressions, sexual orientation adds a further layer of scrutiny, and opens an individual to the prospect of microaggressive acts from more than just their white European American counterparts:

sexual-orientation microaggressions can span the continuum from being conscious and deliberate to unconscious and unintentional . . . Sexual-orientation microassaults can occur via hate speech, terms of disparagement (“dyke” or “queer”), and telling heterosexist jokes; microinsults and embodied
in ‘Don’t ask don’t tell’ policies and microinvalidations might take a form of not inviting a gay or lesbian parent to “family school days (Sue, 2010, p.191).

Sexual orientation definitions span multiple races and genders. Sexual orientation also is not always as apparent as one’s race or gender. “Probably the most harmful forms of microaggressions are those outside the level of conscious awareness of perpetrators and, oftentimes, the targets as well” (Sue, 2010, p. 191). The microaggressive acts may not be as immediately apparent to the targets, but over time, the aggressions take a toll on the victims. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) individuals who are of transitional age are already experiencing the stress of moving from being teens into adulthood. Adding in the stress of discovering the understanding of being further different from the “majority norm” adds further confusion to many.

Sue (2010) further expands on the definition of microaggressions beyond everyday generic occurrences: “In the world of business, the term ‘microinequities’ is used to describe the pattern of being overlooked, under respected, and devalued because of one’s race or gender” (p. 24). This definition could just as easily be used to describe microaggressive acts that are perpetrated within the confines of a university setting. Sue continues to explain that microinequities “are often unconsciously delivered as subtle snubs or dismissive looks, gestures, and tones” (pp. 24-25). Sue further expands on the theme of microaggressions by describing previously defined themes of such acts. These themes include, but not exclusively, such microaggressions as creating feelings of being “Alien in One’s own land”. An example could be asking someone a European American sees as foreign to teach him or her their native language. The message the person of color receives from this is
that they are not considered to be an American, rather a foreigner in their own homeland.

Other examples of microaggressive themes include the ideas of color blindness, ascription of intelligence, second-class citizen, myth of meritocracy, use of sexist/ heterosexist language, pathologizing cultural values and communication styles, criminality/assumption of criminal status, and assumption of abnormality, along with sexual objectification. (For a full list of microaggression themes see Appendix A).

The study of microaggressive acts through the lens of a communication standpoint will further expand awareness of the importance of understanding of the phenomenon as well as hopefully encourage individuals to be more aware of their comments. This study will focus specifically on unintentional racial or ethnic microaggressive acts. Therefore the research question for this study is:

Research Question

RQ: What microaggressive themes do individuals describe being aimed at them due to their race or ethnicity?
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

Archives

Using a qualitative textual analysis method, I investigated instances of micro-aggressive behavior through the use of archived audio and transcribed stories about race, which were gathered during the Rethinking Race event at a Midwestern state university. Rethinking Race is an annual two-week series of events sponsored by the university to help foster understanding and facilitate interracial communication for its student body, as well as the general population.

One event that takes place during the weeks is the Color Line Project, which includes “story circles” where groups of six to ten people have the opportunity to tell and hear stories about their experiences with race. Participants include students of various majors along with faculty, and staff from the university; members of the community are also invited to participate in the Color Line Project. The age range of participants includes traditionally aged college students (18-25) as well as faculty, staff and community members who are over the age of 25.

Story circles are part of the Color Line project created by Junebug Productions in 1980. The purpose of the Color Line Project is to create an archive for future generations to be able to hear the stories of struggles created through racial inequality in the United States.
“Since 1980, Junebug Productions Inc. . . . has sought to inspire and support people who work for justice in the African American community and in the wider world” (Yuen, O’Neal & Holden, 2015, p. 2). The story circles were created to be a way to let the voices of minority individuals affected by racial injustices be heard in a safe and secure place. “In the case of both educational institutions, there were strong ties to institutional long range planning interests to ‘understand and celebrate diversity’ and to create stronger connections with their surrounding communities . . .” (Yuen, et al, 2015, pp. 3-4). The story circles not only let individuals share their stories of negative racial and social injustices, but also present an opportunity to discuss ways to move toward positive change. Many of the stories shared in the circles are used to create artful expressions. For example, some of the stories may be turned into small one-act plays. One of the art professors at the current university creates works of art based on the stories. The archives are available through the university’s department of anthropology for use in academic endeavors such as this current research. Each story circle begins with a theme to talk about and a set of prompts (see Appendix D). The stories that the individuals share are usually related in some way to the theme of the day particular to the circles. Thematic prompts can include almost anything, from race to food. This study will focus on those stories told in response to prompts involving race.

Data Collection

The archives are comprised of recordings of spoken stories relating to the topic of race and/or ethnicity. Qualitative researchers are concerned with analyzing records of shared communication (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). For this research I focused on the lived experiences and personal narratives of the participants as told in the safe space of the
story circles. Lindlof and Taylor explain that the qualitative researcher typically uses a process of interviews to gain others’ perspectives either immediately or to gain insight into past experience. However, for this research the stories will take the place of interviews.

The archive was specifically created to find meaning and make sense of racism in the United States, both from the past and what is happening now in current time. This archive is a permanent record of the lived experiences of all participants. This particular archive fits within the parameter of a primary source. Primary sources are described by Lindlof and Taylor (2011) as the eyewitness testimonies of the participants as they see and understand the unfolding of particular events. Furthermore, primary sources are “usually preferred when the facts of an event need to be established” (p. 233). For this research I was interested in the lived experiences of the participants as they described them, situations where their personal race or ethnicity plays a part in the communication experience, focusing particularly on instances that could be construed as microaggressive communication acts.

The current study attempts to fill some of the research gap on the important, yet understudied communication phenomenon of unintentional microaggressions, by studying previously conducted interviews and stories shared and recorded by individuals of various races, gender, and sexual orientations who have experienced racial prejudice including microaggressive acts in their daily lives. I relied solely on the participant’s self-descriptions of their personal ethnicity/race. This description is noted in the findings as “self described.”
By reviewing the stories in the archive collected since 2010 through to 2015, both those still in audio form as well as those which have been transcribed, I hoped to gain a better understanding of how microaggressive behavior affects the recipient, as well as bringing to light the harm microaggressive communication acts have to the perpetrators. I hoped the use of personal stories and shared examples would help to bring the phenomenon of communicative microaggressions into a more mainstream consciousness.

Some of the stories in the archive were told in response to prompts about racism. Other stories were told specifically for a certain group or demographic that did not fit within the parameters of this study, such as stories told at a local junior high school by minors. To date, there are approximately three hundred and sixty recorded stories related to racial issues in the story circle archives. Out of the three hundred and sixty stories less than half have been transcribed. (There is no discernable pattern to which stories have been chosen for transcription; the job of transcription has mainly fallen to graduate assistants within the department of anthropology at the university.) Of the three hundred and sixty stories, I listened to or read transcripts from approximately two hundred.

Data Analysis

Textual analysis will serve as a lens to make sense of the stories in the archive. I chose to use qualitative textual analysis for this study, as, “Qualitative communication researchers are typically drawn to questions about dynamic action and meanings of verbal and behavioral signs” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 220). Since the data are already collected in the form an archive of stories, the analysis begins at the point of interpreting and analyzing the text. The stories showed themes that provided a way to make valid
connections between the stories and either the predetermined themes by Sue (2010) or newly emerging themes not previously identified.

After spending time in the lab listening to the audio files I hand transcribed quotations from the stories to keep a personal record of what was shared in each story. I saved any previously transcribed stories for use during the coding process. I then sorted the individual stories into categories of microaggressions or not microaggressions, based on Sue’s (2010) themes of microaggressive acts (Appendix A). Next, since I have chosen to focus only on those stories that fell under the parameters of unintentional negative racial microinsults and microinvalidations, based on Sue’s (2010) parameters, stories that expressed overt and blatant racial discrimination and any instances of microassaults fell outside the scope of this study and were excluded. Once I identified stories of unintended microaggressions, I used code sheets (Appendix C) to guide the process of sorting out microinsults and microinvalidations. Once the stories were categorized using the code sheets, I then began to look for similarities and saturation of themes within each group. The data reached saturation after sixty stories, meaning participants began to tell stories that fit similar themes.

Using Sue’s (2010) previously recorded themes as a guide, I categorized each individual transcript that reflected racially motivated microaggressive acts toward individuals. For the creation of the coding sheet, I used the predetermined “Categories of Relationships among Racial Microaggressions” (Sue, 2010, p. 29). Sue has determined racially motivated themes between those aimed at Black Americans and Asian Americans. These themes include: *Alien in one’s own land, ascription of intelligence,*
color blindness, assumption of criminal status, and denial of racism. (For a table including Sue’s categories see Appendix A.)

While Sue (2010) has also created themes based on gender and sexual orientation, only the racially motivated themes were utilized, as the current study is interested specifically in racially motivated microaggressions. Sue’s racially motivated categorizations were the basis for my coding, however, I also looked for microaggressive instances that might constitute other categorizations beyond those identified by Sue. For instance, the previously mentioned African American female student who spoke about Colorism gives one example of within race microaggression and there is also a story shared within the Color Line Project of an African American father telling his daughter to remember her place.

Coding

A coding sheet was created (see Appendix C) with the headings of: participant #, microaggression: yes or no., a microaggression being a communication considered to be racist in nature by the receiver. Macroaggressions yes or no, which are overt verbal aggressions. Then theme: breaking it down more, and notes, for a place to insert quotes from the various stories to back up the claim of a microaggression being committed. After creating the coding sheet I then read over all quotes chosen from the audio file and organized them based on the predetermined categories. The transcribed archives were then re-read and categorized in the same way as the audio files. For any stories that did not directly fit into a previously created category I put a question mark to come back and compare after all the coding was done to determine if a new category of microaggression had emerged. Through multiple readings and study of the data, the research provided two
new possible emerging themes: awareness of the shift or change in racism, where individuals mentioned racism still exists but has become less overt than it was in past generations. I also discovered individuals talking about within race microaggressive behavior where they felt they had been racially offended by individuals of their own ethnicity. These themes will be further discussed in the following chapters.
CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS

The answer to the research question “what microaggressive themes do individuals describe being aimed at them due to their race or ethnicity?” was answered with the themes of color blindness, myth of meritocracy, second-class citizen, and assumed criminology according to Sue’s (2010) parameters. Two other themes not discussed in any of the literature reviewed included awareness of the shift in racism and also within race microaggressive behavior.

Color Blindness

One theme that is consistent with microinvalidation was colorblindness. Sue (2010) described the theme of colorblindness as, “Statements that indicate that a White person does not want to acknowledge race” (p.32). Many participants declared at the beginning of their stories that “they don’t see color,” and also denial of racism; many self-described Black individuals stated “most Whites don’t agree there’s still racism.”

One self-described Black male participant shared a story of an interaction between himself and a white woman who stated “You know I like Colored people. You guys are nice.” The gentleman was so taken aback by this unprovoked declaration he said, “I felt I had stepped back into the 1950’s or 60’s.” He claimed that he had no idea how to respond to this comment. This is a strange comment, however when looking at the parameters of classic microaggressions it would fit under denial of racism. The woman clearly saw color, however she tried to convince the man that it didn’t matter. Had the color of his
skin not mattered to her she would not have felt inclined to make such a statement. Sue (2010) describes the colorblindness theme as being perpetrated by White individuals however a self-described Black woman began her personal story with the same sentiment as she described being taught not to see in color, but rather to see everyone equally so this was how she strived to live her life. The idea that a Black woman would make such a comment was the reason I began to look for other microaggressive themes described as committed through “in race” communication. Sue (2010) would describe this same comment as color blindness if made by a White individual.

Myth of Meritocracy

A further microinvalidation theme that emerged from the stories included the myth of meritocracy, which is “a theme that asserts race . . . does not play a role in life successes” (Sue, 2010, p. 38). A self-described African American male said, “Like the fact that a lot of African American males droop their pants, a lot of people see them and find that to be ignorant.” This participant felt this way because his generation as part of his black culture was judged by the way they dress. A different self-described African American man shared a story of a White guidance counselor not believing in his ability to publish a book he had written. This particular gentleman stated that the White woman wouldn’t even read it, making him feel that she decided based on his race that it would not be worth her time.

Second Class Citizen

Sue (2010) defines the microinsult theme of second class citizen as “. . . an unconscious message that certain groups are less worthy, less important, and less deserving, and are inferior beings that deserve discriminatory treatment” (p. 35). A self-
described African American woman also felt that beyond her race her financial status played into the way she was treated at times. Even Black social workers gave her a hard time when she was trying to get medical benefits for her young son, for which he clearly qualified. She claimed she was made to feel less than those she was going to for help.

A young self-described African American male was made to feel inferior to his white “friends” from school when they refused to give him a ride home. They stated that they didn’t feel safe in that neighborhood and showed genuine shock that he could have actually survived growing up there. The young man was both surprised and hurt by their comments stating, “So what does it say about me, if they feel that way about where I live?” The comments made by his friends made this young man not only feel sad but also as if he was labeled and judged by those he had considered friends. Further examples of the second class citizen microinsult included a self-identified Black woman who described her experience working at a Macy’s department store. Many of the racist acts she described were nonverbal communicated microaggressions such as some White people, usually the males, who would not return her welcome greeting or acknowledge her when she spoke to them. She also described watching White customers search for a White clerk to check them out or be in line for the White clerk when she was open and willing to check them out.

A very powerful example of the second-class citizen theme came from a young self-described Black girl. She shared a story of growing up poor and hungry. She told of a White female guidance counselor in high school who had taken her under her wing. This counselor would pay for her lunch and make sure that she had what she needed to survive in school. However when it was time to fill out college applications and get career advice
the counselor told her she could not survive in college and she should just concentrate on
getting a job. At that point the girl “felt less than everyone else, as no more than a charity
case.” The young woman proceeded to explain that she not only got into college but
makes the dean’s list every semester.

A young self-described White female participant shared a story of her father not
wanting her to have Black friends, especially males. He went so far as to try to bring
sexual assault charges against one of her Black male friends, just to keep him away from
her. Her father felt that the boy wasn’t good enough to be part of her circle. The father
may also have been against the idea of his daughter having Black male friends as part of
the microaggression of assumed criminology.

Assumption of Criminology

The microinsult of assumption of criminology was also a theme that emerged
from the stories. Sue (2010) describes assumption of criminology as when “A person of
color is presumed to be dangerous, criminal, or deviant based on their race” (p. 32). One
of the first participants’ stories that fit was that of an individual who worked for Time
Warner Cable Company. He was on a service call and the White man who answered the
door didn’t want to let him in. The storyteller said that even though he had all the proper
I.D. with him and the man had requested the service, because the storyteller was Black he
was assumed to be there for criminal reasons. He did finally get admittance into the
house, but the customer was there the whole time breathing down his neck and making it
very clear that he was not going to be allowed anywhere else in the house. When the
storyteller left the house he reported everything to his boss who said he had to ignore the
behavior, as they didn’t want to lose a customer.
A young man who told a story of driving through a horrible snowstorm shared another instance of assumed criminology. He said there were lots of cars on the road driving slowly trying to make it to safely to their destinations just like he was. He was surprised to find himself pulled over by a policeman, who claimed he pulled him over for having his rear license covered in snow. When the young man said; “well it’s a snow storm, everyone out here has their license covered with snow,” the policeman very rudely demanded his license and registration.” This story also lends its self to the larger problem of police profiling in our society.

A woman describes how silly and rude she thought it was when some of the Black male lawyers would get on the elevator in the office building and women would clutch their purse straps and look nervous, “And these are well dressed, full Armani suits and tie wearing men.” This is the textbook example of assumption of criminology. The reaction is nonverbal and may or may not be conscious on the part of the offender.

A young man who describes himself as having a Middle Eastern cultural background shares a story of how on numerous occasions he would be walking his White girlfriend home after being out together. Every time they were on a certain street, a cop would pull over and ask her if she was okay, or if she felt she was in any danger. One time, the cop tried to insist on driving her home himself to get her away from her boyfriend. The girlfriend would get very upset with the police. This again is an instance of not only assumed criminology but also police profiling. A self-identified Black woman, who also described herself as a well-educated person and her economic status as upper middle class, told another story that really shows the assumption of criminology. She had gone to a store with her then fifteen-year-old son to do some shopping. She let
him go to the department where he was going to buy something and she gave him her credit card. When she went to meet with him she couldn’t find him anywhere. A store manager realized something was wrong and approached her. When she told him about her son, he said, “Oh I know where he is.” Her son had been detained by store security and was in a back room being surrounded by security. He had been mistakenly arrested for using a stolen credit card, and they would not listen to him or try to find her in the store to corroborate his story. She described being furious, sad and sick all at the same time.

The Shift of Racism

Sue (2015) further describes microaggressions as the new face of racism as “subtle forms of microaggressions are hard to prove, hard to quantify, making them hard to take actions against, as not everyone sees them as harmless” (interview). Numerous participants in the story circles talked about the changing “face” of racism. As one participant described the issue, with modern day racism, “Racism isn’t always something that’s explicitly stated. Sometimes it’s hidden under the seams.” Individuals mentioned that sometimes they really have to stop and think about what they were just told. “It’s the message behind the words that can be hurtful.” These individuals didn’t name these verbal acts as microaggressions; however they were able to describe the racist phenomenon they experienced. A self-described Black woman stated that:

I mean I guess people just experience racism in all different types of forms. Its not just one, it doesn’t come in one cookie-cutter form. It comes in all types of forms. So you don’t have to be Black, White, you know female, male you know. Its just, I guess its just out there everywhere”

This individual described the fact that it seems that you cannot avoid dealing with racism; it’s out there in our society, and without awareness and education, the issue is not going
to go away. Many of the participants made comments about the idea of racism not being what it used to be. A quote that made an impression on me, speaks to the theme of the shift in racism, “the cycle of racism isn’t broken- its been changed, it was overt. Racism is still there just more under cover.” These individuals were not discussing individual racist acts that could be categorized under individual themes, however they are stories and statements that need to be shared to build further awareness of the harmful effects of racism.

Same Race Microaggressions/Colorism

One theme that emerged from this particular study that has not been mentioned within previous microaggression research was the possible theme of same race microaggressions. Throughout the archives individuals shared stories of instances of microaggressive acts perpetrated by individuals who shared the same racial background. One of the most prevalent themes was the theme of Colorism within same races. A story shared by one young self-described Black woman recounts what an older Black woman said to her:

And she says to me, “I don’t like your haircut, but you’re pretty for a black girl.” And I get this a lot, and what this says to me, in my own culture and my own race is that you feel that being- she was referring to the darkness of my skin, my skin tone- and I’ve received this comment several times throughout high school. So what that’s saying to me is that you feel that I’ve overcome some hurdle apparently, and good for me, there’s a pat on the back. And, I just looked at the woman, because I’m not easily offended, I’ve heard it before. And I just asked her; why can’t I just be pretty? That’s it. Why can’t I just be pretty?

Perhaps the woman who made the comment was trying to compliment the young woman on her appearance despite the conflicting message on her hair cut. However the storyteller was offended by the entire interaction. I would argue this interaction fits
within the parameters of Sue’s (2010) definition of microinsults – “Communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s . . . identity” (p. 31). Sue (2010) may argue that only white privileged individuals can formulate microaggressive acts, however, this young African American woman was judged by the color of her skin by someone she felt was part of her own ethnicity. In many ways it seems that the incident was more hurtful because someone she felt she should have been able to trust not to judge her perpetrated it.

Other self-described African American women shared similar stories. One such story was shared by a light skinned Black woman who was called “red baby” by her older relatives making her feel as if she didn’t truly belong in her family. Others stated that since they were the darkest in their families their relatives looked down on them as being less important than the rest of the family with lighter skin pigment.

Another example of within race microaggressions was discussed by a self-described African American man, who shared a comment made to him by another Black man in regards to athletic ability. The storyteller perceived the comment as very offensive. “So he says to me the reason Black people excel at sports is longer legs relative to their bodies. This guy generalized our entire race. That afternoon a short stocky Asian guy won most of the races.” This comment fits within the parameters of a microaggression as defined by Sue (2011) as “the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to a target person or group” (p. 5). Although the comment may have been meant to show superiority in a Black athlete, the comment actually was
perceived as quite offensive to the listener. The listener was offended by the
generalization of his entire race based on a stereotypical notion.

One self identified Black woman talked about how much damage her father
inflicted on her consciousness. She described herself as “articulate and educated” and a
hard worker, however her father told her to “always remember your place.” She felt that
“the color of your skin is used to dictate your place” and, her father accused her of
“being too big for your britches.” Others shared the idea of being told by their Black
peers or family members that they acted too White. “What does too White mean?
Because I speak as someone who is educated, why can’t I be Black and educated in my
neighborhood?” These comments and shared experiences are examples of how far racism
has taken a hold of our society. If individuals of the same racial background or perceived
racial back are not educated about the damage these types of comments inflict, then it
seems it is just as difficult to educate individuals who do not share a racial commonality.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

The research question, what microaggressive themes do individuals describe as being aimed at them due to their race or ethnicity? Was addressed through the narratives of the story circle participants. Participants shared stories of their experiences of navigating through the minefield of racial prejudice as they live their lives. Using Sue’s (2010) themes, I found examples reflecting previous research on microaggressions.

Using the lens created by critical race theory, the narratives reiterated the idea of racism still existing in the United States. The theme of color blindness is an example of the White majority stating that color doesn’t matter, that it has no bearing on behavior towards others. In fact color blindness creates the idea of further alienating individuals based on differences. It was also interesting to hear self proclaimed African American individuals state that they see everyone the same and don’t look at color either. This shows me that racism is not just a problem between two specific races. Rather racism spans between all races that are different from one another.

The themes of assumed criminology, second class citizen, and myth of meritocracy based on race fit into the lens of critical race theory. These themes all support the idea of racism still being prevalent in today’s society. The idea of judging someone based on their physical appearance as either being a criminal, less capable, or less important than someone else are strong examples of the detriment of racism.
Co-cultural theory lent an important lens for the researcher to make sense of the data as well. Co-cultural theory helped in understanding how the minority narrators’ points of view are being created. The self-proclaimed African American participants are part of the minority. They are not part of the dominant power force in the United States. The lived experiences of the individuals as well as their forbears’ lived experiences have created the way they perceive their place in society. How they perceive their place in society has a direct effect on how they perceive interactions between themselves and other races. Co-cultural theory helps to explain the detriment of color blindness, as individuals who are of various ethnicities and colors should be able to celebrate those differences and not be ashamed of them. The comment that someone does not see in color is a way for those individuals in power to present themselves as not part of the racial problem. Sue (2010) explained color blindness as used by individuals who want to ignore racial differences. By ignoring the differences those who are in the minority are then forced to feel inferior.

Co-cultural theory also helps to make sense of the other themes discovered throughout the research. As co-cultural theory helps to make sense of how minority group members interact and feel toward the majority or power members of a society, co-cultural theory helps to make sense of how the narrators perceived the experiences they chose to share within the story circles. Co-cultural theory can be used as a lens to explain the feelings of second-class citizen, the myth of meritocracy and the changing face of racism. As participants stated they felt racism is still there but more under the seams and less overt as microaggressions are defined, co-cultural theory shows how minorities are aware of the racial climate in the United States.
One of the aspects of qualitative research that is interesting is the fact that even though one thinks the research is going to take you on a particular path there are always detours or forks that take one to a new level of discovery. The idea of racial microaggressive behavior within the same race is not a well-studied idea. Sue (2015), in an interview with PBS correspondents, has stated, “Microaggressions are a reflection of world views of inclusion, exclusion, superiority, inferiority, outside the levels of individuals conscious.” The comments made by African American individuals toward other African American individuals are consistent with this idea.

Microaggressions have been labeled as perpetrated by the hegemonic majority against minorities (Sue, 2015). While the hegemonic majority perpetrates microaggression acts towards minority populations, this research shows that humans are capable of perpetrating hurtful verbal and non-verbal behavior through prejudice and racism toward one another regardless of the race of the communicators.

It is not enough to just understand what microaggressive communication behavior entails; rather it is just as important that we educate the public including current educators on proper intercultural and interethnic communication. Educational programs, i.e. classes and seminars, should be designed for students all through their educational career. The current research is intended to continue the dialogue in the hope that it will shed new light on the importance of intercultural and diversity communication training.

As a researcher I also hope to continue to encourage the growth of awareness in regards to what microaggressive acts are along with the long term negative effects they create. Another possible theme that may be emerging from the research is the idea of status. Many of the participants who shared stories that fit within the parameters of
microaggressions shared some same commonality of being offended while doing service work. The perpetrators of the offences had a perceived higher-class status in society such as the teachers who were inappropriate in their prejudice toward their students. There was the instance of a social worker who wouldn’t help the woman access the health coverage for her son based on the woman’s status in society, and the instance of the Black woman in the store who was so rude to the Black clerk.

The question is whether these people would have been treated as inappropriately if they had been considered equal in status? Race is an underlying issue but the question remains what else is going on? There is also the idea of implicit bias, which like microaggressions, “refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner” (implicit bias, 2015). Implicit biases can encompass both positive or negative stereotypes and ideas toward a person. They are unconsciously preconceived notions.

Sue (2010) describes the relationship of implicit bias of Whites being a contributing factor in microaggressive behavior, however, humans regardless of race, lived experiences and cultural backgrounds can also form these implicit biases. Neuliep (2015) describes the phenomenon of ethnocentrism as “. . . the tendency for any people to put their own group in a position of centrality and worth, while creating a reinforcing negative attitudes and behaviors toward out-groups” (p. 205). Ethnocentric attitudes are not a White only phenomenon. Ethnocentric attitudes can influence implicit bias, and the out-group can encompass the idea of not having the same skin tone as other members of your own culture ethnicity. Being a poor athlete can even cause you to become part of the out-group of your culture based on stereotypes. Overall, I discovered, through the voices
of the storytellers in the archives and the shared stories of racial and just basic prejudice aimed at the participants that we as individuals have a voice and the combined voices are what will make a difference toward change, a change for a better world where someday studies like this one will be obsolete.

Limitations and Future Research

It was surprising to find so few examples of unintentional microaggressive behavior within the narratives, however the prompts used to start the narratives during the story circles may have influenced the sharing of more overt examples of racial aggressions. Further limitations of this study included the lack of ability to further interview any of the participants. Documents, such as the recorded stories, are “mute evidence, because unlike the speaking subjects we engage in interviews and observational contexts, they are unable to respond directly to the researcher’s questioning” (Hodder, as cited in Lindlof and Taylor 2011, p. 217). I did not have the ability to ask follow up questions that may have arisen while listening to the archived stories. The archives spanned over a five-year period of story circles. The lack of demographic information about the participants also caused a limitation in the ability for the researcher to competently group the participants by race, age, or gender. The archive’s main strength is the access of many different types of stories based on racial relations gathered into one archive. As the researcher, I was hoping to find more examples of racial microaggressive acts. It became clear to me that qualitative focus group or personal interviews would provide an even richer set of texts to enhance this communications research.
The use of story circles for further research would be appropriate with the theme of the circle being microaggressive behaviors. Using the terminology of microaggressions to start the conversation would draw out the particular stories and lived experiences of the participants as they relate to microaggressive actions directed at them as minorities.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

RACIALLY MOTIVATED MICROAGGRESSION THEMES

Themes communicated as offensive to African Americans include:

* Ascription of intellectual inferiority
* Second-class citizen
* Assumption of criminality
* Assumption of inferior status
* Assumed universality of the Black experience
* Assumed superiority of White cultural values/ communication styles

Themes communicated as offensive to Asian Americans include:

* Alien in one’s own land
* Ascription of intelligence
* Denial of racial reality
* Eroticization of Asian American Women
* Invalidation of interethnic differences
* Pathologizing cultural values / communication styles
* Second-class citizenship
* Invisibility

(Sue, 2010, pp. 69-70).
APPENDIX B

CODE BOOK GUIDE

Racial Microaggressions
Commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to people of color.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verbal manifestations</th>
<th>Nonverbal Manifestations</th>
<th>Environmental Manifestations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Microinsult</td>
<td>Microassaults</td>
<td>Microinvalidation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Often unconscious)</td>
<td>(often conscious)</td>
<td>(often unconscious)</td>
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- **Microinsult**: Communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage.
- **Microassaults**: Explicit racial derogations characterized primarily by a violent verbal, nonverbal, or environmental attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions.
- **Microinvalidation**: Communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color.

Themes

**Ascription of Intelligence**
Assigning a degree of intelligence to a person based on their race.

**Second-class citizen**
Treated as a lesser person or group.

**Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles**
Notion that the values and communication

**(Sue, 2010, p. 29.)**
APPENDIX C
CODING SHEETS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTICIPANT #</th>
<th>MICRO-AGGRESSION</th>
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APPENDIX D

STORY CIRCLE PROMPTS

Color Line Project

Prompt Examples

Theme: Race

Tell a story about your experience of race or race conflict.
Tell a story about race or race conflict.

Theme: Difference and Diversity

Tell a story about not fitting in.
Tell a story about fitting in.
Tell a story about a time you did not fit in.

Theme: Math Fear

Tell a story about a time you had trouble learning something.

Theme: The arts

Tell a story about the music in you.

Theme: Environment, Fear and Anxiety

Tell a story about a time you spent out in nature.
Tell a story about being alone outside.

Theme: Food

Tell a story about food and your family.
Tell a story about a time when food caused you trouble.
Tell a story about dinnertime. (Sometimes this one is adjusted to “a dinner this week.”)

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