

How Institutional Racism and Racial Microaggressions Affect Minority Mental Health

By: Diana Ro, PsyD, Licensed Psychologist



It is no secret that our country has a significant history of racism.

Some argue that racism no longer exists due to de-segregation laws and policy changes, while others argue that racism is still alive – it has just changed its face. Two factors that people may overlook and not quite understand is the extent of institutional racism and

racial microaggressions and the affect they have on our world today.

What exactly is institutional racism and racial microaggression?

Institutional racism is defined as racism expressed through political and social institutions.

The [Center for Racial Justice Innovation](#) describes how racism is expressed through the wealth gap, employment, housing discrimination, government surveillance and incarceration that still occur today.

Racial microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative slights and insults toward people of color.”

Example: the history of U.S. housing.

In 1934, mortgage lenders, such as the Federal Housing Administration, started carving A, B, C and D zones designating house value depending on how many African-Americans lived there, because they assumed more African-American home owners would de-value the neighborhood. Therefore, African-Americans were unable to get lower interest rates and their home values significantly decreased.

After World War II, many minority veterans returned to their home country, but could not provide for their families because minorities could not purchase a home. Shortly after Martin Luther King Jr.'s death, the [Fair Housing Act of 1968](#) was passed stating it was illegal to discriminate against an individual on the sale, rental or financing of a home based on race, religion, national origin and sex.

Despite the law passing, real estate agencies and banks adopted policies that restricted sales to African-Americans. These policies also kept many African-Americans in inner city areas, since they could not afford to purchase a home, and caused "white flight" of many White Americans in order to protect their home and finances. Although overt segregation laws were overturned, these policies kept segregation alive, and still cause segregation today.

How do racial microaggressions impact minority mental health?

The phenomena of racial microaggressions has huge implications for minority mental health and societal conflict. Minorities are more likely to experience various microaggressions, such as being assumed a criminal or being "exoticized." Therefore, [minorities are more likely to experience immediate distress and long-terms affects from microaggressions](#), including depression, negative affect, low self-esteem, health issues, pain, fatigue ... and, in certain cases, death. Microaggressions seep into our unconscious biases and affect the way in which we interact with others.

1. Microassault

Defined as “behavioral/verbal remarks or comments that convey rudeness, insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior or purposeful discriminatory actions.” This can be seen more as an old-fashioned style of racism.

2. Microinsult

Defined as “communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity.” For example, asking a person of color, “How did you get this job?”

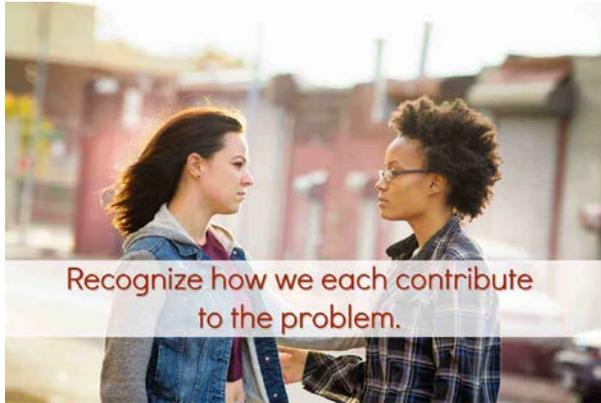
3. Microinvalidation

Defined as “communications that exclude, negate or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of a person of color.” For example, telling an Asian individual, “Wow, you speak English very well!”

Sue argues that racism has become more covert and disguised. Therefore, they are difficult to recognize and confront. He argues that, “the power of racial microaggressions lie in their invisibility to the perpetrator, and often times, the recipient.” He proposes that everyone works under an “invisible veil,” which is the context in which our worldview is formed. Unconsciously, we assume that everyone operates from a shared worldview regardless of cultural components, such as race and culture.

What can we do to combat microaggression?

Examine yourself.



Recognize how we each contribute to the problem.

The first step in eradicating institutional racism and racial microaggressions is our willingness to recognize how we each contribute to the problem. No one is exempt. We must acknowledge our own privileges, power and biases, and how those influence the way we interact with others.

Speak up.

Silence kills. Microaggressions occur every day. When you hear someone making a derogatory comment or stereotype, speak up. Do not continue the cycle. Bystanders have much power. You can both show the perpetrator that it is not appropriate behavior and show the victim that he/she is not alone.

Relational humility

Learn to focus on both self-orientedness and other-orientedness. Practice regulating your ego and evaluating yourself more accurately, while increasing respect and value of others.



Diana Ro, PsyD is a Doctoral Limited Licensed Psychologist at the Pine Rest Traverse City Clinic. Diana earned her Bachelor's degree in Psychology and Social Behavior from University of California of Irvine. She received her Master's degree in Psychology and Christian Leadership as well as her Doctorate of Psychology degree from Fuller Graduate School of Psychology in Pasadena, California