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The Silence of Our Friends: Recognizing Microaggressions

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“In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”

– Martin Luther King, Jr.

Through our personal experiences as individuals living in the United States, we seem to notice as the country becomes more diverse racially and ethnically, there is a huge push for diversity and inclusivity. As graduate students, we decided to come together to share our diverse narratives. By sharing these stories, our hope is to raise awareness of microaggressions that marginalized communities experience. Microaggressions come in different forms. Much of our focus is on racial microaggressions. Solorzano & Perez Huber (2012) discusses racial microaggressions as, “one form of systemic everyday racism used to keep those at the racial margins in their place” (p.1489).

In this paper, we decided to share a form of racial microaggressions of which we have personally experienced, or our friends or family member’s have experienced. In addition, we also wanted to discuss some of the ways microaggressions have affected us. We hope that sharing our experiences will help build community, recognize ways to face microaggressions, and raise awareness of the damaging effects microaggressions have on marginalized individuals. Furthermore, we hope this awareness can help individuals discover ways to heal from the damaging effects of microaggressions. Therefore, we wanted to find a more accessible way to help others engage with the concept of microaggressions and by writing about microaggressions, we realized this was a way to accomplish this concern.

Moreover, we were inspired to title our paper, *The Silence of Our Friends: Recognizing Microaggressions*. This came about from a speech Martin Luther King, Jr. gave in which he stated, “In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies, *but the silence of our friends*” (Smith, 2013). Therefore, we interpret this quote with the purpose and context of this paper in mind. For instance, we recognize that experiencing microaggressions (verbally or

nonverbally) are not easy. Although microaggressions occur every day, we may not always remember the aggressor, however, we will remember what we felt and our response to those feelings. These emotions can either silence individuals or motivate them to speak up. Our intention in sharing our stories is to encourage others *not* to be silenced any longer and to take a stand with their fellow friends against microaggressions and all that it entails. In doing so, being reminded of our courage in helping move one another to a place of healing, peace, and security.

Methodology

Positionality of the group. The ethnic and racial diversity within our group has helped structure our paper in a way that expresses racial microaggressions from various perspectives and intersections. There are five individuals in our group who come from Asian, Latina/o, and, Pacific Island backgrounds. We each bring our own personal knowledge to help inform our project, as well as various areas of expertise acquired from formal Western education which include: gender studies, ethnic studies, education, public health, film, and cultural and media studies.

Critical race theory as a framework. We use Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a framework to examine a few different forms of microaggressions from different ethnic groups. Specifically, CRT looks at racial inequality. The five tenets of CRT in education are: “(1) CRT foregrounds race & racism and challenges race, gender, and class by looking at how racism interacts with other forms; (2) CRT challenges traditional research (White supremacy); (3) CRT views SOC’s experiences as strengths; (4) CRT offers transformative solution to various discriminations by connecting academy with the community, practice with teaching (healing/response); (5) CRT continues to expand its boundaries by using contextual, historical and interdisciplinary perspectives to inform praxis (practice or habit)” (Solorzano, 2013, p. 56-57).

Through sharing our stories, we not only connect to each tenet in CRT, but we also hope this is a practice of transformational resistance.

Unraveling microaggressions: examining our stories. The term microaggression was first introduced by Dr. Chester Pierce in 1970 (Perez Huber & Solórzano, 2014). According to Perez Huber and Solorzano (2014), “Approaching an examination of microaggressions from a CRT perspective means we engage an interdisciplinary analysis that centers the lived experiences of People of Color to understand how everyday racism, and other forms of oppression, intersect to mediate life experiences and outcomes” (p. 5). Therefore, we weave in tenets of CRT and examine how each of us has experienced various forms of microaggression.

In our first example of a microaggression, John¹, a Tongan male, experiences a form of racial microaggression. Due to athlete stereotypes and John’s appearance, he is assumed to be at the college as a football player instead of a scholar. Even though he explained his purpose on campus is for academics, not sports, the White female mother does not hear what he is saying and persistently asks him to take a picture with her son despite. Finally, after much pressure who John awkwardly gives in and takes the picture. Racial microaggression is not a complex terminology in the sense that it is an experienced everyday racism.

If this everyday racism is directed toward a certain race, we can define it as racial microaggression. Racial microaggressions are “verbal and non-verbal assaults directed toward People of Color, often carried out in subtle, automatic, or unconscious forms” (Perez Huber & Solorzano, 2016, p.2). Solorzano (2016) also explained that layered assaults are based on a People of Color’s race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status and cumulative assaults are ones that happen routinely, which takes a psychological and physiological toll on People of Color.

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

In our second example of a microaggression, Cathy¹ experienced a racial microaggression where her friend generalized Asian drivers as “bad” drivers. This was a form of a layered assault where Asians were viewed as bad drivers based on their race. Instead of seeing as how an immature driver happened to be Asian as well, Cathy’s friend generalized all Asians as bad drivers and this is an existing stereotype for Asians, especially for Asian women drivers. We name this as a verbal, layered assault, and a form of racial microaggression that marginalizes Asians with an incorrect depiction of their driving skills.

We live in a society where there is a racial division between Majority (Whites) and minority groups. Those in the majority group produce dominant narratives that are stereotypes and generalizations of minority groups. This dominant narrative is produced from the idea of White supremacy, which “justifies the superiority of a dominant group over non-dominant groups” (Perez Huber & Solorzano, 2014, p. 1).

In our third example, a White delivery woman saw Emily’s¹ outer appearance and also her last name (i.e. Kim), a common last name for Koreans, and started saying all the Asian languages she knew. The issue was that the delivery woman, a White female, was aggregating East Asian languages, assuming there is one language for East Asians when there is a clear difference between Chinese, Japanese and Koreans. When Emily closed the door without responding to her Asian languages, the delivery woman immediately said, “Asians are rude” instead of really thinking about how this could have made Emily uncomfortable. This complex binary division between majority and minority groups can create dominant narratives. Here, Asians were viewed as rude people and also the aggregated representation of East Asian languages silenced Emily, who is Korean, not an East Asian.

¹All names are pseudonyms.

If racial microaggressions foregrounds racial inequality, intersectionality combines various subordinations such as race and gender. Gendered Racial Microaggressions are “subtle and everyday verbal, behavioral, and environmental expressions of oppression based on the intersection of one’s race and gender” (Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood & Hunt, 2013, p. 53). In our fourth example of a microaggression, Sarah¹ witnesses how a Woman of Color is being marginalized and oppressed in an academic setting. There are layered assaults based on the Woman of Color’s race, gender, and status as a mother and a scholar. As Lorde (1982) states, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.” (para. 14). Thus, it is very common to see intersectionality of microaggressions based on one’s race, class, gender, sexuality, language, immigration status, etc.

There can also be intra-microaggressions, which happens within a minority group. Nadal (2008) argues that individuals within ethnic and racial groups often experience racial microaggressions. Jenny’s¹ husband, Mark¹, experiences intra-microaggression where his friend, who share the same ethnic background, tells Mark to trim his beard so he does not get mistaken as an ISIS member. Racial microaggressions can also occur between ethnic and racial minority groups (Allen, 2010), which are called inter-microaggressions.

Pedagogical Tool. “We argue racial microaggressions can be a powerful ‘tool’ for identifying, disrupting, and dismantling the racism that marginalizes, subordinates and excludes People of Color in and outside of education” (Perez Huber & Solorzano, 2014, p. 1). In our paper, we shared our stories to examine how we face microaggression in our everyday life.

Healing from Microaggressions

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

More often than not, racial microaggressions can leave unwanted wounds that require healing. Specifically, this form of racism can contribute to the “stress, trauma, and emotional injury” of persons of color (Bryant-Davis, 2007, p. 135). In addition, microaggressions are experienced daily which can stifle attempts to heal. Hence, individuals go through more “long-term physical, mental, emotional, and psychological effects of racism” because of this “society characterized by white dominance and privilege” (Geronimus et al., 2006; McGee & Stovall, 2015, pg. 491). Arline Geronimus et al. identifies this lengthened process of response to these difficult pressures as “Weathering” (2006). Fortunately, as individuals push through *weathering*, they will develop ways of coping with their pain. However, there is not a one fits all formula that exists in order to begin the healing process. There are different forms and stages of healing depending on how deep one’s wounds are and what their specific needs are in order to move forward.

Joy DeGruy explained that in order to begin healing one must “simply tell the truth” (DeGruy, 2016). We decided early on that the *truth* our group wanted to share would come from each of our own personal experiences or stories. Storytelling is a way of giving voice to individuals who otherwise would be silenced (Hooks, 2010). This paper provides the space and opportunity for the five of us scholars to further get to know one another and to impart our stories concerning microaggressions. Initially, it was not easy to be completely vulnerable while sharing our experiences, but as we discovered how we could all relate to each other’s stories, more and more just kept flowing into the discussion. It truly was an emotional exchange as we listened with intent, genuinely offering our empathy, support, and validation for each other. In the words of Bell Hooks (2010), “Stories also help us heal (p. 52) ...It is one of those powerful ways to educate, to create community in a classroom” (p. 56). We were very grateful to have this

new community to candidly share our stories with. Throughout the entire process of planning and interacting with our group, we truly did begin healing individually.

Another form of healing focuses on nourishing our spirituality. The Dalai Lama (2004) defines spirituality best as the “qualities of the human spirit—such as love and compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony—which brings happiness to both self and others” (Lama, p. 9). One way of honoring spiritual needs is through education (Palmer, 1998). Education in the sense of teaching others through action and by example. For instance, teaching an aggressor how their statement was hurtful and inappropriate. In addition, education can also refer to being the learner. It is important to acquire knowledge and understanding from others in order to grow and gain perspective. Parker Palmer agreed that “Education is about healing and wholeness. It is about empowerment, liberation, transcendence, about renewing the vitality of life. It is about finding and claiming ourselves and our place in the world” (Hooks, 2010, p. 149; Palmer, 1998). It is our hope that by sharing our stories through this paper, others may also feel empowered to do the same. Therefore, finding their sense of belonging and wholesomeness.

Conclusion

We do not think we fully anticipated what the process and experience of doing so, would in turn, teach us. However, we saw the purpose and the importance to no longer be silent and to share our stories and thoughts concerning microaggressions. In doing so, we stood together in solidarity to face our realities concerning specific examples of oppression and assault that we (or our friends and family) have endured. As a result, we learned that “unnecessary and unchosen suffering wounds us, but need not scar us for life. It does mark us. What we allow the mark of our suffering to become is in our own hands” (Hooks, 2000, p. 209). It is truly up to us to take

actions to heal as we deal with daily microaggressions. Although we started out as mere acquaintances, we now are friends who collectively support each other to share our voices, no more to be silenced.

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