

## Modern-Day racism in the workplace: Symbolic diversity or real change?

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Coca-Cola made headlines when 16 current and former African American and Latino employees filed a racial discrimination suit against the corporate hegemon. The suit claimed that minorities at Coca-Cola are surrounded by a “cesspool of racial discrimination” (Greenwald, 2012, p. 1). A number of accusations pertaining to a discriminatory work environment were made against the company including inequities in promotional advancement, punitive and retaliatory actions against minorities, and disproportionate dispersion of overtime hours (Greenwald, 2012). Several of the employees reported that racial slurs against minorities were recurrent and had gone unpunished (Marzulli, 2012). Possibly the most shocking part of this suit is that it was filed in 2012, and referred to events occurring during the same period in US history as the election of the first black President.

### How much progress did our society make?

Reports like these motivate the question of whether we have truly made the kind of racial progress towards equality often presumed. Have we truly experienced real racial change or has discrimination simply undergone a metamorphosis? Many people point towards the election of a black President, or the increased numbers of minorities represented within our organizations, but are these truly indications of progress? Or is this purely symbolic diversity that obscures a pervasive underlying problem and perpetuates denial about the inequalities that

continue to plague our organizations? There is overwhelming evidence that modern day racism persists, and although it doesn’t always resemble the overt forms characterized by “old fashioned” racism, in many ways the covert forms of discrimination in organizations may be more harmful due to their insidious and pervasive nature. One recent study found that over a two week time period 78% of the Asian Americans participants experienced a microaggression (Ong et al., 2013).

Since the emergence of the movement towards political correctness, racism has taken on distinctly more subtle and aversive forms. People have begun to guard against the overt forms of racism frowned upon in a politically correct landscape (Deitch et al., 2003). Current research investigating discrimination within the workplace has revealed the disturbing fact that racial microaggressions are frequent, pervasive, and cause significant harm to both individuals and organizations. Microaggressions is a term that has been used to identify many forms of discrimination, but has most commonly been used to refer to the discrimination experienced by racial and ethnic minorities. Within this context Microaggressions can be defined as “commonplace verbal or behavioral indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicates hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 278).

**What is a microaggression?** Microaggression can further be organized according to subcategories that include *microassaults*, *microinsults*, and *microinvalidations*. *Microassaults* are most similar to the overt forms of “old fashioned” racism (Sue et al., 2007). Examples of microassaults include explicit racial epithets associated with language more characteristic of the antebellum period (Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowel, Ja, & Sue, 2013). *Microinsults* are more covert styles of verbal and nonverbal communication that lack sensitivity towards issues faced by minorities. For example, when an African American employee is promoted within an organization, other employees often believe that the promotion was based upon Affirmative Action rather than intelligence or competency. Employees that then approach the newly promoted individual and question how the job was acquisitioned would be insulting the minority colleague by implying that the promotion was due to something other than intelligence or competency (Sue et al., 2007). Finally, *microinvalidation* is a form of discrimination that invalidates or disavows the psychological and emotional experience of minorities. For example, it has become widely popular within the mainstream media to accuse minorities of invoking the “race card,” this functions to invalidate the subjective psychological and emotional experiences described by minorities (Sue et al., 2007).

**Symbolic Diversity or Real Change?** Many times people point to the progress that society has made with respect to the more overt forms of racism as evidence that there is racial equality within our country. For example, people often argue that Affirmative Action programs have

created equality within the workplace. While hiring disparities have certainly decreased, this does not mean that experiences of discrimination within the workplace have been eradicated. In fact, the more covert forms of discrimination that are prevalent today throughout our organizations are astonishingly frequent. Sometimes these incidences are overlooked due to the inherent covert nature of microaggressions which functions to perpetuate the problem because they are difficult to identify by the perpetrator (Offerman et al, 2014). It would be a mistake to dismiss these occurrences as less harmful than overt forms of racism due to the “daily frequency and chronicity, microaggressions likely have a cumulative, inimical effect on health and well-being”(Ong et al., 2013, p. 197). The stealth nature and frequency of discrimination in the form of microaggressions within the workplace directly refutes the argument that Affirmative Action programs have gone far enough to create equality within organizations.

Recently Forbes magazine published an article describing the detrimental outcomes for organizations that ignore race by attempting to adopt a color blind perspective (Nobel , 2013). The claim of colorblindness among people is often used as a way to express that they view all individuals as the same regardless of skin color. Statements of color blindness often fail to address the underlying attitudes that are far more responsible for covert forms of discrimination. A study on workplace discrimination revealed that people who ascribe to a colorblind worldview are less likely to perceive discrimination within the workplace. People that hold a color blind worldview are therefore likely to be unaware of

discrimination in the workplace and even unaware of their own discriminatory behavior. Fostering a belief that people are all the same and are all treated equally is a form of denial that minimizes the daily discrimination experienced by minorities. Since this worldview denies the very real experiences of minorities, color blindness is itself a microinvalidation (Offerman et al., 2014).

The media has focused extensively on the issue of minorities employing the “race card” within discussions of race relations. The claim that minorities are falsely attributing certain experiences to race is again a form of microinvalidation. The pejorative “race card” denies or invalidates the daily experiences of discrimination minorities face within the workplace (Sue et al., 2007). One study attempted to discover if people really are incorrectly assigning discrimination as the motive behind behavior within the workplace, as the race card supporters would claim. In order to do this the researchers used data previously collected for a completely different study that investigated mistreatment within the workplace. Using this data about mistreatment within the workplace, the researchers were able to examine if there were in fact real differences between the extent of mistreatment experienced by white employees versus black employees. They found that blacks experienced significantly more mistreatment within the workplace, even when the questions for data collection had nothing to do with race. This study demonstrates that blacks are truly being mistreated more often than whites within the workplace, and argues in opposition of the existence of a “race card” (Deitch et al., 2003).

Individuals and organizations are suffering as a result of the blind spot that is created by the prevalence of symbolic diversity, colorblindness, and misguided beliefs about the supposed “race card” which all result in the failure to address actual issues of modern racism. Microaggressions have been linked with negative physical and emotional consequences for minorities (Ong et al., 2013). These consequences affect the overall health of individuals as well as the absenteeism and turnover rates within organizations. Some of the individual-level outcomes include depression, lower self-esteem, and even PTSD (Ong et al., 2013). Also, discrimination within the workplace has been linked with poor job performance (Deitch et al., 2003). These documented negative consequences strongly suggest the need for organizations to work on solutions for their employees and organizations alike.

#### **Where are we, and where do we go from there?**

There is a significant body of research on modern forms of racism and discrimination that suggest initiatives like Affirmative Action, and cultural sensitivity training are not going far enough to combat the problems of discrimination within our organizations (Deitch et al., 2003). Arguments that the symbolic representations of diversity provide evidence of the “race issues solved” ignore the ongoing covert forms of daily discrimination prevalent within the workplace. One suggestion would be to encourage organizations to extend the definition of discrimination to account for microaggressions that are pervasively eroding performance (Deitch et al., 2003). This new definition that addresses both microinvalidations and microinsults could be incorporated into ongoing diversity training

programs, which could function to bring awareness to the problems which result from microaggressions subtle nature.

Another option is for organizations to begin cultivating cultures of inclusion in order to reduce microaggressions. Organizations attempting to foster more inclusion have begun establishing mentoring programs for all employees which function to help minorities to begin integrating into organizations in a way that fosters growth along racial lines and inclusion for all employees (Constantine et al, 2008). Creating separate divisions within organizations that solely deal with issues of diversity and inclusion can provide enough staff to track the success of implemented changes following revised training courses. Where separate divisions are not possible, ensuring dedicated, empowered staffing within organizations to focus specifically on issues of diversity and inclusion can provide organizations with the ability to track and maintain momentum following training courses, and better ensure success. Tracking behavioral changes following training has demonstrated success with respect to training initiatives outcomes (Kravitz, 2008). Finally, cooperation between Human Resources departments, legal consultants and training managers can begin to change internal policies to incorporate definitions of microaggressions as a form of discrimination and function to reduce its occurrences (King et al., 2011).

The understanding that discrimination within industry persists despite training and policy efforts helps to explain the continued problems represented by reports like the 2012 Coca-Cola suit (Greenwald, 2012). Organizations need to

begin considering more comprehensive approaches to mitigating these forms of discrimination within organizations which is likely to have positive consequences for individuals, organizations and our overall society.

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