Be Color Bold: Dialogue on Racial Microaggressions.

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Fifty-one years after the Civil Rights act and sixty-one years after *Brown vs. The Board of Education* great racial disparities still exist in America. Forbes reports that the median white household had $111,146 in wealth holdings in 2011, compared to $7,113 for the median black household (Shin, 2015). Asked if they believe racism against blacks is wide spread in the U. S. 50% of Whites and 80% of Blacks answered yes (Gallup, 2015.)  In the U.S., 74% of black students attend majority nonwhite schools (50-100% minority), and 38% attend intensely segregated schools (those with only 0-10% of whites students) (Orfield, Kucera & Hawley 2012.)

Racial microaggressions (Sue, et al, 2007) are insults, indignities, and marginalizing messages sent by well-meaning people unaware of the hidden messages. They have generated considerable research in professional journals as explanations for some of the harmful effects of racism. The topic of microaggressions has lately been appearing in the popular press and generating controversy based on differing interpretations. People often resent the implication that they are racially biased and may believe that they are not.

Psychology now knows that a great deal of our behavior and attitudes are based on automatic associations made outside of awareness (Khaneman, 2011). Thus, many people insist that they have no racial bias and are unaware of their biases. Dovidio (Mitchel, 2015) stated that while whites often believe they are color blind and don’t see race, their biases are pervasive and have a huge pernicious effect on blacks. The Implicit Association Test (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013) demonstrated that when measured in such a way that they could not choose a conscious answer, the majority (about 75%) of Americans showed a preference for whites over blacks. Thus, while “Explicit bias is infrequent; implicit bias is pervasive.” (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013, p. 208.) Even black subjects showed an implict preference for white over black (Cohen’s d = .16) though smaller than that for whites (Cohen’s D = .83) (Nosek, B. A., Banaji, M. R., & Greenwald, A. G. 2002)

We wanted to create dialogue between white and black students in a small, 8-week group that discusses the issues around microaggressions. We hoped to gain understanding into the different perceptions and reactions to the issue by people of separate racial identities. Reducing the incidence and impact of racial microaggressions may help decrease high levels of social stress in African-Americans. Reducing such stress may improve health outcomes and graduation rates in college.

**Method**

After obtaining approval from the IRB, we recruited students informally with class announcements and postings. Participants received an explanation of the process, referral information about the university counseling center and signed informed consents. At the first group meeting we watched a TED video by Mellody Hobson (2014) entitled: *Color blind or color brave?* She discussed the existing disparities, the social proscriptions against discussion of race and the need for dialog to break down barriers between the races. One leader took notes at each session and circulated a copy of those notes prior to the next group. The group consisted of eight students, four black students and four white students, and 2 group leaders, one black group leader and one white group leader.

**Results**

Students were enthusiastic about the group and all stated that it was a worthwhile and valuable exercise that they were glad they had taken part in (see appendix A for a short list of quotes from their reactions). Most indicated they would like to do it again. Mellody Hobson stated “it's time for us to be comfortable with the uncomfortable conversation about race” (Hobson, 2014) and it clearly was uncomfortable. Group members were hesitant to say things that might offend others. However, we gradually experimented with risky statements and looked for a negative reaction. When there was none members continued the conversation. The group had a relaxed feeling, perhaps because it was not required and there were no obligations beyond taking part.

It was a busy semester, causing attendance to not be consistent, which probably slowed the development of cohesion. Nevertheless, student feedback indicates that students valued the group very highly. For example, one student said “Regardless if we disagreed on a topic or not there was always a healthy level of respect and understanding among the entire group. That is what made it so successful, a safe nonjudgmental environment.” Another added that, “I honestly feel that everyone entered the group with the goal of ‘understanding the other side’.” This kind of attitude made the group something to look forward to despite its uncomfortable subject matter.

We hoped that as time went on group cohesion would build and we would have a more here and now focus. In one situation a rather brash, seemingly confident black woman burst into tears over family slights and while she was comforted by another black member, most of the group was silent. In other cases where African-American members discussed slights other members found it difficult to show the compassion they were feeling. In future groups it is important to find ways to improve attendance. It may be necessary to provide some sort of incentive to encourage attendance.

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Appendix A: Sample of Student Comments

* *Microaggressions to me is now a powerful term. There is nothing small about racial tensions. This has been one of the most influential groups I have had the privilege to be a part of.*
* *The topics however were great and I was glad that at the end we were able to come together and be open-minded and express our opinions on such touching topics. Overall the group was useful and helpful I would be more than willing to participate again.*
* *I was very glad that we had the group of the students that we did because everyone was so open and willing to share which is what I had hoped for.*
* *Thank you so much for giving me this opportunity it was beneficial and useful.*
* *I wouldn't say the group changed my mind, but I will say that I gained more knowledge to see both sides of the problem. I feel that I would better be able to argue against racial microaggressions as well as why they exist now if put in the situation.*
* *I did like the group. It was a great opportunity to be able to speak with people about race-fueled issues in our society today without feeling judged about my own personal opinion.*
* *Prior to meeting this amazing group of people I believed that African American’s often took neutral topics and made them about race. I blamed them as a group. My clouded perspective on this as well as other issues unknowingly limited my close relationships to only those who resembled my skin pigmentation.*