Racial Microaggressions and the Asian American Experience

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Racial microaggressions were examined through a focus group analysis of 10 self-identified Asian American participants using a semistructured interview and brief demographic questionnaire. Results identified 8 major microaggressive themes directed toward this group: (a) alien in own land, (b) ascription of intelligence, (c) exoticization of Asian women, (d) invalidation of interethnic differences, (e) denial of racial reality, (f) pathologizing cultural values/communication styles, (g) second class citizenship, and (h) invisibility. A ninth category, "undeveloped incidents/responses" was used to categorize microaggressions that were mentioned by only a few members. There were strong indications that the types of subtle racism directed at Asian Americans may be qualitatively and quantitatively different from other marginalized groups. Implications are discussed.

Keywords: Asian American experience, racial microaggressions, microinsult, microinvalidation

It is well documented that racism has been a constant, continuing, and embedded part of American history and society (Jones, 1997; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Many Americans still cling to the belief, however, that the civil rights movement eliminated racism in our nation and created equality between Whites and people of color (Thompson & Neville, 1999). Although the civil rights movement had a significant impact on changing racial attitudes and overt prejudicial behaviors, racism is far from eradicated and continues to plague the nation (President's Initiative on Race, 1998; Sue, 2003). Instead of overt expressions of White racial superiority, research supports the contention that racism has evolved into more subtle, ambiguous, and unintentional manifestations in American social, political, and economic life (Sue, 2003; Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002). The "old fashioned" type where racial hatred was overt, direct, and often inten-tional, has increasingly morphed into a contemporary form that is subtle, indirect, and often disguised. Studies on the existence of implicit stereotyping suggest that the new form of racism is most likely to be evident in well-intentioned White Americans who are unaware they hold beliefs and attitudes that are detrimental to people of color (Banaji, 2001; Banaji, Hardin, & Rothman, 1993; DeVos & Banaji, 2005). The "new" manifestation of racism has been likened to carbon monoxide, invisible, but potentially lethal (D. W. Sue & D. Sue, 2003; Tinsley-Jones, 2003). Some researchers prefer to use the term "racial microaggression" to describe this form of racism which occurs in the daily lives of people of color. They are so common and innocuous that they are often overlooked and unacknowledged (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Sue et al. (2006) define microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults that potentially have harmful or unpleasant psychological impact on the target person or group." Simply stated, microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group. These exchanges are so pervasive and automatic in daily interactions that they are often dismissed and glossed over as being innocuous. What constitutes racial microaggres-

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sions, how they impact people of color and the strategies used to deal with them have not been well conceptualized or researched (Sue et al., 2006).

Although it is generally accepted that African Americans and Latino/Hispanic Americans experience both overt and covert forms of prejudice and discrimination, Asian Americans are frequently viewed as a model minority who have made it in this society and experience little in the form of racism (Wong & Halgin, 2006). Despite the long documented history of racism toward Asian Americans, there has been a lack of attention paid to prejudice and discrimination directed against them (D. W. Sue & D. Sue, 2003). One reason may be that many White Americans tend to dichotomize racial issues in Black and White terms (Liang, Li, & Kim et al., 2004). As a result, the psychological needs of Asian Americans arising from racism are often overshadowed by the experiences of Whites and Blacks, and research findings for these racial groups are often assumed to speak to the experiences of Asian Americans as well.

Despite the belief that Asian Americans have somehow "made it" in our society and are "immune" to racism, widespread prejudice and discrimination continue to take a toll on their standard of living, self-esteem, and psychological well being (Wong & Halgin, 2006). Indeed, the study of Asians in America is the study of widespread prejudice and discrimination leveled at this group. Denied the rights of citizenship, forbidden to own land, and incarcerated in internment camps, this group has been the target of large-scale governmental actions to deny them basic civil and human rights (D. W. Sue & D. Sue, 2003).

Research reveals that overt racial discrimination is identified as one of the potential social risk factors of mental illness, is related to physical and psychological well-being, and contributes to stress, depression, and anger in its victims (Chakraborty & McKenzie, 2002; Kim, 2002). For example, in a survey of studies examining racism, mental health researchers found that higher levels of discrimination were associated with lower levels of happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and mastery or control (Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). However, many of the existing studies examining the relationship between racist events and mental health typically have not included the experiences of Asian Americans (Liang et al., 2004). As a result, these findings may not accurately describe the Asian American experience of racism and high levels of discrimination.

An interesting and valuable means of studying the manifestation and impact of racism upon Asian Americans is through the concept of racial microaggressions. Microaggressions have been described as subtle, stunning, often automatic exchanges which are "put downs" (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978, p.66). People of color experience them as subtle insults directed toward them, often automatically and unconsciously (Solorzano et al., 2000). Social psychologists have outlined the many ways contemporary racism can be expressed resulting in harm and disadvantage to the target person or group (Jones, 1997; Dovidio et al., 2002). Some examples of racial microaggressions include (a) teachers who ignore students of color, (b) taxi drivers who fail to pick up passengers of color, or (c) airport security personnel screening passengers of color with greater frequency and care. Because microaggressions often occur outside the level of conscious awareness, well-intentioned individuals can engage in these biased acts without guilt or knowledge of their discriminatory actions (Sue, 2003). Despite the intentions of the perpetrator, these acts of discrimination can significantly harm the victims (Delucchi & Do, 1996; Sue, 2003). Racial microaggressions can also take form as verbal statements such as, "You speak such good English," "But you speak without an accent," and "So where are you really from?" (Solorzano et al., 2000). Asian Americans and Latino/Hispanic Americans indicate that they perceive these statements as invalidating and insulting because they reflect a worldview that racial/ethnic minorities are aliens in their own country (DeVos & Banaji, 2005; D. W. Sue & D. Sue, 2003). Unfortunately, through selective perception, many Whites are unlikely to hear the inadvertent racial slights that are made in their presence (Lawrence, 1987). As a result, White individuals may unconsciously perpetuate Eurocentric attitudes of White supremacy and in effect cause individuals of color to feel invalidated or inferior.

Ever since the civil rights movement, critical race theory has provided a means for challenging Eurocentric epistemologies and dominant

ideologies such as beliefs in objectivity and meritocracy that has masked the operation of racism, especially as they relate to groups like Asian Americans (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Sleeter & Bernal, 2004). Although not referred to as microaggressions, Asian American Studies has used counterstorytelling, media/film analyses, and narrative critiques to elucidate the Asian American experience of both overt and covert forms of racism (Hu-DeHart, 1995; Hyun, 2005; Nakanishi, 1995). Although the Ethnic and Asian American Studies literature lend support to the existence of racial microaggressions, there is a paucity of psychological studies on their effects for all racial groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 1992; Johnson, 1988; Lawrence, 1987). A review of that literature reveals only one study on African-Americans that focuses specifically on microaggressions (Solorzano et al., 2000). The investigators reported that microaggressions resulted in a negative racial climate for Blacks, and often fostered emotions of self-doubt, frustration, and isolation on the part of the victims (Solorzano et al., 2000). They concluded that the cumulative effects of racial microaggressions can be quite devastating. Sue (2003) believes that "this contemporary form of racism is many times over more problematic, damaging, and injurious to persons of color than overt racist acts" (p. 48). It has been noted that the collective effects of racial microaggressions may theoretically result in "diminished mortality, augmented morbidity and flattened confidence" (Pierce, 1995, p. 281). Without documentation and analysis to help better understand microaggressions, the threats that they pose and the assaults they justify can easily be ignored or downplayed (Solorzano et al., 2000).

Sue et al. (2006) have proposed a taxonomy of racial microaggressions that classifies them under three forms: microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation. Microassaults are defined as explicit racial derogations that are verbal (i.e., racial epithets), nonverbal (behavioral discrimination), or environmental (offensive visual displays) attacks meant to hurt the person of color. It is generally deliberate and conscious. Calling someone a "Chink" or "Jap," White parents discouraging a son or daughter from dating Asian Americans, or displaying Asian caricatures of exaggerated slanted eyes and large buck teeth are examples. Microas-

saults are most similar to old fashioned forms of racism in that they are deliberate and conscious acts by the aggressor (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000).

The two other forms (microinsults and microinvalidations), however, tend to operate unconsciously, are unintentional, and generally outside the level of conscious awareness. They are seemingly consistent with the research literature on the power of implicit racist attitudes and beliefs (Banaji, 2001; DeVos & Banaji, 2005). These microaggressions are not consciously intended by the perpetrator, but from the perspective of the recipient, they represent a negative experience. A microinsult is a behavioral action or verbal remark that conveys rudeness, insensitivity, or demeans a person's racial identity or heritage. A White manager who states to a prospective applicant of color that "the most qualified person should get the job" may be perceived as implying that people of color are not qualified. Microinvalidations are actions that exclude, negate or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of a person of color. When an Asian American is complimented for speaking good English or when Blacks are warned not to be so oversensitive, the underlying messages may be that Asians are perpetual foreigners in their own country and that the experiential reality of racism for African Americans is not real.

Because Sue et al. (2006) were more concerned with the unintentional and automatic expressions of microaggressions, they chose to concentrate on the latter two rather than microassaults. They created a taxonomy of microaggressions and proposed categories of each with their own distinct themes: (a) microinsult (*ascription of intelligence*—assigning high or low intelligence to a racial group, *second class citizenship*—treated as a lesser being or group, *pathologizing values/communications*—notion that values and/or communication styles of people of color are abnormal, and *assumption of criminal status*—presumed to be a criminal, dangerous or deviant based on race) and (b) microinvalidation (*alien in own land*—assumption that racial minority citizens are foreigners, *color blindness*—denial or pretense that one does not see color, *myth of meritocracy*—success in life is due to individual effort and not race, and *denial of individual racism*—denial that personal racism or one's role in its perpetuation). A ninth category, environmental inval-

idation was identified, but it appears to be more of a mechanism for delivering microaggressions (verbal, behavioral and environmental) instead of a free standing and distinct expression.

Although there is considerable conceptual and anecdotal support for the researchers' taxonomy and classification scheme (American Counseling Association, 1999; Banaji, 2001; Dovidio et al., 2002), its recent formulation has not been adequately researched. Studies examining the deleterious effects of "old fashioned" or overt forms of racism are plentiful, but few have examined the more covert forms as manifested in microaggressions. Further, the above taxonomy was derived from considering microaggressions across several racial/ethnic minority groups (African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latino/Hispanic Americans), and there is an underlying assumption that they apply equally to all groups of color. Although many social scientists have suggested that racism and stereotyping operate under similar principles for all marginalized groups (Bienat, 2003; Jones, 1997), some have hypothesized that there may be qualitative differences of how racism is expressed against Asian Americans as opposed to African Americans or Latino/Hispanic Americans (Liang et al., 2004; Yoo & Lee, 2005). Understanding the manifestations of racism is critical to designing effective interventions to counter the negative effects of racial oppression (Thompson & Neville, 1999), especially as it affects Asian Americans (Noh, Beiser, Kaspar, Hou, & Rummens, 1999). The current study was conducted in order to qualitatively explore the experience of racial microaggressions among Asian Americans and to identify typical microaggressive themes. By exploring the types of microaggressions Asian Americans experience, messages being conveyed, reactions to these experiences, and how individuals deal with the effects of these encounters, we hope to increase understanding of the dynamics of subtle racism directed at Asian Americans.

Method

The present study utilized a qualitative method to identify microaggressions directed at Asian Americans, explored the various forms they take, studied their impact upon recipients, and determined the means used to cope with their impact. Focus groups were used as a method to capture the richness of the participants' experiences by allowing the social group interactions to facilitate the development of meaning (Krueger, 1998). Focus groups have been found to be an effective means of obtaining in-depth information about a relatively unexplored concept (Seal, Bogart & Ehrhardt, 1998; Krueger, 1994) and used successfully to explore racial perceptions on a number of topics (Saint-Germain, Bassford & Montano, 1993; Solorzano et al., 2000; Thompson, Bazile, & Akbar, 2004). In this case, we were interested in understanding social interactions and events related to experiences of subtle racism directed toward Asian Americans by describing, comparing, contrasting, cataloguing, and classifying microaggressions.

Participants

The ideal number for effective focus group analysis ranges from 4-12 people (Seal, Bogart & Ehrhardt, 1998). Participants were selected based on purposive criterion with the aim of choosing a sample that typifies the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 1990). All participants in the two focus groups had to self identify with being Asian American, were born and raised in the United States, and agree that racism and discrimination against people of color (particularly Asian Americans) exist in the United States. These three criteria were essential to insure that the phenomena under investigation would be present in the discussions. A total of 10 self-identified Asian Americans participated in the study: 1 male and 9 female; 4 Chinese Americans, 2 Filipino Americans, 1 Korean American, 1 Japanese/German American, and 1 Asian Indian/European American. Eight were students, two were working professionals, and all were in their mid-20s with only one in her early 40s. Two focus groups of five were formed from the volunteers.

Researchers

The researchers for the study consisted of 5 doctoral and 5 masters' students in counseling psychology taking a graduate research seminar in racism and antiracism taught by the senior author at a private Eastern University. Because qualitative research places the role of the re-

searcher as the central means of data collection, identification of personal values, assumptions and biases are required at the initial onset of the study (Fassinger, 2005). This allows us to account for potential biases and assures that the contributions to the research setting, methodology, analysis, and interpretation can be useful rather than detrimental (Krueger, 1998; Polkinghorne, 2005). All students taking the course did so voluntarily because of their strong interest in the topic of racism. The team consisted of three African Americans, three Asian Americans (including the senior author), two Latinos, and three White Americans. The instructor (senior author) has over 30 years of research related to topics of diversity, multiculturalism, racism, and antiracism. As this was a two-year seminar, considerable time was spent in the study of racism directed toward Asian Americans which allowed for the informed formulation of the study. It is also clear that team members bring certain biases to the study. Team members believe, for example, that subtle racism exists, that it occurs against Asian Americans, that it possesses detrimental psychological consequences, and that it may be ethnic group specific. Further, all were members of a research seminar that might inadvertently influence their work on the project (pleasing the instructor). As a result, every effort was made to ensure objectivity, but it is acknowledged that these biases may shape the way data are collected, viewed, and interpreted.

Measure

Two formal means of collecting data were used: (a) a brief demographic questionnaire aimed at obtaining basic information related to Asian ethnicity, gender, age, occupation, and education, and (b) a semistructured interview protocol. The protocol was developed from a review of the literature on microaggressions (Pierce et al., 1978; Solorzano et al., 2000; Sue, 2003), research related to implicit and explicit stereotyping (Banaji, 2001; Banaji, Hardin, & Roth, 1993), aversive racism (Dovidio et al., 2002; Jones, 1997), and Asian American experiences of racism (Kim, 2002; Liang et al., 2004; Wong & Halgin, 2006). As we wanted to allow the participants considerable freedom in responding to the questions and prompts, all questions were open-ended, and generally aimed at eliciting real life examples that they experienced. In general, the eight questions were intended to generate a variety of microaggressive examples, explore the impact they had on participants, construe meaning from the interaction, and outline how participants responded. Transition and ending questions were also developed to aid in moving from one topic to another and to bring closure to the focus group activity. A copy of the interview protocol is found in the Appendix.

Procedures

Participants were solicited throughout the local university community (campus and neighborhood) through posted flyers, word of mouth, classroom invitations, and a website asking for volunteers. Asian American participants who volunteered were placed in one of two focus groups. No financial compensation was offered. Each focus group lasted for 2 hours and was conducted by a two-person team: the facilitator and observer. Both the facilitator and observer were Asian Americans and part of the research team. As the topic dealt with subtle racism against Asian Americans, it was believed that facilitators of the same race would minimize any hesitancy or reluctance to disclose negative sentiment about interactions with those outside of their own group. The role of the facilitator was to lead the discussion while the observer noted nonverbal behaviors and group dynamics (Krueger, 1998). Prior to the interview, both researchers went through a brief behavioral rehearsal related to moderating the focus group discussion, and anticipating and overcoming possible resistances to the flow of the discussion. Immediately after the interview and after the focus group was dismissed, a debriefing session was held between the two researchers related to their own reactions, observations about the group, major themes that arose, climate in the room, and discussion of problematic issues. The focus group discussions took place in an enclosed private room at Teachers College, Columbia University. All participants were asked to sign a consent form that included permission to audiotape the entire session. The debriefing between the two researchers was also audiotaped. The tapes were transcribed verbatim making sure that the identities of participants were removed. Tapes were destroyed after

transcription. The transcript was subsequently checked for accuracy by the two facilitators before they were presented to the team for qualitative analysis.

A four-person research team, which included the facilitator and observer, went over the entire transcript to record responses or situations illustrating microaggressions generated in the focus groups and the content of responses from the group participants were analyzed qualitatively. The team task was to look at what types of microaggressions Asian Americans experience, the messages that are being conveyed via these microaggressions, and the type of reactions (i.e., behavioral, cognitive, and/or affective) Asian Americans have in response to these microaggressions. In keeping with focus group analysis (Seal et al., 1998; Krueger, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994), each member of the research team individually identified topic areas or domains used to conceptually organize the overwhelming amount of data generated from the group discussion. The narratives and descriptions from the group participants were analyzed qualitatively along the following domains: (a) identifying microaggressions from the perspective of the participant, (b) producing illustrative critical incidents, (c) analyzing the unintentional/intentional themes, (d) categorizing their impact, and (e) describing typical responses to microaggressions.

The preliminary analysis was then presented to the senior author and other seminar members who acted as auditors in reviewing and providing feedback to the team in order to reach consensus that approximate the "truth." The procedure used in the consensual process was similar to the one described in consensual qualitative research (CQR) (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Hill et al., 2005), although the unit of study was a focus group rather than an individual. Because of member interactions in the two groups, using CQR to analyze general, typical, or variant themes independently among individuals was compromised. Rather, transcripts were analyzed according to the degree of uniform consensus reached by each group during a discussion of the microaggressive episode. As qualitative research is ultimately about the study of experience or experiences, using a modified CQR procedure to arrive at consensus was considered an appropriate methodology (Polkinghorne, 2005). Once consensus was reached in the large group, the team members were asked to individually extract core ideas from the domains. Core ideas are defined as a summary or abstract derived from the domains that integrate the data in a holistic fashion linked to the context of the phenomenon under study. Once accomplished, the members of the team presented their individual analysis to one another, reached consensus about their contributions in a group meeting, and presented it to the auditors. The roles of the auditors, as prescribed in CQR were threefold: (a) compare and contrast the work of the independent team members, (b) minimize the effects of groupthink by encouraging divergent perspectives, and (c) help finalize the themes in a group working session. The results of both focus groups were then combined.

Results

The following section will provide examples of the themes gleaned from the combined focus group transcripts. In addition, the messages conveyed by each microaggression to the recipient and the intent of the aggressor will be explicated to reach a deeper understanding of their meanings. Eight microaggressive themes were identified. There were, however, several microaggressive incidents that could not be classified under any of these themes and/or did not receive group consensus to develop an additional category. Thus, we used the category "undeveloped incidents/responses" to include these incidents.

Theme 1: Alien in Own Land

This theme emerges from both focus groups and can be described as a microaggression which embodies the assumption that all Asian Americans are foreigners or foreign-born. An example of this theme was universally voiced by Asian Americans of all ethnicities and manifested in questions or remarks like "Where are you from?" "Where were you born?" or "You speak good English." The participants were often torn between whether the comments were well intentioned expressions of interest in them or perceptions that they were foreigners and did not belong in America. Furthermore, the meaning construed by recipients is that they were different, less than, and could not possibly be "real" Americans. That this phenomenon has

empirical reality was a finding that White Americans, on an implicit level, equated "White" and "American" with one another while Asian and African Americans were less likely associated with the term "American" (DeVos & Banaji, 2005).

On the whole, the participants did not see the questions or "compliments" as benign and curious, but disturbing and uncomfortable. One Chinese American participant shared that while she was working in a restaurant, a White customer came in and attempted to converse with her in Japanese. She interpreted the behavior as the person perceiving her as a foreigner and not fluent in English. Worse yet, the person could not distinguish between Chinese and Japanese Americans. The focus group members did not perceive the intent of the questions to be overtly malevolent. They believed the person might have been attempting to establish a relationship with the Chinese American and might have wanted to indicate that he was not like other White Americans and could speak an Asian language.

Theme 2: Ascription of Intelligence

This theme also emerges from both focus groups. It is described as a microaggression that occurs when a degree of intelligence is assigned to an Asian American based on his/her race. Many of the participants describe teachers and fellow students making statements such as "You are really good at math," "You people always do well in school," or "If I see lots of Asian students in my class, I know it's going to be a hard class." The message conveyed is that all Asians are bright and smart, especially in math and science. Interestingly, the work on stereotype threat suggests that this belief is shared by many Whites, and that it may actually depress academic performance among them when in the presence of Asian Americans (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

The participants believed that the conscious intent of these statements was to compliment Asian Americans, since being good at math was perceived by aggressors as a positive quality. However, the impact of assuming Asian Americans are good at math can be harmful. Participants describe feeling pressured to conform to a stereotype that they did not endorse, particularly if they were not good at math or did not

enjoy it. In essence, they expressed feelings of being trapped. One Korean woman, for example, describes her coworkers bringing every math question for her to solve. Not only did it seem to operate from a stereotype, but it added pressure to help them, and resulted in a heavier workload for the woman. She also expressed discomfort at another major side effect: Asian Americans were viewed as intelligent while other people of color were perceived as less intelligent. It created tensions between her and other Black and Latino coworkers.

Theme 3: Denial of Racial Reality

Participants of all Asian ethnic backgrounds share that many microaggressions invalidate their experiences of discrimination. In one case, a Vietnamese American male was told that "Asians are the new Whites." The participant in the study indicated that the remark dismissed his experiences of racism, indicated that Asians experience no discrimination, suggested inequities do not exist for Asians, and that they have made it in society. In other words, the Vietnamese male felt that the perpetrator saw Asians as a model minority, similar to Whites and experience minimal socioeconomic or educational disadvantages. While the intent of the aggressor may be to compliment the Asian American individual by saying that Asians are more successful than other people of color, the negating message is that Asians do not experience racism—denying their experiential reality of bias and discrimination.

Theme 4: Exoticization of Asian American Women

A fourth theme found in both focus groups is exoticization of Asian American women who are relegated to an exotic category. One Chinese American women stated, "White men believe that Asian women are great girlfriends, wait hand and foot on men, and don't back-talk or give them shit. Asian women have beautiful skin and are just sexy and have silky hair." One Korean American woman indicated that she is frequently approached by White men who are very forthcoming with their "Asian fetishes" of subservience and pleasing them sexually. Nearly all members of the focus groups inter-

preted these microaggressions as indicating that Asian women are only needed for the physical needs of White men and nothing more. Again, participants felt that the intent of the aggressor in these situations may be to praise Asian women for their ability to take care of a man's every need. One participant was quite vocal in stating that the continual subjugation of Asian American women to roles of sexual objects, domestic servants, and exotic images of Geishas, ultimately "equates our identities to that of passive companions to White men." Many of the participants also suggested that the exotic image of Asian American women also serves as an unconscious backlash to feminist values and that it potentially creates antagonism with White women as well.

Theme 5: Invalidation of Interethnic Differences

This theme is most closely associated with the statement: "All Asians look alike." One Filipino American woman states, "I am always asked are you Chinese?" Another example of this is conveyed by a Chinese American who stated that new acquaintances oftentimes make statements like, "Oh, my ex-girlfriend was Chinese, or my neighbor was Japanese." These microaggressions tend to minimize or deny differences that may exist between interethnic groups or the existence of other Asian American groups. Participants believed the microaggression suggests that all Asian Americans are alike and that differences between groups do not exist and/or do not matter. The intent of the aggressor in this situation is to express that they are familiar with Asians, but instead the message received is that the aggressor assumes that all Asians are Chinese or Japanese. Moreover, it is assumed by the aggressor that most Asians are familiar with each other, regardless of their Asian ethnic background.

Theme 6: Pathologizing Cultural Values/ Communication Styles

Another microaggression theme involves the perception of cultural values and communication styles other than that of the White majority as being less desirable or indicators of deficits.

One Chinese American woman expressed exasperation at how class participation (usually verbal) is valued strongly in academic settings and that grades are often based upon it. Because of Asian cultural values that emphasize the value of silence, less verbal Asians are often perceived as lacking in interest, disengaged, or inattentive by the teacher. Many of the participants felt disadvantaged, for example, when verbal participation in class was graded. They felt forced to conform to Western norms and values ("talking more") when such behavior violated their cultural upbringing. Although the Asian participants could see that educators might be attempting to enforce an objective grading standard, they unintentionally negated traditional Asian cultural values and penalized their Asian American students. Another example was relayed by a Vietnamese American male who describes being derided and teased by friends for using chopsticks as a utensil. He stated that the message was quite clear; eating with forks, knives, and spoons is the right/ correct way to eat and "the American way."

Theme 7: Second Class Citizenship

Being treated as a lesser being or second class citizen was another common experience. A number of Asian Americans relayed similar stories of Whites being given preferential treatment as consumers over Asian American customers. A typical story involved a Korean American female who told of dining with White friends. Although she frequently ordered the wine, it is usually her friends who are asked to taste and approve the wine selection. She would often feel snubbed because Whites were believed to more knowledgeable about wine, and their opinions were more important. Another Asian American woman described how her eight family members were taken to a table to the back of the restaurant, even though there were available tables elsewhere. She interpreted the action to mean that they were lesser customers and did not deserve a table in the front of the restaurant. The message, they believed was that Asian Americans are not deserving of good service and are lesser than their White counterparts.

Theme 8: Invisibility

This theme is used to label incidents that involve the experience of being overlooked without the conscious intention of the aggressor. Experiences with the theme of invisibility are commonplace among Asian American individuals of all ethnic groups who share that they were often left out whenever issues of race were discussed or acknowledged. One Chinese American female stated, "Like even most race dialogues are like very Black and White. . .like sometimes I feel like there's a lot of talk about Black and White, and there's a huge Asian population here and where do we fit into that?" Another example involved an Asian American appointed to a committee and having someone suggest that they needed "to appoint a person of color" to the group as well. The messages being conveyed were that Asians are not an ethnic minority group, experience little or no discrimination, and that their racial concerns are unimportant. In addition, the Asian participants felt trapped in that when issues of race are discussed, they were considered like Whites, but never fully accepted by their White peers.

Theme 9: Undeveloped Incidents/Responses

There were a number of stories told by participants that could not be categorized easily. The eight themes identified above seemed universally endorsed by the informants. Some of the incidents, however, were mentioned by one or two individuals in the group and it was difficult to determine the degree of consensus. It is believed that with more time and probing, it might have been possible to more clearly identify a particular theme. For example, one Chinese American woman describes an experience she had while she was driving her mother's car, with her Chinese name and last name on the license plate. She recalls being pulled over despite the fact that she was in the middle of two cars, and they were all going relatively the same speed. The stereotype operating here was that Asians are poor drivers, and therefore, she was singled out. Another example of the stereotype theme occurs when a gay Vietnamese male shared that an online dating site posted a statement that read, "No Asians, real men only." The message being conveyed in this situation is that

Asian men do not fit the masculine qualities of Whites and therefore are not deemed as "real" men.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to identify the types and dynamics of racial microaggressions experienced by Asian Americans. Although the eight racial microaggression themes seemed to be universally endorsed by Asian Americans in both focus groups, caution must be exercised in generalizing these findings to all Asian American groups. Our study consisted of only 10 participants, did not include all Asian ethnicities, and was not gender balanced. There was only one male participant, for example, which may make these themes gender specific. Although such an argument can be made, especially with respect to the exoticization of Asian women, sufficient anecdotal and scholarly literature suggests that the other seven are commonly mentioned by Asian Americans of both genders (Yoo & Lee, 2005; Wong & Halgin, 2006). Nevertheless, future studies might explore how gender may potentially interact with race and influence the types of microaggressions likely to be experienced by both women and men.

It could also be argued that the theme "second class citizenship," arose from our interview questions which used the phrase and may have artificially created the category. Although we were cognizant of this potential problem, we also defined the category as "inferior treatment of Asian Americans in preference to others over them." Thus, we believe that the commonalities of these microaggressive incidents are more important than the categorical name as the theme "inferior/lesser treatment" could have been used instead. In addition, a reanalysis of our transcripts revealed that an overwhelming number of microaggressive incidents classified under this theme arose from the previous six questions, prior to using the term "second class citizen."

Our study provides strong support that microaggressions are not minimally harmful and possess detrimental consequences for the recipients. Most participants described strong and lasting negative reactions to the constant racial microaggressions they experienced from well intentioned friends, neighbors, teachers, co-

workers, and colleagues. They described feelings of belittlement, anger, rage, frustration, alienation, and of constantly being invalidated. Common comments from the groups were they felt trapped, invisible, and unrecognized. Although we wanted to more clearly identify how the Asian American participants behaviorally responded to what they perceived as a racial microaggression, the strategies they used to deal with it, and the impact it had on them, the focus group members spent the majority of time (a) describing microaggressive events, (b) interpreting what the message meant to them, and (c) talking about the intent of the perpetrator.

Interestingly, most of the participants acknowledged that the majority of those who engaged in microaggressions did so unintentionally, and the perpetrators often perceived their own remarks or actions in a positive light (interest in the Asian American person: "Where were you born?"). Nevertheless, most of the Asian American participants were clear that the remarks reflected a biased worldview that tended to communicate something negative and disrespectful about their group. In general, it appears that most of the Asian American participants experienced psychological conflict and distress because of several dilemmas they faced.

First, they remarked that it was often difficult to determine whether a microaggression occurred. Were they being oversensitive or misreading the remarks or questions? They described spending considerable psychic energy trying to discern the motives of the person and/or dealing with inner turmoil and agitation caused by the event. A few stated that it was often easier to deal with a clearly overt act of bias than microaggressions that often created a "guessing game."

Second, most of the racial microaggressions that occurred came from peers, neighbors, friends or authority figures. It disturbed them that personal or respected acquaintances could make such insensitive or hurtful remarks. What bothered them most, however, was their occasional tendency to "make excuses" for friends by rationalizing away their biases and by denying their own racial reality. Although we did not specifically explore the differential impact of microaggressions from acquaintances versus strangers, it appears that some of the participants felt that microaggressive behaviors were easier to handle and less problematic when they came from strangers.

Third, many expressed severe conflict about whether to respond to microaggressions given that most were unintentional and outside the level of awareness of the perpetrator. Pointing out a microaggression to a friend, for example, generally resulted in denial, defensiveness, and a negative outcome for the relationship. A few shared that they simply were at a loss of how to respond, or that the incident occurred so quickly a chance for some sort of intervention had long passed. They described being angered and upset without any recourse other than to "stew on it." Some indicated being especially angry at themselves when they finally thought of what they could have said or done ("Damn it, that's what I should have said.") Again, we did not explore this aspect of the participants' inner turmoil; blaming themselves for not having a "comeback" and having to deal with the agitation for a prolonged period of time. We can only conclude that the emotional turmoil could be long lasting and take a psychological toll on the recipient.

Last, deciding to respond also had major consequences. Some of the informants stated that responding with anger, striking back, or confronting the person generally did no good. It only served to make the victim appear "paranoid" or suggest that the responder had some major personal problem. Unfortunately, our study did not explore the adaptive strategies used effectively by Asian American participants. In a future study it would be important to explore more deeply the psychological impact microaggressions had on the recipients, how they handled the situation, what outcome resulted, and what they would have done differently upon reflection.

Our study also points out that microaggressions often play a role in denying the racial reality of Asian Americans and strongly perpetuate the "model minority" myth. As mentioned previously, there is a strong belief that they are somehow immune to the effects of racism (Liang et al., 2004; Wong & Halgin, 2006). Testimony from Asian Americans indicates that racial microaggressions are very hurtful and distressing to them. Besides the individual pain suffered by Asians in America, the belief that they fare better than other minority groups in achieving success in education and employment

have major social implications. First, when the model minority myth is endorsed, it can become a justifiable reason to ignore the problem of discrimination against Asian Americans and be used as a convenient rationale to neglect them in research and intervention programs (Miller, 1992; Wong & Halgin, 2006). Second, it is often used by some to reaffirm the belief in a democratic society in which any group can be successful if they work hard enough or possess the right values. The result is to minimize racism or societal oppression as important forces in how minority groups do in America (D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2003). Third, it can foster hard feelings and interethnic conflicts between Asian Americans and other groups of color. This was constantly mentioned in the themes above. Thus, it is important for social scientists and the general public to possess a realistic picture of Asian Americans and to understand the many overt and covert manifestations of racism directed at them.

Our study also potentially adds meaning to the original taxonomy of microaggressions proposed by Sue et al. (2006). Four of eight themes were similar and/or overlapping: alien in own land, ascription of intelligence, pathologizing cultural values/communication styles, and second class citizen. The four other themes color blindness, criminality/assumption of criminal status, denial of individual racism, and myth of meritocracy did not arise from our focus groups. It is important to note that the current study also identified four themes not originally proposed in the Sue et al. (2006) taxonomy: denial of racial reality, exoticization of Asian American women, invalidation of interethnic differences, and invisibility.

One major explanation is the strong possibility that different racial groups may be more likely to experience certain classes of microaggressions than others. Asian Americans, for example, may be more likely to experience microaggressions with themes that revolve around "alien in own land," "invisibility," and "invalidation of interethnic differences" than African Americans. This statement is not meant to suggest that Blacks may not also be victim to these racial microaggression themes, but they may be more prone to experience racial microaggressions around other themes like "assumption of criminal status" and "color blindness" than Asian Americans.

Further, the form that microaggressions take in a similar category may be quite different between two racial groups. The theme "ascription of intelligence" for Asian Americans (intelligent and good in math and science) is contrasted to that of African Americans (intellectually inferior). In addition, a closer analysis of the total of twelve themes derived from both studies (collapsing the four common ones) reveal the possibility of further coalition into a higher order category. For example, the theme "denial of racial reality" is very similar in its effects to "color blindness." It is clear that further research regarding taxonomy of microaggressions and their culture specific manifestations would be valuable in clarifying these issues.

Although the qualitative method used in this study was rich and informative, it would be helpful to begin developing survey scales or instruments that allow for and supplement the qualitative findings on Asian American racial microaggressions. Fortunately, there has been an increasing number of studies addressing the issue of perceived discrimination against Asian Americans (Noh et al., 1999; Barry & Grillo, 2003), quantification of coping strategies (Yoo & Lee, 2005), and the development of inventories to measure race-related stress among Asian Americans (Liang et al., 2004). Indeed, the latter researchers have developed the Asian American Racism-Related Stress Inventory (AARRSI), a 29-item Likert scale consisting of three subscales: general racism, socio-historical and perpetual foreigner. Although reliability and validity appear good, it is the specific items that seem very consistent with our qualitative findings. For example, the AASRRSI contains items such as: "At a restaurant you notice that a White couple who came in after you is served first," "You are asked where you are really from," and "Someone you do not know asks you to help him/her fix his/her computer."

The experiential reality of Asian Americans has continued to indicate the existence of racial microaggressions, but their ambiguous and subtle nature makes them difficult to identify and quantify (Sue et al., 2006). Sue (2003) has often stated that the task in the study of subtle and implicit racism is "to make the invisible, visible." Using the categories developed in this study and combining them with the conceptual items of the

AARRSI may prove fruitful as a guide to developing items that allow for their measurement and ultimate unmasking of Asian American microaggressions.

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Appendix I: Script for Asian American Facilitator

Hi, my name is "facilitator." Thank you for coming here today to participate in this focus group. The purpose of this group is to gain a better understanding of day-to-day discrimination and experiences of subtle racism. I am sure that you are familiar with overt forms of discrimination such as racial slurs or hate crimes. However, today we are interested in hearing about your experiences of subtle acts of being discriminated against because of your race. These experiences may have occurred in any setting or at anytime in your life. We will be asking you some questions that we encourage you to answer to the best of your ability and we recognize that many of you will have unique experiences of being subtly discriminated against. There are no wrong answers.

At this time, I'd like to introduce "observer," who will be a nonparticipating member of our group today. He/She is here to record our conversation so that I can be involved in the group without having to take too many notes.

Okay, so, I am going to give everyone a form now which basically states that your participation in this group is entirely voluntary and that you may decline to participate and leave the group at any time. Please read this sheet carefully before signing it. It discusses potential risks to you as members of this group as well as the use of audiotaping during this session. I'd like to give everyone the opportunity to ask any questions they may have before we begin the group. *Question/Answer. . .*

Statement of Confidentiality

We will be audiotaping this session in an effort to maintain the integrity of your dialogue. However, your identities will not be revealed to anyone, and only the researchers will have access to this tape. This discussion is to be considered confidential, and we would hope that you will all respect each other rights to privacy by not repeating any portion of this discussion outside of this session.

Opening Question

At this time we would like for each of you to say your first name, your occupation and why you are interested in participating in this study.

General Question

Asian Americans often have experiences in which they are subtly, invalidated, discriminated against, and made to feel uncomfortable because of their race. In thinking about your daily experiences, could you describe a situation in which you witnessed or were personally subtly discriminated against because of your race?

Interview Questions

- What are some subtle ways that people treat you differently because of your race?
- Describe a situation in which you felt uncomfortable, insulted, or disrespected by a comment that had racial overtones.
- Think of some of the stereotypes that exist about your racial group. How have others subtly expressed their stereotypical beliefs about you?
- In what ways have others made you feel "put down" because of your cultural values or communication style?
- In what ways have people subtly expressed that "the White way is the right way"?
- In what subtle ways have others expressed that they think you're a second-class citizen or inferior to them?
- How have people suggested that you do not belong here because of your race?
- What have people done or said to invalidate your experiences of being discriminated against?

Transition Questions

- What are some of the ways that you dealt with these experiences?
- What do you think the overall impact of your experiences has been on your lives?

Ending Questions

So today you shared several experiences of subtle discrimination. Some of you said. . .

There were several themes that were consistent across many of your experiences. These themes include. . .

Does that sound correct? If not, what themes might you add?