Esther Klingbiel
Culture, Ethnicity, and Mental Health
Final, Prompt 1: Racial Microaggressions

1. **Racial microaggressions.**
   a. Draw from the readings and class discussions to describe the construct and theoretical importance of racial microaggressions.
   b. Provide at least two examples of racial microaggressions that were depicted in the film *The Color of Fear* and discuss the impact that the microaggressions had on the target individual.

A. Racial microaggresions are displays of aversive racism by a member of the dominant racial group (White people) toward a member or members of oppressed racial groups. Aversive racism, in short, is defined as implicit, often unconscious displays of racism. Therefore, in this context microaggressions are subliminal displays of racism and may not always be recognizable by the person of the dominant group.

Microaggressions can have a profound impact on members of oppressed racial groups as they reinforce institutionalized racism. Microaggressions as subliminal displays of racism are also conflicting in the meanings they carry via the content of what a person says or does versus its mode of delivery. For example, aversive racists may act untrusting or suspicious towards people of color through body language, such as avoiding eye contact, shifting, or physically withdrawing, all while carrying on a conversation. This type of microaggression may be conflicting towards a person of color. Microaggressions in conversation may include the assumption that someone is not American or does not speak English based on skin color, the assumption that certain people of color are intellectually inferior, or assumptions about a person of color's morals and motivations.

Psychologists regard microaggressions as an external stressor that causes real physiological reactions of the target of such microaggressions. Such reactions include

increased heart rate and release of stress hormones, identical to a flight or fight response.[1] While these reactions are temporary, the impact of these repeated responses leads to serious health issues later in life, such as a weaker immune system due to frequent release of stress hormones, and therefore higher susceptibility to illness.

Moving beyond physical impacts, racial microaggressions can also substantially impact the mental well being of a person of color, especially if the individual does not have a strong social support system. These impacts may include anxiety, depression, loss of self-esteem, and social withdrawal.[2]

Microaggressions are especially important to discuss when considering the impact of aversive racism because they are often invisible to the perpetrator. Therefore, victims may not feel comfortable bringing up the microaggression for fear of rejection and may spend a great deal of energy deciding whether or not to confront the perpetrator and actively working to disprove microaggressive assumptions, greatly diminishing quality of life.[3] Conversely, a person of color may begin to internalize these microaggressions as a mode of appeasement and survival in a White society. With this in mind, it may be especially important to remind and teach White people to recognize and call out microaggressions as it is much more penalizing, physically and emotionally taxing, and consequential for a person of color to do so.

[1] Sue, D. (2010). Microaggressive Stress: Impact on Physical and Mental Health. In Microaggressions in
[2] Ibid., 99
[3] Ibid., 103

B. In the documentary *The Color of Fear,*[4] one of the two White men of the discussion group, David, consistently expressed microaggressions in many ways and contexts. He would frequently say "colored people," or "you coloreds," in reference to the members of the group who were people of color. When called out for that, he would respond defensively by invalidating their feelings about the terms and ignorantly brushing off what they would say. Whether or not he knew that the term "colored" is politically incorrect and racist, he did not respectfully responded to the men of colors' requests not to use that term, which in and of itself is also a microaggression.

Another microaggression that David displayed was that he often talked over and interrupted others. Although this may not be immediately apparent to some as a microaggression, by displaying these behaviors, David was implicitly implying that he didn't respect or care about what other people had to say. It also implied that he believed that as a White person, the things he had to say were more important or "right" than what the other men of color had to say.

As discussed previously in this essay, the microaggressions served as stressors towards the men of color and invalidated their dignity and feelings. This internal, extremely conflicting stress was displayed most obviously by Victor, an African American man who became very agitated and started yelling, in response to David's comments and behaviors. Other men displayed their stress by becoming very quiet and withdrawing from the conversation, internalizing their stress. This is an example of how microaggressions serve to enforce a social hierarchy based on institutionalized racism.

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[4] Wah, L. (Director). (1997). The Color of Fear [Motion picture on DVD]. United States: Stir-Fry Seminars & Consulting.

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Sue, D. (2010). Microaggressive Stress: Impact on Physical and Mental Health. In
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Final, Prompt 2: Interracial Interactions

2. **Interracial interactions.**
   a. Summarize the empirical findings described in Pearson, Dovidio, and Gaertner (2009) and Trawalter, Richeson and Shelton (2007) and discuss their implications.
   b. How might these findings inform the development of practical suggestions for individuals seeking to improve the quality of their interracial relationships?

A. The article *The Nature of Contemporary Prejudice: Insights from Aversive Racism* by Pearson, Dovidio, and Gaertner argues that the contemporary form of racism in this country, aversive racism, is "fundamentally ambivalent"[1] and is displayed by White people in indirect, subliminal ways, such as through microaggressions.

While White people no longer endorse overt racist views, the majority believes that racial discrimination is not a factor of inequality of income, opportunity, and health when looking at statistics between White and Black people. As direct displays of racism are no longer socially acceptable, the authors argue that aversive racism is the contemporary form of racism that has taken "dominative" racism's place,[2] and that new psychological approaches must be taken to measure the affects of aversive racism.

Pearson et. al. believe that aversive racists actively avoid being associated with racist views or actions, and therefore express their biases subliminally and indirectly. Aversive racists also tend to characterize themselves as non-racist, "color blind," and politically and ideologically liberal. The authors argue that because of this, aversive racism is much easier to perpetuate and is more pervasive than more extreme acts of

[1] Pearson, A., Dovidio, J., & Gaertner, S. (2009). The Nature of Contemporary Prejudice: Insights from Aversive Racism. Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 3, 1.
[2] Ibid., 2-3

racism, such as hate crimes.[3] Additionally, the authors argue that this in turn affects interracial relationships, with Whites quietly harboring stereotypes, and people of color generally mistrusting Whites because of this.

Among studies conducted, the authors found that aversive racism manifests in many different types of actions and decision making which ultimately informs interracial relationships and relations. Whites were less likely to help Black people in emergency situations if there were other people present, they were more likely to pass over Black people for jobs and various other types of applications (when compared with similarly or even less qualified White applicants), and were more likely to believe that Black people were guilty of crimes (compared to White people) when shown potentially incriminating evidence.[4]

The authors offer various methods of fighting back against aversive racism in interracial groups and settings, such as creating a feeling of in-group identities,[5] learning to acknowledge unconscious biases and behaviors,[6] and self-regulating internal thought processes.[7]

The article *Predicting Behavior During Interracial Interactions: A Stress and Coping Approach* by Trawalter, Richeson, and Shelton offer coping methods for the stress response that is caused by interracial interactions for both Black and White people. The authors argue that White people display both positive (content of conversation) and negative (nonverbal behaviors and internal fears of appearing racist) behaviors in tandem

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[3] Ibid., 5
[4] Ibid., 6-8
[5] Ibid., 12
[6] Ibid., 13
[7] Ibid., 15

with aversive racism during interracial interactions that cause stress and perceptions of threat for both parties.[8]

The authors carefully examine the process of threat potential, including types of stressors and secondarily, the available resources an individual has to cope with those stresses.[9] Based on these appraisals, the authors argue, "…stress engenders primary action tendencies to (a) fight, (b) flight, (c) freeze, or (d) "tend and befriend."[10] They argue that because evaluation of prejudice is focused on the White person by both parties, the coping responses of Black and White people in interracial interactions are sometimes different. Among these coping responses are the utilization of social scripts, antagonizing the partner, avoidance (many aversive racists use this coping response) and even freezing.

The authors argue that more research should be conducted centered around interracial interactions, as aversive racism continues to persist in an ever-diversifying population in the United States.

B. The findings of these articles may help to inform an individual seeking to improve the quality of their interracial relationships by providing a framework whereby an individual can assess their partner's appraisal of their interracial interaction, as well as their own.

For someone who is White, it may be useful to carefully examine both one's own overt and implicit modes of interaction. It is important to understand how oneself may be aversively displaying discomfort and stress towards a person of color, especially through non-verbal behavior.

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[8] Trawalter, S., Richeson, J., & Shelton, N. (2009). Predicting Behavior During Interracial Interactions: A Stress and Coping Approach. Personality and Social Psychology Review, 13, 244.
[9] Ibid., 245
[10] Ibid., 246

Both White people and people of color should learn to recognize their own threat appraisals and coping mechanisms, and be able to reflect on how they interact and react to their partner. For example, does actively trying to be friendly and accommodating come off as fake? Is an antagonizing, avoidant, or freezing response appropriate for the situation? Both parties in an interracial interaction should try to cast off their preconceived prejudices both about themselves and each other and think about how their coping mechanisms may affect their interactions across many spectra and situations.

Works Cited

Pearson, A., Dovidio, J., & Gaertner, S. (2009). The Nature of Contemporary Prejudice: Insights from Aversive Racism. Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 3, 1-25.

Trawalter, S., Richeson, J., & Shelton, N. (2009). Predicting Behavior During Interracial Interactions: A Stress and Coping Approach. Personality and Social Psychology Review, 13, 243-268.

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Final, Prompt 3: Cultural Competence

1. **Cultural competence.** Answer all of the questions below:
   a. Draw from the readings and class discussions to critically discuss the construct of
   cultural competence. Given that Hansen et al. (2000)'s list of multicultural
   competencies is now 15 years old, how might you update or revise this list?
   b. What would it look like to be culturally competent in your own chosen career path?
   In other words, what qualities, characteristics, behaviors would a cultural
   competent person exhibit? How would it be exemplified in practice?

A. Cultural competence is a set of skills, knowledge, and awarenesses in clinical

psychology that inform and enable cross-cultural therapeutic relationships. Psychologists

argue that traditional psychological treatment is ineffective when considering minority

groups in the United States, including cultural and racial minorities. The traditional and

mainstream view of psychology tends to be focused from a Euro-American point of view

and can ignore or devalue the importance of cultural differences in the field of mental

health.[1]

The most mainstream approaches to cross-cultural competence in clinical settings

have come from etic, and more recently, emic points of view. Although these are

relatively recent methods when considering the cultural backgrounds of therapeutic

clients, studies show that psychologists emerging from graduate school today are only

slightly more competent in cross-cultural therapy than they were twenty years ago.[2]

Hansen et. al. argue that for effective cross-cultural competencies across a wide

range of scenarios, groundwork for these competencies should be set. Hansen et. al. offer

such a framework. Explained most simply, the authors believe that in order for cross-

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[1] Hansen, N., Pepitone-Arreola-Rockwell, F., & Greene, A. (2000). Multicultural Competence: Criteria and
Case Examples. Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 31(6), 652.
[2] Ibid., 653

cultural interactions to be successful, the individual must understand how their own culture and memberships in different strata of their culture affect an interaction, and consequently have a set of skills based off this knowledge that are effective for these interactions.[3]

Despite the fact that Hansen et. al.'s list of multicultural competencies is 15 years old, I believe that many items on the list are still relevant, as they are basic frameworks of understanding that transcend a period of time of less than two decades. Having mentioned this, however, I do believe the list can be updated in a number of ways.

First, when analyzing mental health, one should stay updated on the culture-specific illnesses included in the most current version of the DSM, as well as keeping up to date on pharmacological changes in treatments (and if these treatments are normative or acceptable in the culture in the first place). I also believe that the implications of the weight of an individual can affect their experiences and may be important to consider in cross-cultural therapy, especially when an individual's culture has not been exposed to the Westernized ideals of thinness as beauty.

B. As someone whose chosen career path would ideally be some type of graphic design, I think it would be informative to my design practice to consider how others' aesthetics are influenced by their cultures and cultural histories. Someone who is a culturally competent designer would take these aesthetics into consideration when thinking critically about and discussing their colleague's design. Instead of writing certain designs, motifs, and symbols off as "exotic" or "foreign," a culturally competent designer would consider what these items mean when communicating to a viewer. I also think that a culturally

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[3] Ibid., 653

competent designer would not appropriate other cultures in their designs. For example, Urban Outfitters has culturally appropriated Navajo designs by printing them on their clothes without permission by Navajo people. Furthermore, they did not hire Navajo people to design their garments in the first place; taking advantage of a culture without letting that culture reap any of the benefits.

Works Cited

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Final, Prompt 4: Intersectionality

Because I have only been absent once this semester, I am choosing to skip this question.

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Final, Prompt 5: Final Thoughts and Next Steps

1. **Final Thoughts and Next Steps.** [All students must answer this question.]
   a. What did you find most interesting, useful, thought-provoking, or impactful about this course and why? Please be specific.
   b. Evaluate your own learning and growth over the course of the semester. Describe areas of cultural knowledge, awareness, or skills that you hope to continue developing. *If there are none, provide a rationale.*
   c. Identify three specific concrete actions you can take to strengthen or deepen your learning in these areas. Refer to the readings and relevant literature, if applicable. *If you do not have an interest in continuing your learning in this area, please briefly discuss other approaches you could take to prepare yourself to live and work in an increasingly multicultural society.*

A. Before enrolling in this class, I had never participated in a course that discussed race and racism in the United States. Although the topic of race is thought provoking in any context, I think this was especially true for me in this class because as a White person I have the privilege of not having to think about race. This class forced me to move out of my comfort zone and the advantage I have to regress whenever I feel uncomfortable thinking or talking about race. I think society in general should have this attitude towards race and not teach White people to coddle themselves or each other.

All of my previous knowledge of institutionalized racism in the United States was shallow at best; this class helped my understanding the Black-White paradigm and the implications and associated stereotypes of being a person of color. I think it is important for all members of American society to understand the social racial hierarchy that is so indelible in the United States, as it informs almost everything a person experiences and does. Learning about the structures of aversive racism in society helped me to understand in myself and other White people how truly damaging and powerful aversive racism can

be against people of color. I feel grateful to have learned about this; a lot of my White friends have never heard the term in their life, and I certainly didn't prior to this class.

B. I think the reading reactions in this class were important as they helped me to formulate my thoughts and opinions, as well as to summarize what I had learned. This is especially important when reading scholarly articles as they are often more difficult to understand than other types of writing. I also appreciated that I was given room to express my emotional reactions to the readings because the topics we learned about hold endless emotional implications for every individual in the United States. As well, learning to think about some of these topics emotionally helped me to apply it to my everyday interactions in my life.

What I want to continue after this class is teaching myself more about the world I am living in, in the contexts of culture, ethnicity, and mental health. In a society where whiteness is everywhere, it can be hard to seek out the opinions and experiences of racial minorities. Nevertheless, they exist. By teaching myself more about culture through multiple media, I believe that I may be able to learn to appreciate and not appropriate.

C. 1. One way I can learn to recognize aversive racist reactions and thinking is to monitor myself in interracial interactions. As certain subliminal aversive racist messages often go unrecognized by the perpetrator,[1] I believe it is important for me to constantly be aware of my thoughts and judgments when speaking with a person of color. This includes my

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[1] Pearson, A., Dovidio, J., & Gaertner, S. (2009). The Nature of Contemporary Prejudice: Insights from Aversive Racism. Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 3, 1-25.

body language, my feelings when assessing the quality and status of the interaction, and my partner's body language and certain reactions to what I say or do.

2. Secondly, I believe that media literacy is crucial when one lives in a society so heavily centered around and influenced by institutionalized racism. Learning to understand the true messages that are being broadcasted to me helps to understand how the racial hierarchy in this society is reinforced. And I want to challenge and ask questions about these messages; how is Whiteness reinforced as the ideal standard of beauty? How are racial stereotypes reinforced in TV and movies? How are certain news stories broadcast so as to be biased against racial minorities?

3. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I can no longer shy away from second-guessing myself, even about matters which I consider myself to be well informed or educated about. This is especially salient when making judgments about another person's character, especially a person of color. While I do not consciously think about how one's race affects my perception of them, this is the very weakness that I need to pull from my subconscious. I need to ask why I think the things I do, rather than accept them as fact. Do I make certain judgments about someone's trustworthiness or intelligence based on real interactions where I have seen these attributes displayed, or do I automatically make them based on their skin color? While it can be distressing, it is important to think about, and fighting racism on an individual level starts at this point.

Works Cited

Pearson, A., Dovidio, J., & Gaertner, S. (2009). The Nature of Contemporary Prejudice: Insights from Aversive Racism. Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 3, 1-25.