

Combating the “Too Sensitive” Argument: A Demonstration That Captures the Complexity of Microaggressions

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Abstract

Colorblind ideology provides individuals with numerous ways to minimize racism. This poses a challenge for instructors who teach about race and racism as students deploy this ideology to derail classroom discussions. Student resistance may be amplified when discussing microaggressions because students often characterize focusing on microaggressions as being “too sensitive” or trying to see racism where it does not exist. This article details a demonstration that attempts to move students past the too-sensitive argument so they can understand the complexity of microaggressions. An analysis of anonymous student reflections shows that the activity successfully conveys the cumulative impact of microaggressions, demonstrates how racism is embedded in everyday interactions, and encourages students to reflect on their own role in perpetuating and ending racism. In short, the demonstration helped students understand the structural and cumulative nature of microaggressions by combating the too-sensitive argument and encouraging a critical examination of racism.

Keywords

microaggressions, race and ethnicity, racism, student learning, classroom-based exercise

It is not uncommon for students to actively resist instructors’ attempts to discuss race and racism in their classes (Haltinner 2014; Mueller 2013; Ruparelia 2015). This is particularly true for instructors of color and for those who teach at predominantly white institutions because “for many white people, an isolated course taken in college . . . is the only time they may encounter a direct and sustained challenge to their racial reality” (DiAngelo 2018:100). Classrooms conjure student resistance because many students have been socialized into the dominant racialized ideologies that extol individualistic worldviews rooted in colorblindness and myths of meritocracy (Bonilla-Silva 2014; DiAngelo 2018; Kendi 2019).

Although colorblind ideology and the myth of the meritocracy allow students to identify and

condemn overt forms of racism (e.g., slavery and the Ku Klux Klan), they amplify resistance around examinations of contemporary forms of racism. This resistance forms because these contemporary articulations of racism are often covert, subtle, and sometime well intentioned or accidental (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Rondilla and Spickard 2007; Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000; Sue 2010). Students often struggle to see how more subtle forms of racism reflect the same system of power that fostered overt forms of

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racism. In addition to causing student resistance to discussions of race and racism, colorblind ideology provides students with the language and skills to deflect and derail conversations about race (Apfelbaum et al. 2008; Bonilla-Silva 2004, 2014; Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick 2006; Desmond and Emirbayer 2009; DiAngelo 2018). Students draw on colorblindness to minimize the importance of race and racism in contemporary social organization, an obstacle instructors must scale if they are to teach students about racial inequality.

Attempting to combat this form of student resistance is not a new endeavor for instructors. There are many documented strategies for challenging colorblind ideologies in the classroom to effectively teach students about race and racism. These strategies are diverse and include the use of simulation activities (Matthew, Gast, and Broscoe 2019), modified board games that highlight racial inequality, semester-long research or community-based projects (Brewer 2014; Friedman and Graham 2018), and the use of film, memoir, oral history, or journaling to encourage reflection on the contemporary state of race relations (Johnson and Mason 2017; Picca, Starks, and Gunderson 2012; Wolff 2014). There are documented strategies for teaching students about microaggressions, but they tend to be quite limited. These include the various “I too am” projects (e.g., <https://itooamharvard.tumblr.com/>), which describe microaggressions and provide a springboard for discussions about their prevalence. Other strategies provide students with examples of microaggression and ask students to identify the oppressive meaning behind the statement and attempt to reframe the statement in ways that are not marginalizing (Togans, Robinson, and Meredith 2014).

Although these approaches are useful in teaching about microaggressions, they often focus on students’ ability to identify and recognize microaggressions. This misses a crucial aspect of understanding microaggressions, which is the cumulative effect of microaggressions on individuals. Ettarh (n.d.) has created an online game, *Killing Me Softly*, that leads students through the everyday life of individuals who experience the compounding stresses of microaggressions. Although this activity is informative, it is best used as an individual activity rather than a classroom demonstration. Therefore, it does not make use of the collective knowledge and empathy that can emerge out of classroom discussions. This article provides instructors with a classroom activity that addresses these issues and can help instructors reach students who might resist

conversations about microaggressions, the subtlest form of racism. It provides instructors with a wide variety of discussion topics related to microaggressions yet is a simple demonstration that requires few materials and little setup time.

MICROAGGRESSIONS

Chester Pierce (1974:515) coined the term *microaggression* in the 1970s, describing them as subtle and often unintentional discriminations against black individuals that were “the major vehicle for racism” in the United States. He later argued that microaggressions “may seem harmless, but the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to diminished mortality, augmented morbidity, and flattened confidence” (Pierce 1995:281). Davis (1989:1576) highlighted the unconscious nature of microaggressions and their connection to the racial hierarchy; he wrote that microaggressions are “automatic acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of white supremacy and constitute a verification of black inferiority.”

Early explorations of microaggressions centered on black experiences with racism, but scholars have recently documented how racism is enacted through microaggressions for other racial and ethnic groups in the United States (Harris 2017; Nadal et al. 2012; Solorzano 1998; Solorzano et al. 2000; Sue et al. 2007). This research demonstrates the numerous forms that microaggressions take in contemporary society and necessitates a broader definition of microaggressions. Sue (2010:5) provided such a definition: “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional” that remind individuals of their marginalized status. The activity described in the following draws on this definition, which microaggression scholarship often uses.

Although individuals may not always agree about what constitutes a microaggression, these subtle slights are an important curricular focus because they serve as windows for seeing racism as a hegemonic social system. This is especially true when microaggressions can be linked to dominant racial ideologies to show how they maintain dominant racial structures (Hughey et al. 2017; Steele 2010; Sue 2010). Furthermore, examinations of microaggressions are important because research suggests that the cumulative effect of microaggressions can have negative impacts on identity (Jones and Galliher 2015), sense of belonging (Nadal

et al. 2012), and well-being (Smith, Huang, and Franklin 2011; Yosso et al. 2009).

Although microaggressions can deteriorate relationships between people of color and white people, they can also affect relations between and within racial minority groups. For example, Nadal et al. (2013) demonstrated how multiracial individuals experience microaggressions that lead to isolation, favoritism, and the questioning of their racial authenticity from their monoracial family members. Houshmand, Spanierman, and Tafarodi (2014) stated that Asian international students in Canada felt isolated from their peers who avoided them, ridiculed their accent, and rendered them invisible. These findings align with scholarly work that demonstrates how members of historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups can gain prestige in a system of racism by denigrating individuals from other marginalized groups or their own group (Bonilla-Silva 2002; David 2013; Eisen 2018; Okamura 2008). In short, racial microaggressions are commonplace in social interaction and deteriorate relationships between individuals. Thus, they keep dominant racial structures and ideologies intact.

Given the power of microaggressions, it is vital for instructors to successfully engage students in robust conversations about them. Students should leave these conversations with an understanding of microaggressions that extends beyond defining and identifying microaggressions. To truly understand the impact of these subtle racialized experiences, students must see why these subtle slights are more than small annoyances, understand the cumulative effect of microaggressions on individuals, and be able to link these instances to dominant racial ideologies and structures.

THE “TOO SENSITIVE” ARGUMENT

One of the largest barriers to teaching about microaggressions is overcoming the popular belief that a focus on microaggression encourages people to be “too sensitive” or see racism where it does not exist. Many contestations of microaggressions (Friedersdorf 2015a, 2015b; Lilienfeld 2017; Nagai 2017) have questioned the concept of microaggressions. Sometimes these critiques focus on the methodology of microaggression research. Popular culture critiques, however, often rely on the premise that focusing on microaggressions perpetuates a “victimhood culture” (Campbell and Manning 2018:21). These critiques suggest that a focus on

microaggressions unnecessarily casts individuals as victims of racism in a world where racism is decreasing.

It is not surprising that these critiques of microaggressions have emerged. According to Bonilla-Silva (2014), colorblind racism is the dominant racial ideology in the United States. This ideology is comprised of four interlocking frames: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and the minimization of racism. These frames collectively construct racism as a historical practice that has been terminated and therefore no longer informs contemporary social practices. This is accomplished by building a narrative centered on equal opportunity (abstract liberalism) that downplays racial inequalities (minimization of racism) as a result of natural (naturalization) or cultural (cultural racism) differences between groups. Bonilla-Silva (2014) demonstrated that by employing these frames, individuals divert their attention away from racism and effectively engage in racialized discourse without appearing racist.

Similarly, Desmond and Emirbayer (2009) identified five fallacies of racial thinking that help maintain colorblindness and enable racism. They argued that individuals minimize racism by referencing preventive laws (legalistic fallacy), people of color in positions of power (tokenistic fallacy), and decreases in overtly racist acts (fixed fallacy). This framing blames individuals for racism (individualistic fallacy) and decontextualizes the current state of racism (ahistorical fallacy). Paired with colorblind frames, these fallacies enable individuals to claim that racism no longer structures peoples’ lives in the United States (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Burdsey 2011; Desmond and Emirbayer 2009).

The pervasiveness of colorblind racism and related fallacies create students who enter classrooms with a keen ability to employ various configurations of these frames and misconceptions to derail classroom conversations about racism (Bonilla-Silva 2014; Desmond and Emirbayer 2009; DiAngelo 2018). Therefore, instructors who hope to teach their students about race, racism, and microaggressions must overcome students’ ability to minimize racism and frame the recognition of microaggressions as being too sensitive. The activity described here was designed to overcome these barriers and help students understand microaggressions as more than a simple annoyance, recognize the cumulative effect of microaggressions, and see the link between microaggressions and a system of racism. Analyses of students’ responses to the

activity demonstrate that it provided students with this depth of understanding and encouraged personal reflection about their own contribution to microaggressions.

INTRODUCING THE ACTIVITY AND MICROAGGRESSIONS

It is important to begin this demonstration with an introduction to the concept of microaggressions that includes a clear definition of the term. Therefore, students are given a broad overview of microaggressions as subtle slights that reinforce systems of power. The description includes Sue's (2010) definition of microaggressions. Students are then told that the class session will focus on racial microaggressions and asked to help develop a list of such behavior. Because racial background often influences experiences with and understanding of microaggressions, students of color are likely to identify more subtle microaggressions than white students. For example, white students often offer examples of overtly racialized acts (e.g., touching a black individual's hair), while students of color offer subtle examples (e.g., asking where one is from). As students provide these examples, they are written on the chalkboard.

Over the past several years, I have found that students are becoming more adept at identifying microaggressions. However, students continue to have difficulty explaining how subtle microaggressions can maintain the system of racism. This is especially true because students recognize that microaggressions can be unintentional, accidental, and even well intentioned. This leads some students to question the instructor's decision to devote a class period to discussing microaggressions. It is important to recognize this resistance but not fully engage with it because the activity is specifically designed to defuse this resistance and demonstrate the answer to such questions. Thus, instructors should make a statement recognizing that these kinds of sentiments may exist and assuring students that the demonstration will help provide answers to these types of questions.

It has also been helpful at this point to state explicitly that the subtle and unintentional nature of microaggressions often leads conversations about the topic to be very confrontational or completely shut down. In my experience, both students who have attempted to educate others about microaggressions and those who have been accused of committing a microaggression typically agree on this. It has been useful to provide some space for

students to share their experiences about how a conversation about microaggressions has gone awry. This often elicits stories from students with marginalized identities about calling out a microaggression and being told that they were just being too sensitive or were seeing things that did not actually exist. The instructor should tell students that the demonstration will provide an exploration of microaggressions that will help explain why individuals discussing microaggressions struggle to understand one another and will provide insights into potential solutions for engaging in these conversations.

THE ACTIVITY

The materials needed for the demonstration are (1) a clear, wide-mouth mason jar; (2) pieces of aluminum foil large enough to cover the jar's opening; and (3) a bag of marbles. The jar is used to represent a person, and it is vital that the jar be clear so students can see the marbles that will accumulate in the jar throughout the demonstration. The foil is used to represent individual- and collective-level factors that may mitigate the effects of microaggressions. The marbles represent instances of microaggressions that an individual experiences.

The demonstration begins with the introduction of the jar. Because the demonstration focuses on racial microaggressions, students are told that the jar represents a person of color. As expanded on in the next section, it is often useful to introduce or reinforce previous class discussions about intersectionality at this point (Crenshaw 1991; Hill-Collins 1993; hooks 2000). Regardless of whether intersectionality is discussed, it is important to remind students that although race will be treated as a master status in the demonstration, the person represented by the jar has many intersecting identities.

After the identity categories have been assigned to the jar, the aluminum foil is introduced to students. Students are told that these represent factors that might mitigate the effects of microaggressions. As they did with identifying microaggressions, students are asked to construct a list of mitigating factors as a group. Initial responses often focus on individualistic factors (e.g., self-esteem, self-efficacy, and resilience), which provides instructors with an opportunity to strengthen students' sociological imaginations (Mills 1959) by challenging them to identify structural, institutional, or community-based factors. Although students can identify these types of factors, they do not use sociological terms. For example, students often identify connections to family, friends,

and mentors as a mitigating factor, which instructors can reframe as social capital (Bourdieu 1986) to introduce new terms or reinforce previous learning in the class. Generally, students identify factors that instructors can reframe as economic or cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986), community cultural wealth (Yosso 2005), and access to racial counterspaces (Grier-Reed 2010; Nunez 2011; Solorzano et al. 2000).

Identifying mitigating factors provides the foundation for constructing the layers of foil that will cover the jar. Students are engaged in a conversation about how many layers of foil the person represented by the jar might have. Ideally, instructors will limit the number of foil layers to three because each layer of foil increases the time that the demonstration takes to complete. As each layer of foil is secured over the jar, instructors should use a pen to make several holes in the foil. This speeds up the demonstration but also can be used as an opportunity to remind students that no factor can completely protect an individual from harm.

With these components set up, the marbles are introduced. Students are told that each marble represents the experience of a microaggression. The represented individual's experience with microaggressions will be simulated by dropping a marble onto the aluminum foil covered jar. Students are told that microaggressions can have differential effects on an individual and that the class will discuss the impact each instance. Through consensus, the class will decide the height from which and the force with which the marble will be dropped onto the jar.

Next, experiences with microaggressions that the represented individual might experience are introduced. Because I often align the identities assigned to the jar with my own, the examples I use are rooted in my lived experiences as a person of color, who grew up in Hawai'i and currently lives and teaches in a predominately white community. The introduction of microaggressions begins with examples that students will likely view as an annoyance rather than an overt racist attack. For example, I tell students about the racialized experiences I had with white college roommates who would police the terms I used to describe things. For example, they would correct me that "rubbish" was "trash" and that what I called "slippers" were actually "flip-flops." Although these examples can be traced to racial ideologies, students interpret them as innocent cultural misunderstandings and thus argue the marbles should be dropped from slightly above the jar and without a lot of force. Instructors may

choose to use more overt examples of racialized language policing throughout the demonstration to help students situate these types of examples as racialized experiences. The decision to drop the marble from a low height without a lot of force leads the marbles to either roll off the foil or come to rest on the foil.

This process of introducing a microaggression, engaging in a class discussion about the height and force of dropping the marble, and dropping the marble continues. As the demonstration progresses, microaggressions that would be viewed as more harmful are introduced. For example, I share experiences of being racially misidentified, being told I'm lucky that I have a culture, being followed around stores, and being told that Filipinos eat dog. Sometimes these examples shock students, and they are more likely to classify these instances as racist. Therefore, they agree that the associated marble should be dropped from a higher distance, with more force, or both. It is important to note that because these experiences are personal, students are less likely to question the validity of the example. If they do question the validity, I am able to provide clear explanations of when these things have happened and how often they have happened. Instructors may also use examples from scholarly articles about microaggressions because this provides them with a similar ability to justify the examples.

At this stage of the demonstration, the marbles tend to continue to bounce off or settle on the foil, but collective impact of the marbles has increased the size of the holes in the foil. Individuals do not experience an instance of a microaggression once; therefore, as the facilitation continues, examples of microaggressions already discussed are reused. This is done to develop students' understandings of how exhausting repeatedly experiencing the same microaggression can be. Like marbles that represent more overt forms of racism, students often agree that marbles that represent repeated microaggressions should be dropped from a higher level, with more force, or both. Each repetition adds more height and more force to the marble. Thus, the activity provides a visual representation of how examples that were once viewed as inconsequential are now classified as having a similar or larger impact than microaggressions students once viewed as more serious. The compounding effect of microaggressions begins to become apparent to students at this point in the facilitation.

Eventually, this process increases the size of the holes in the foil to the point where marbles no

longer bounce off the jar or rest on the foil. Instead, the marbles begin to fall into and accumulate in the jar. When this begins to happen, the instructor should use a marble to represent a seemingly inconsequential microaggression that students have not previously discussed. This leads students to agree that the marble should be dropped from just above the jar and without much force. However, unlike the earlier marbles that were dropped in a similar fashion, these marbles fall directly into the jar. When this happens, it is important for instructors to point out this difference and engage students in a conversation about why the outcome was different. These final marbles provide a clear visual of the cumulative effect of microaggressions and how seemingly small slights can have a profound impact on an individual.

Facilitation Tip 1: Intersectionality, Positionality, and Systems of Power

Although it is possible to facilitate this demonstration without a discussion of intersectionality, incorporating discussions of intersectionality helps to capture the nuance of systems of power. There are several points in the demonstration that lend themselves to opportunities to discuss intersectionality. The first occurs when the jar is introduced. By assigning various identities to the jar, instructors can provide the foundation for a more nuanced discussion of the microaggressions this person may experience throughout the demonstration. This can be as simple as assigning the represented individual a gender. Doing this can provide instructors with an opening to identify how the intersections of gender and race position an individual within a system of power and expose them to different microaggressions. For example, unlike a man of color, a woman of color will experience racial microaggressions, gender microaggressions, and racialized gendered microaggressions. The opportunities to discuss the nuances of intersectionality and how one's positionality within matrices of domination expose or protect them from different microaggressions increases as more identities are assigned to the jar.

The discussion of intersectionality can extend into the introduction of the foil. As protective factors are identified, instructors have the opportunity to discuss how intersecting identities may enhance or limit access to these factors. For example, instructors might point out how heterosexism might push LGBTQIA+ individuals out of counter-spaces for people of color or how social class standing might limit one's access to various forms

of capital. Therefore, students begin to see the complexity of an individual's positionality and how intersecting identities may influence one's access to the protective factors that they identify. This discussion also highlights how privileged identities can directly or indirectly mitigate the likelihood or effect of experiencing various microaggressions associated with a marginalized identity. Overall, this sheds light on the complexity of experiences with microaggressions and elevates the importance of intersectionality.

It is also helpful to conclude the demonstration by returning to intersectionality and highlighting Hill-Collins's (1993) argument that intersecting identities make individuals simultaneously the oppressor and the oppressed. This reminds students that they are likely both the perpetrators and victims of microaggressions. This adds a bit of closure to the demonstration and encourages students to reflect on how they can cultivate more productive conversations about microaggressions in the future. Overall, students realize that microaggressions need to be understood within the context of lived experiences and that they could be more understanding when they are accused of committing a microaggression.

Facilitation Tip 2: The Difficulty of Talking about Race

After a larger hole forms in the foil and a marble that represents a seemingly inconsequential microaggression falls directly into the jar, instructors may want to facilitate a discussion about why conversations about microaggressions often go awry. To do this, they should focus on the last marble dropped for an "inconsequential microaggression," asking students to identify how the person, represented by the jar, might react to the microaggression they just experienced. They often argue that the individual would be hurt or angry. Discussions highlight that the individual's reaction would be triggered by the most recent microaggression but informed by their cumulative experience with microaggressions. Therefore, what might seem like a disproportionate reaction occurs because the individual is likely exhausted and hurt by all the previous microaggressions—a state that students can visualize due to the altered shape of the foil and the marbles in the jar. Therefore, they see each experience as located within an individual's history with racism. Students thus realize that the response is not an overreaction to a small incident but an appropriate response within a larger social context.

At this point, students should be asked to consider the cultural narrative that discussing microaggressions is being too sensitive or seeing racism where it does not exist. Although the demonstration counters this argument, students are challenged to think about how one could justify the too-sensitive argument. After some thought, they often conclude that a person who employs this argument to deny culpability for a microaggression has to be unaware of or chooses to ignore the larger context in which the microaggression occurs. They recognize that the too-sensitive argument only holds true when one hyperfocuses on one interaction and views the microaggression as an isolated instance without social context. This realization enables facilitators to identify how colorblindness and fallacies about racial thinking are often used to craft the too-sensitive argument and derail conversations about race and racism.

Overall, engaging in this discussion helps students realize that conversations about microaggressions often go awry because those involved in the conversation have different focal points. Those most resistant to these conversations focus on the immediate event (the single marble dropped, often from a low level and without a lot of force). Unlike those with whom they are engaged in conversation, they are unable to or refuse to see the larger context (the broken layers of foil and the marbles accumulated in the jar). This narrow focus ignores the lived experiences of people of color and their context within a system of racism, and this act of ignorance is a microaggression in itself.

RESULTS

This demonstration was first conceptualized in collaboration with an undergraduate research assistant for an introductory to sociology class. The opportunities for introducing additional concepts, which enables the instructor to adjust discussions to meet the needs of an audience, makes this a versatile demonstration. Indeed, this demonstration has been successful in introductory and upper-division classes, an annual social justice leadership retreat, staff trainings, and community-dialogue workshops. In each of these settings, participants have been highly engaged and reported that they learned a lot from the experience.

To assess the demonstration and provide students with an opportunity to reflect on learning, students were asked to complete a five-minute free write on the following: "What were your biggest a-ha moments

or takeaways from this demonstration?" If this prompt did not resonate with students, they were encouraged to write a general reflection on the demonstration. To encourage honest reflection, reflections were submitted anonymously and were not graded.

Presented next is a qualitative analysis of 105 reflections that come from two 100-level sociology courses, an upper-division critical race theory course, and an annual social justice leadership retreat. Although these are quite different learning environments, there were no significant differences between the groups' reflections, and therefore, the presented analysis focuses on the total sample rather than a disaggregated sample. No demographic data were collected with the reflections, so precise demographics of the sample are unknown. However, my memory of the classes and the fact that these classes fulfill several core curricular requirements for students suggest it is reasonable to assume the demographics closely align with institutional demographics in which 51 percent and 49 percent of the respondents identify as women and people of color, respectively.

All students submitted reflections, and their responses to the activity were overwhelmingly positive. In fact, only two responses (1.9 percent) demonstrated resistance to the activity or no new learning demonstrated. An inductive analysis that utilized line-by-line coding of students' reflections was used to assess the effectiveness of the demonstration. Line-by-line coding was followed by thematic coding, which organized line-by-line codes into broader codes that sought to identify the main learning students got from the demonstration. This process developed categories such as (a) the context of microaggressions, (b) the effects of microaggressions, (c) understanding microaggressions, (d) protective factors, (e) talking about microaggressions, (f) self-care, and (g) commitment to change. Overall, this analysis demonstrates that students left the demonstration with an understanding of how the collective experience of microaggressions influence people. Because a reflection was not completed before the activity, it is unclear whether this learning was new for students or enhanced previous knowledge; although, students' reflections seem to suggest the former. This understanding of microaggressions served as a foundation to see microaggressions as part of a system of racism rather than isolated and unfortunate incidents, which encouraged many students to reflect on their own relationship to microaggression and make a commitment to attempt to counter microaggressions.

Seeing the Cumulative Effects of Microaggressions

The majority of students ($n = 66$; 62.85 percent) explicitly mentioned that they had a better understanding of microaggressions. Challenging dominant notions that racist acts are committed intentionally, 21 students (20 percent) noted that they understood how racism can be enacted through subtle acts known as microaggressions. One introductory sociology student wrote, "microaggression[s] are a subtle form of oppression that usually goes unnoticed by the person oppressing." A critical race theory student wrote:

Microaggressions are a huge part of modern racism and are more covertly racist. This, however, does not make the impact of them any less real or powerful as overtly racist actions. They are small slights, sometimes frame[d] as questions or jokes, that remind someone of their oppressed identity in a white world

Because no pretest was given to assess students' previous knowledge about microaggressions, it is possible that some of this knowledge is not new for students. However, some students noted that through the demonstration, in the words of one, they "discovered what microaggression are—I knew they existed, but never knew what to call them" (introduction to sociology student), and another wrote that they "never learned anything about [microaggressions] or even knew what it was until this class [session]" (introduction to sociology student).

In alignment with the goals of the demonstration, the students' writing demonstrated that their improved understanding of microaggressions stemmed from their ability to understand the cumulative nature of microaggressions. Sixty-two students (59 percent) mentioned this as they discussed how these incidents pile up, add up, or built up. For example, one student wrote, "the physical demonstration shows how the persistence of these acts over time eats away at an individual" (introduction to sociology student).

Students who wrote about the cumulative effect of microaggressions primarily conveyed this information in two different ways. First, students identified the weight and burden that microaggressions place on a person. One student wrote, "it's not just one microaggression, but the weight of all of them that punctures through to the core of the individual" (critical race theory student), while another

wrote, "the problem with microaggressions that just collect at the surface, is that over time—[they eventually] all fall through the layers of protection" (introduction to sociology student). In both cases, the writers reference the weight of the marbles that sit on the foil. In reflections like this, students noted that as the marbles collected, the foil needed to support more weight and was more likely to break. This is clearly demonstrated in a critical race theory student's reflection, who wrote, "I thought it was interesting how microaggression can be subtle but end up mounting on the jar and eventually tear through the layers." These types of responses show that students have been encouraged to see microaggressions as more than isolated incidents, that they conceptualize microaggressions as an ongoing series of experiences that collectively work to marginalize an individual. By noticing the collective weight of microaggressions, students can see that things that might appear inconsequential at first glance are significant contributors to the vast system of racism that affects individuals in a variety of ways. These types of realizations help to unravel the minimization-of-racism frame of colorblind racism that serves as the foundation for the too-sensitive argument.

Second, many students noted that the demonstration caused them to realize that the effect of a microaggression on an individual is contingent on the individual's previous experiences with microaggressions and racism. An introduction to sociology student wrote, "while microaggression aren't supposed to be big insults or demeaning, [experiences] and questions of such, over time add up and turn into bigger deals than what they started as. You get sick of hearing the exact same microaggressions." Another introductory-level student wrote, "I learned from this lecture how detrimental microaggressions can be after you hear them time and time again. This demonstration... was very helpful to see just what an impact, both small and large, microaggressions can have on a person after hearing them over and over again." These reflections most likely stemmed from the discussions that ensued after the same microaggression was used as an example in the demonstration, in line with the collective agreement that the microaggression would have a larger impact on the individual and therefore should be dropped from a higher distance and with more force due to repetition. As one critical race theory student wrote, although the incident may seem innocent at first glance, the receiving individual may be deeply impacted by the microaggression because they "heard that dumb question a million times."

In short, it is clear that the demonstration helped students understand how microaggressions, as a phenomenon, harm individuals and how the same microaggression can have a differential effect on individuals at different times. This differential effect often depends on an individual's previous experience with microaggressions. For example, a social justice retreat participant wrote, "overtime [*sic*] these little acts punch holes in a shield and actually start to have an impact." This student is referencing the fact that marbles introduced later in the demonstration, even those associated with seemingly inconsequential microaggressions, drop into the jar without much resistance because previous marbles have already broken through the layers of foil. An introductory student echoed this, writing, "even small comments can put a strain on a person's armor. All it takes is one big blow and then all of a sudden comments that wouldn't regularly cut deep have a larger impact." This student explains why a seemingly innocuous microaggression can have a large impact. Comments like this demonstrate that students are developing a better understanding of why an individual's reactions to microaggressions are not overly sensitive. Other students' comments reinforce this success, such as:

I think this lecture was very interesting. I usually associate the idea of microaggressions with the idea that someone just sees it as being too sensitive when you bring them up. I appreciate the way that you brought them up in class because it made my feelings for them change and gave validity to how I felt when people have said microaggressions to me. (Introduction to sociology student)

YOU'RE NOT OVERSENSITIVE! Your feelings about one min[i]scale comment are not irrational. You cannot see the microaggressions building up over time that cause one to snap over a "small" comment/joke/question. (Critical race theory student)

Overall, the responses suggest the demonstration helped students realize that microaggressions do not happen in a vacuum, which means that an understanding of the effects of microaggressions must take into account the collective weight of microaggressions and individuals' previous experiences with marginalization that have had affected their "protective layers."

Personal Reflection and Commitment to Change

The understanding of microaggressions that students gained from this demonstration led many of them to reflect on their own experiences and commit to some level of personal change. Although many others hinted at personal reflection and change, 41 students (39 percent) explicitly mentioned a commitment to change in the future. In so doing, many of these students stated that they would be more aware of their own actions because they wanted to limit the number of microaggressions they commit. For example, an introduction to sociology student wrote, "it makes me more aware of the fact that I need to be careful about the way I say things, as some times I don't even notice [things I say could be offensive]." Another introduction to sociology student wrote, "I never considered how someone might feel about some of the things that I say. I don't like it when microaggressions are directed at me, so I'll be more conscious towards others." These reflections demonstrate that students can see themselves as perpetrators of microaggressions and recognize how these actions can have an effect on others. In recognizing this and committing to change, students engage in self-reflexive work that attempts to disrupt the structures of racism by minimizing how often they commit microaggressions.

These commitments to change were often linked to students' understanding of the cumulative effect of microaggressions, which challenged the ahistorical fallacy of racial thinking (Desmond and Emirbayer 2009). This fallacy was challenged for students because they were able to situate current interactions with the context of other interactions, a skill that helps them see the structural nature of racism. For example, a critical race theory student wrote, "the jar visualization was helpful to see how intense microaggressions can be, especially once they have [broken the foil] and gone into the jar." Similarly, an introduction to sociology student wrote, "this presentation has really inspired me to be aware of what I am saying and how I am interacting with another person. This also makes me realize that [the gravity] of what I say or do can be amplified by [someone's] past interactions."

Although students mentioned being more aware of the actions, they did not describe this self-monitoring as debilitating. Instead, students realized that the subtle and unintentional nature of microaggressions meant that it was still likely that they would

commit a microaggression in the future. Thus, the demonstration appears to have encouraged students to develop a sense of empathy for individuals who experience microaggressions. This was evident in that students reported a desire to be more open and responsive when hearing about others' experiences with microaggressions. This often meant that students committed to being more responsive in conversations about racism and being less defensive when they were told that they committed a microaggression. For example, a critical race theory student wrote:

My thoughts after this talk is to be more understanding an[d] open if I make a microaggression towards someone because to me it may not seem like a big deal, but to them they may be really irritated from dealing with these things. . . . [W]e need to be more aware of our actions and assumptions towards others.

Similarly, an introduction to sociology student wrote, "what I learned today is to talk about our problems and the causes of them. Having a conversation [and being understanding] with someone will open your eyes." Overall, students committed to listening to others more, especially when they had the opportunity to learn how their behaviors may negatively be affecting others.

Furthermore, students shared that they were going to be more conscientious about their own actions and work toward not blaming the victims of racism for being too sensitive. In general, students seem to have developed empathy for those who endure microaggressions. For example, a social justice retreat participant wrote, "People shouldn't have to constantly put their guard up and protect themselves just for being who they are. And being a person going through day-to-day life we should never assume and always ask and educate." Another student, who was in the critical race theory course, admitted to having used the too-sensitive argument to shut down conversations, writing:

Another takeaway for me was how the over-sensitive argument is normally looked at with only an instance at a time and doesn't take into account the bulk that is weighing down the individual experiencing the microaggression. I'm a fan of this example and will most likely share the story throughout my life.

Overall, the demonstration encourages students to reflect on how they may commit microaggressions and the effect these might have on others. In this way, they identified strategies to address their own role in racism through committing microaggressions. Students believed that they could be more reflexive about their actions and preemptively change their behavior to stop committing microaggressions. They also understood that microaggressions are not isolated incidents but are situated within ongoing experiences of microaggressions. This made them more likely to want to listen and engage in conversations about racism and microaggressions. The willingness to engage in these conversations appears to be supported by students' ability to empathize with victims of microaggression and willingness not to blame them as too sensitive.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of students' anonymous post-demonstration free writes shows that the activity helped them develop a better understanding of microaggressions. After the activity students could explain how microaggressions have a cumulative effect, locate microaggressions within the larger system of racism, and reflect on their own role in addressing and perpetrating microaggressions. In doing so, students developed empathy for victims of microaggressions. This sense of empathy, which mirrors the empathy development that students experience in sociology courses more generally (Rockwell et al. 2019), led many students to commit to personal change. For students, this meant vowing to commit fewer microaggressions and being more responsive when told about microaggressions they have committed.

It is particularly important to note that this activity led students to engage in self-reflection, a practice that furthers sociological learning (McKinney 2007; Rusche and Jason 2011). Designed to encourage critical reflection and conversation, this activity does not simply deliver content to students but gets students to see their positionality in perpetuating and ending racism. In doing this, students are able to situate themselves within the system of racism and discover their own agency in perpetuating or disrupting systems of oppression. Instructors should strive for these types of learning environments because scholarly endeavors about race and racism should seek to disrupt the racist systems and ideologies in the hope of ending them rather than simply teaching about them (Golash-Boza 2016).

Although the demonstration described in this article focuses on racial microaggressions, it can easily be adapted to teach about all forms of microaggressions. In fact, when students are asked for examples of microaggressions at the beginning of this demonstration, they often provide examples that are related to gender, sexuality, and social class. An instructor could choose to focus this activity's discussions on any of these social identity categories. This is further supported when an instructor chooses to engage with discussions of intersectionality throughout the activity.

Fully exploring this is beyond the scope of the current article, but the activity proposed here also provides opportunities for classroom discussions of how to address microaggressions and racism. For example, instructors might ask how to stop the marbles from being dropped onto the jar. As shown in students' reflections, students often take responsibility for being more conscientious about their actions. Students often acknowledge that it would be impossible to completely end all microaggressions. This turns the students' attention to other avenues for intervention, such as repairing and building up the foil layers on the jar. Instructors should ensure these conversations include systemic, institutional, group, and individualistic factors. Students need to see how these collective investments support an individual in healing and developing new layers of foil. With this focus, instructors help students develop a sociological imagination and prevent victim-blaming narratives from arising.

This demonstration also provides an opportunity to discuss internalized racism (Pyke 2010). As marbles collect in the jar, students can be asked about the messages that are attached to microaggressions. The clear jar enables students to see how all of the marbles have been "internalized" and sit in the jar. This often leads to important discussions about self-care and decolonizing the mind to address internalized racism. A third point of intervention thus becomes a discussion on how to empty the marbles from the jar.

Overall, in addition to teaching students about microaggressions, this activity demonstrates the complex nature of social change while providing students with opportunities to see how they can influence change. It shows various levels of intervention and clearly demonstrates that focusing on one level will not be enough. Students begin to understand that focusing on building up protective layers does not address issues of internalized racism or the threat of experiencing a microaggression. Therefore, they begin to understand that solutions to racism must be multifaceted and address different

levels of social organization. Perhaps most importantly, this activity helps students position themselves within both the problems and solutions of microaggressions, which helps them see how they can contribute to challenging and ending racism.

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