

Examples of Racial Microaggressions in Therapeutic Practice

Theme	Microaggression	Message
<p>Color blindness Statements which indicate that a White person does not want to acknowledge race</p>	<p>A therapist says “I think you are being too paranoid. We should emphasize similarities, not people’s differences” when a client of color attempts to discuss her feelings about being the only person of color at her job and feeling alienated and dismissed by her co-workers.</p> <p>A client of color expresses concern in discussing racial issues with her therapist. Her therapist replies with, “When I see you, I don’t see color.”</p>	<p>Race and culture are not important variables that affect people’s lives.</p> <p>Your racial experiences are not valid.</p>
<p>Denial of individual racism A statement made when Whites renounce their racial biases</p>	<p>A client of color asks his or her therapist about how race affects their working relationship. The therapist replies, “Race does not affect the way I treat you.”</p> <p>A client of color expresses hesitancy in discussing racial issues with his White female therapist. She replies “I understand. As a woman, I face discrimination also.”</p>	<p>Your racial/ethnic experience is not important.</p> <p>Your racial oppression is no different than my gender oppression.</p>
<p>Myth of meritocracy Statements which assert that race does not play a role in succeeding in career advancement or education.</p>	<p>A school counselor tells a Black student that “if you work hard, you can succeed like everyone else.”</p> <p>A career counselor is working with a client of color who is concerned about not being promoted at work despite being qualified. The counselor suggests, “Maybe if you work harder you can succeed like your peers.”</p>	<p>People of color are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder. If you don’t succeed, you have only yourself to blame (blaming the victim).</p>
<p>Pathologizing cultural values/communication styles The notion that the values and communication styles of the dominant/White culture are ideal</p>	<p>A Black client is loud, emotional, and confrontational in a counseling session. The therapist diagnoses her with borderline personality disorder.</p> <p>A client of Asian or Native American descent has trouble maintaining eye contact with his therapist.</p> <p>The therapist diagnoses him with a social anxiety disorder. Advising a client, “Do you really think your problem stems from racism?”</p>	<p>Assimilate to dominant culture.</p> <p>Leave your cultural baggage outside.</p>
<p>Second-class citizen Occurs when a White person is given preferential treatment as a consumer over a person of color</p>	<p>A counselor limits the amount of long-term therapy to provide at a college counseling center; she chooses all White clients over clients of color.</p> <p>Clients of color are not welcomed or acknowledged by receptionists</p>	<p>Whites are more valued than people of color.</p> <p>White clients are more valued than clients of color.</p>
<p>Environmental microaggressions Macro-level microaggressions, which are more apparent on a systemic level</p>	<p>A waiting room office has pictures of American presidents.</p> <p>Every counselor at a mental health clinic is White.</p>	<p>You don’t belong/Only white people can succeed.</p> <p>You are an outsider/You don’t exist.</p>

Adapted from: Wing, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, Esquilin (2007). Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice. *American Psychologist*, 62, 4, 271-286

Types of Racial Microaggressions Identified by an African American Focus Group

Microaggression	Definition	Example
Colorblindness	Denying racial-cultural differences	"I don't see you as Black; I just see you as a regular person."
Overidentification	Denying or minimizing individual racial bias because of assumed similarity	"As a gay person, I know just what it's like to be discriminated against because of race."
Denial of personal or individual racism	Professing presumed freedom from or immunization to racism	"I'm not racist because some of my best friends are Black."
Minimization of racial-cultural issues	Minimizing or dismissing the importance of racial-cultural issues to a person of color	"I'm not sure we need to focus on race or culture to understand your depression."
Assigning unique/ special status on the basis of race or ethnicity	Assuming that a positive behavior or characteristic is atypically present in a person on the basis of race or ethnicity	"You're not like other Blacks; you're a credit to your race" and "You're a very articulate African American."
Stereotypic assumptions about members of a racial or ethnic group	Assuming that a behavior, norm, or characteristic exists on the basis of a person's race or ethnicity	"I know that Black people are very religious" and "Did you grow up in the inner city?"
Accused hypersensitivity regarding racial or cultural issues	Assuming that a person of color is hypersensitive during discussions of racial or cultural issues	"Don't be too sensitive about the racial stuff. I didn't mean anything bad/offensive."
Meritocracy myth	Ignoring the responsibility of individual perpetrators and sociopolitical systems for perpetuating racism	"If Black people just worked harder, they could be successful like other people."
Culturally insensitive treatment considerations or recommendations	Displaying cultural insensitivity in the context of understanding or treating clients' concerns	"You should disengage or separate from your family of origin if they are causing you problems."
Acceptance of less than optimal behaviors on the basis of racial-cultural group membership	Accepting or normalizing potentially dysfunctional behaviors on the basis of a person's racial or cultural group	"It might be okay for some people to cope by drinking alcohol because their cultural norms sanction this behavior."
Idealization	Overestimating the desirable qualities and underestimating the limitations of a person on the basis of racial or ethnic group membership	"I'm sure you can cope with this problem as a strong Black woman" and "Black people are so cool."
Dysfunctional helping/ patronization	Offering help that is unneeded or inappropriate on the basis of racial or ethnic group membership	"I don't usually do this, but I can waive your fees if you can't afford to pay for counseling."

Adapted from: Constantine, Madonna G. Teachers College, Columbia University (2007) Racial Microaggressions Against African American Clients in Cross-Racial Counseling Relationships, *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, v54 n1 p1-16 Jan 2007