Looking through the pupil of the eye: Shedding light on racial microaggressions at work through the case of an African-American corporate leader

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Abstract

Racial microaggressions are subtle insults, often unconsciously expressed. In the work context, they can lead to decreased morale and productivity. In this case study, the experiences of a corporate leader of African-American descent are explored. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

*Keywords*: Racial microaggressions; Racism at Work; Microinequities; Workplace Inequality.
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“[T]he pupil of the eye...is dark in colour, yet it is the fount of light and the revealer of the contingent world” (Abdu’l-Bahá, 1982, p. 114).

Racism is still alive and rampant in the United States today (Goodstein, 2008; Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal & Torino, 2008). We may finally have an American President with a manifestly diverse racio-ethnic background (partially of African descent even!) but that is no indication that we have overcome the disease of racism that afflicts our society and communities. Racism is manifested in a variety of ways, sometimes blatant, vocal and direct; sometimes subtle, indirect, and implied; and sometimes only in private thought and unexpressed emotion (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007; Ashburn-Nardo, Morris & Goodwin, 2008). Madonna Constantine (2007), Derald Wing Sue (2007), and their colleagues, following in the footsteps of Pierce (1978, 1995), identified the more minor, indirect affronts as “racial microaggressions” and investigated how these microaggressions show up in the counseling relationship between White therapist and African-American client. Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal and Torino (2007) extended this work to racial microaggressions in a variety of day-to-day situations and in the workplace (Sue, 2010). This current work explores the lived experiences of an individual Black, male, corporate leader with racial microaggressions in the workplace.

Objective

The pupil of the eye is a small dot of black in the midst of a larger sea of white. Such is the case with people of African-American descent who live and work in the upper Midwestern region of the United States, including the Twin Cities metropolitan area. What can be learned
about the American workplace by studying the daily lived experiences of such individuals? What light can be shed through an examination of the experiences of these individuals? More specifically, what can be learned about racial microaggressions in the workplace, by studying the experiences of senior executive leadership who happen to be of African-American descent?

In this paper, I looked at the experience of an individual African-American corporate leader in Minnesota. For a period of approximately 20 years, spanning the 1980s and 1990s, “Max” was a senior executive at a Fortune 500 company headquartered in the Twin Cities. To what extent did he face racial microaggressions in the workplace? How did he deal with them? What can be learned about racism at work through a deep investigation of Max’s experiences? What can be learned about the emotional intelligence that it must take to deal with such daily aggression? This case study attempted to explore those questions by looking at the experiences of one individual Black American man’s experiences with racial microaggressions during his two decades as a senior executive of a Fortune 500 company headquartered in the upper Midwestern region of the United States.

Definitions and Terminology

At the outset, it is important to define the concepts under investigation. Of course, with the topic of this current work, the definitions and distinctions are murky and contested. “Race,” “ethnicity,” and “culture” are often confounded with one another in usage and definition (Goodstein, 2008). While it is impossible to set universal “rules” about how skin pigmentation and physical features are included and not included in the concept of “race,” we cannot deny that pigmentation and physical features are part of this construct. It may be more useful, perhaps, to attempt to define these terms in contrast to one another. As such, I argue that “race” has to do more with physical appearance, particularly focused on skin color, whereas “ethnicity” is more
strongly indicative of cultural background and traditions. Sometimes “race” and “ethnicity” are part of one single, larger whole, and sometimes they are meant to indicate separate and distinct characteristics.

In the particular context of the United States, one of the most telling sociological phenomena is our tendency to classify any person with any amount of “Black” ancestry or genetic makeup as “Black” – thus overemphasizing the Black component of their racio-ethnic makeup above and beyond any other component, whether justified by the particular ratio of genetic makeup or not (Hickman, 1997). In other words, in our country, any amount of Black makes you “Black.” This subjective weighing of “Black” has to be part of our discussion of the term “race.”

“Racism” is a negative force, backed up by beliefs, emotions, actions, and structures, that asserts that one group of people is inferior to other group(s) simply due to color of skin. Racism can show up at the individual (either as internalized or externalized racism), group, organizational, cultural, or national levels. Benedict (1983) defined racism as “the dogma that one ethnic group is condemned by nature to congenital inferiority and another group is destined to congenital superiority” (p. 87).

“Corporate” is herein used to signal large, for-profit business organizations. “Senior leader” is herein used to indicate an individual business professional, who works for a corporate entity, is a member of the decision-making body that runs the strategic operations of that entity, and is at a Vice-Presidential level or higher.

**Rationale**

Exploration of this topic is important for at least five reasons. First, the victims of microracial aggressions experience significant suffering (Byrd, 2007; Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso,
Victims suffer significant psychological stress (Sue, 2010; Salvatore & Shelton, 2007); sapping of “psychic and spiritual energy” (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal & Esquilin, 2007); reduction of cognitive ability and focus (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007); and “diminished mortality, augmented morbidity, and flattened confidence” (Pierce, 1995). Second, beyond the actual suffering that victims experience, it is inhumane for larger society to allow such suffering to continue unaddressed. Thus, I would argue that investigation and resolution of this phenomenon is part of our responsibility towards other individuals and communities, and towards ourselves. Third, upcoming demographic changes in the American workforce, or more specifically the increasing diversification of the workforce, will demand that such issues be addressed (Cox & Nkomo, 1990; Sue, 2010; Sue, Parham & Santiago, 1998). More specifically, Sue (2010) indicated that the higher birthrate of people of color as well as the influx of visible racial/ethnic minority groups through the processes of immigration (both documented and undocumented) will cause the visible ethno-racial population to become “a numerical majority in the United States … some time between the years 2030 and 2050” (p. 212). This translates to increasing numbers of people of color in the workforce, and thus issues of racism and ethno-racial discrimination in the workplace increasingly become important. Fourth, both individual and group performance in organizations is diminished when individuals and work groups are affected (even subtly) by the vestiges of racism (Byrd, 2007). Finally, invisibility and silence about this phenomenon actually serve to give it more power (Cox & Nkomo, 1990; Meares, Oetzel, Torres, Derkacs & Ginossar, 2004; Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000; Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal & Esquilin, 2007; Sue, 2010). Solórzano, Ceja and Yosso (2000) explained that “without careful documentation and analysis, racial stereotypes, the threats that
they pose and the assaults they justify in the form of racial microaggressions, can easily be ignored or downplayed” (p. 72).

Racial Microaggressions

This term was first used by Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez and Willis (1978) to indicate “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’” (p. 66). Davis (1989) further explained that racial microaggressions are “stunning, automatic acts of disregard that stem from unconscious attitudes of white superiority and constitute a verification of black inferiority” (p. 1559). Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal and Esquilin (2007) defined racial 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 to the target person or group” (p. 273).

Constantine (2007) provided examples of racial microaggressions directed towards Black Americans: “being ignored by salesclerks in favor of White customers and being mistaken for service personnel in stores” (p. 2). Another example might be a fellow shopper in a grocery store aisle who suddenly clutches her purse closer to her body when a person of color walks down the aisle, or a comment directed to a person of Asian heritage stating that his/her “English is so good!” when that individual was born and bred in the United States (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007).

Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal and Esquilin (2007) identified nine themes of common racial microaggressions. These include: alien in own land; ascription of intelligence; color blindness; assumption of criminality; denial of individual racism; myth of meritocracy; pathologizing cultural values/communication styles; second-class citizen; and environmental microaggressions (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal & Esquilin,
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2007, pp. 276-277). Constantine (2007) identified twelve categories of racial microaggressions: colorblindness; overidentification; denial of personal or individual racism; minimization of cultural-racial issues; assignment of unique or special status on the basis of race or ethnicity; stereotypic assumptions about members of a racial or ethnic group; accused hypersensitivity regarding racial or cultural issues; the meritocracy myth; culturally insensitive treatment considerations or recommendations; acceptance of less than optimal behaviors on the basis of racial-cultural group membership; idealization; and dysfunctional helping or patronization.


Microinequities. Another term commonly used by Sue and his colleagues is that of “microinequities.” Sue employed this term to indicate the occurrence of racial microaggressions in the workplace (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal & Esquilin, 2007; Sue, 2010). Other scholars have also published work using this alternative terminology, although it is uncertain whether they hold the same strict distinction of context (Beagan, 2001). In this work, I have used both terms interchangeably.

Macrononsense. There is, of course, discussion about the validity of the concept of racial microaggressions. Scholars have argued against this concept in a variety of ways. Some have argued that Sue and his colleagues are making mountains out of molehills (Harris, 2008; Thomas, 2008); some argued that there is a confounding of race and culture in the concept
(Goodstein, 2008); some have asserted that microaggressions are not unique to race (Thomas, 2008); and others have declared that both individuals in a cross-racial dyad are victims, and that White participants should not solely be classified as “perpetrators” (Schacht, 2008). All of these are legitimate concerns and are an important part of the discussion of this phenomenon, but none of them render the concept to be “macrononsense” as some have contended (Thomas, 2008).

Methodology

The methodology for this study was composed of three parts: document analysis; interviews; and literature review. For the document analysis, I searched the online archives of two local newspapers in the Twin Cities area: the Star Tribune and the St. Paul Pioneer Press. Using search terms such as “race,” “racism,” and “work,” I gathered articles published in these papers over a twenty-year period, the same period during which Max was a corporate executive in this same geographical region. I was also provided with a one-page resume/career profile document from Max, outlining his expertise and career trajectory. I was also able to conduct two, in-depth, face to face interviews with Max. The first took place for an hour and a half on the morning of October 26, 2010 and the second took place for the same duration on the morning of November 15, 2010. I was only able to record the second interview, as the recording apparatus failed to function in the first interview. I did, however, have hand-written notes of our discussion to draw upon. Finally, I conducted a rather extensive review of published scholarly articles on the topics of racism at work, racial microaggressions, career development for Black employees, critical race theory, bifurcated consciousness, and diversity training in the workplace. These three sets of data – the document analysis, the two interviews, and the literature review – were posited against one another and served as a source of data triangulation, a process that is critical to the integrity of sound case study methodology (Yin, 2009).
The bounded unit. This case study focused on the unit of an individual person. As mentioned earlier, he is a Black American male, who worked as a corporate executive at the Vice-Presidential and higher levels, for over 20 years, in a Fortune-500 corporation that was headquartered in the Twin Cities area.

Our relationship. I must also disclose that I have known Max and members of his family for over twenty years. Our two families interact socially on a regular basis. I had never before discussed Max’s experiences as a Black American man with him in detail before. I approached Max via email, and he was responsive to engaging in these discussions.

Research questions. There were three general sets of questions investigated in this study. First and foremost, I wanted to know about Max’s personal experiences with racial microaggressions at work. When we met during our interviews, I asked Max very general question such as: Did you suffer from racial microaggressions at work? Can you tell me of a couple of instances that stand out for you, that immediately come to your mind, when you hear the term of “racial microaggression”? How did you feel and how did you deal with your feelings? What was the outcome? What did you learn? Second, from my review of literature, I sought to answer questions about the characteristics of racial microaggressions at work. I wanted to know about relevant theories, how racial microaggressions show up in the workplace, and how prevalent they are. From my review of published newspaper articles, I wanted to answer questions about the larger, public discussion of race and racism in the Twin Cities at the time that Max was a corporate leader in this same context. Were articles published about racism at work? How sophisticated was the analysis? What was the frequency of this publication and discussion?
Results

**Review of published news articles.** I conducted a review of the titles, and some of the content, of published newspaper articles over a twenty year period, in the same geographic location that Max lived and worked in. The two main newspapers were the *Star Tribune*, with its main readership in the metropolitan area, particularly Minneapolis, and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, which has its main readership located in St. Paul, although it also is delivered throughout the metropolitan area. Overall, it was quickly clear that there were many more articles published on the topics of race and racism in the *Star Tribune* than in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press.* Nevertheless, both papers covered a wide range of contexts in which issues of race and racism were discussed. These included contexts such as local and national government policies and political representatives, racial profiling by law enforcement, instances of overt racism in schooling contexts, history of Black Americans in Minnesota, some mention of workplace discrimination in hiring and promotion, recognition of local activities and community members, and more.

It is difficult to draw conclusions about the number and frequency of the publication of these articles. No conclusions about topic saturation or frequency of discussion could be drawn from the document analysis. The one conclusion that is apparent is that race and racism were discussed, at least to some extent, through the public media during the twenty year period in which Max worked as a corporate leader. It is also apparent that the content of the public discussion around race was at least somewhat complex. This is indicated by some rather interesting article titles that illustrate the range and depth of issues that the media was willing to print and thus attempt to bring to the attention of the larger metropolitan population. These titles include the following: “Black actors, athletes are proof that hard work, determination pay off”
“Some hope on racism” (St. Paul Pioneer Press, 7/26/93); “An honest conversation about race” (Star Tribune, 2/28/97); “Talking is difficult but it’s necessary. Facing issues of racial hatred, discussion may lead to peace” (Star Tribune, 12/15/98); “When ‘Minnesota Nice’ isn’t extended to all” (Star Tribune, 11/2/99); “There’s no evidence racism helped defeat Edina school proposal” (Star Tribune, 10/25/98); “Will revealing racism cause more pain?” (Star Tribune, 3/18/98). While the list above is heterogeneous and reveals different levels of comfort with discussion of race and racism, such heterogeneity of conversation is a positive sign insofar as it indicates a more honest public discussion of this contentious topic.

Data gathered from interviews. Max and I had two extended interviews in October and November 2010. We met in his office in St. Paul, early in the morning. I began by asking Max if he was familiar with the idea of racial microaggressions, and we discussed the scope of micro versus macro racial affronts. I provided Max with a couple of examples from Sue’s (2007) work on racial microaggressions against Asian Americans in everyday life. Max seemed very comfortable with this topic and expressed his belief that this was an important topic for scholarly inquiry.

The heart of our conversation started by me asking Max to think of some specific racial microaggressions that had been directed at him during his years as a senior corporate leader. I was hoping that some particular examples would come to mind, and that he would be able to articulate the details and the attendant emotions. Max did not do this. He spoke in generalities, or he spoke about racial microaggressions directed at other racio-ethnic groups, cultural groups, and gender groups. I repeated this question to Max two or three times during our initial hour and a half long conversation, but he never answered the question with the specific, concrete examples that I was hoping for. I wondered if perhaps he was avoiding this level of conversation, and I
remain uncertain about this facet of the interview. Nevertheless, our conversation was rich and explored a range of details and dynamics related to this phenomenon. In terms of Max’s own experience with racial microaggressions at work, seven themes of significance emerged. They are each described below.

**Low expectations/always on guard.** Life experience has trained Max to constantly expect coworkers and colleagues to show their true racist feelings without a moment’s notice. He has had more than one close colleague of more than a decade’s friendship reveal blatantly racist beliefs and feelings to him without awareness of the inappropriateness of such feelings or of the hurt this revelation causes. Even within Max’s faith community, this type of painful revelation has occurred multiple times with close friends. At the same time, Max does not feel general support from the larger African-American community either. Part of this has to do with the internalized racism that afflicts the Black American community, and in this case, it seems to manifest around Max’s light skin pigmentation.

In many ways, this seems like a life of isolation and constant apprehension. Both of these feelings must certainly exist for Max, and one can imagine the depth of psychological pain that this causes, although Max will not dwell on these emotions, even when questioned directly about them. Luckily, Max has a large, strong and loving immediate family who are all accomplished, active individuals who are part of other larger communities. They are singers, and scholars, and athletes, and educators. I would guess that his family feels like an oasis of safety for him, but outside of this family circle, he does not have overwhelming confidence in the non-racist understanding of the larger circles of which he is a part. He participates in them, contributes his share, even achieves consistent excellence and success in those communities and of behalf of those communities, but he also maintains low expectations for the individual members of those
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Communities when it comes to issues of racism and prejudice against African Americans, including himself. One can understand how this is both a logical stance to take, after repeated exposure to racist attitudes from a diverse variety of sectors, and one can also see that there is an element of self-protection in having low expectations.

**Geographic/cultural differences.** One theme that Max identified throughout his discourse was a sensitivity to geographic and cultural differences that inform larger society’s perception of race. He spent quite a bit of time describing the larger Scandinavian/German culture of the upper Midwestern United States, and he identified a cultural artifact that is often described as “Minnesota nice.” In other words, Max explained that people in this part of the United States like to think of themselves as liberal, open-minded and fair. This is a point of pride, and it is so strongly valued that people reject any proof that disputes this notion (Constantine, 2007). In other words, people are not comfortable with acknowledging their own innate racism or prejudices. Instead, they claim to be “color-blind.” The fears and negative feelings then manifest themselves in passive-aggressive dynamics. In other words, while individuals usually will not engage in any blatantly racist rhetoric or actions, nevertheless their microactions and assumptions certainly reveal their underlying concerns and thoughts. Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal and Esquilin (2007) explained that “most White Americans experience themselves as good, moral, and decent human beings who believe in equality and democracy. Thus, they find it difficult to believe that they possess biased racial attitudes and may engage in behaviors that are discriminatory” (p. 275).

**House slave versus field slave.** In literature on the African-American experience, particularly around social structure on Southern plantations during the time of slavery, one common distinction that was made by both Black slaves and White owners was that of “house
slave” versus “field slave” (Jacobs, 2010). In other words, there were certain slaves who worked the fields and others (usually of lighter complexion, of greater formal education, and sometimes the progeny of White male members of the land-owning household) who worked primarily in the home on a range of domestic duties, from childcare, to cooking, to maintenance of the daily functioning of the home (Jacobs, 2010). Over time, a distinction of class became part of this distinction of function. One of the eventual criticisms laid against house slaves by field slaves were that house slaves “bought into” the beliefs and ways of the owners – that they somehow thought themselves better than field slaves, and would contribute their own share to the maintenance of the unjust social structure. In other words, house slaves were the worst of hypocrites because they supported the unjust social order that oppressed their own brothers and sisters.

Max revealed that he thought of himself according to these same categories. He identified himself as a field slave—although he used a much more derogatory term, which I cannot bring myself to replicate. It was important to Max that he be a field slave, that his inmost self would be categorized as “field slave,” meaning that even though he was so light in complexion, even though he enjoyed the accoutrements of corporate American success, he did not support a system of racial oppression, and that whenever and wherever he could, he would fight racism and its systems with integrity and forthrightness regardless of the race of others in the room. Max recounted one experience in a smaller workgroup, where at least one other member was a Black American man. It took a while for this other individual to understand this part of Max’s orientation to life. Once this became clear, that individual was surprised and exclaimed: “Oh, you’re really a field slave, aren’t you?!?” And Max affirmed with pride that indeed, he was.
**Preparation for battle.** Max’s father trained him in the art and skills of intellectual battle or “jousting.” In previous conversations, Max has described to me the nightly scene at his father’s dinner table, which included constant debate and defense of opinions and ideologies, oftentimes centered on issues of race and racism. Each night was a long, drawn out argument, full of emotions and disagreement. This nightly deliberation continued with force and vehemence until Max one day reached a developmental milestone wherein both he and his father simultaneously recognized that Max was no longer overwhelmed by the force of his father’s argumentation. After this milestone, which occurred sometime in his 15th year of age, the tone of conversation at the dinner table mellowed considerably. Years later, Max’s father would recall the moment of recognition and realization that his son had been adequately trained to defend his own ideas and opinions and not be afraid of mental confrontation and argumentation.

Max is not a violent man whatsoever. In fact, he has quite a calming, almost meditative demeanor. Yet, I was struck by some imagery about physical violence that ran through his narrative. Several times he noted awareness of his own physical strength and agency, and awareness of the physical vulnerability of others with whom he interacted, sometimes focusing on White male corporate leaders. I did not get the sense that this was a distorted orientation toward violence. Instead, this may be part of the training and orientation that males in our society are afforded as they grow up, and I wonder if this lies at some intersection of masculinity and the Black American male experience.

**Reclaiming power.** During our first interview, I found myself wondering about how powerless and disheartened Max must feel. I asked him a bit about this and tried to delve deeper. Richie, Fassinger, Linn, Johnson, Prosser and Robinson (1997) noted that the participants in their study of the career development of high achieving African-American women “had experienced
disempowerment at some point in their careers…and had to develop ways of reclaiming power and control in the workplace—for example, through writing, political action, or deliberately empowering other women” (p. 140). What emerged quite clearly during our interview was that Max reclaimed power through study of his family history. He and his eldest daughter conducted a study of the history of the African-American side of his family, and identified certain successes and strengths that carried on from one generation to the next – such as entrepreneurial success and educational attainment. These specific strengths feed Max’s sense of personal control and agency. He described feeling that he could rely on these almost-genetic strengths as a source of control over his own career fate. On more than one occasion, he would find himself thinking that if he were to lose his corporate job or be kicked out of the organization by another powerful player, that dismissal would not control his employment fate because he “knew” that he had the entrepreneurial genetic makeup to create a successful future.

**Giving back.** Max has worked towards the alleviation of conditions facing people of color in the United States in a variety of ways. First of all, Max has dedicated time and energy to educating his four children on the history and ramifications of racism in the United States. He also has focused on increasing the scope and depth of knowledge and ability of people of color in his own specific industry. For years, Max led a minority-led corporation in California, traveling between that state and the Twin Cities on a weekly basis. He also described to me his recent efforts to establish another minority-led company in the same region, and explained how important it was that Black Americans and other people of color be able to play a role in this particular industry.

**Devotion to the Beloved.** A central facet of Max’s experience was that of spirituality, and his focus on the pleasure of his spiritual Beloved. Max described his devotion to the central
spiritual figure in his life. Repeatedly, Max explained to me that everything that he did, every situation he found himself in, every decision that he made, whether at work or at home, was part of his relationship with his spiritual Beloved. As I reflected on this, I realized that Max was not using his spiritual beliefs as a way to step out of or transcend the very real day-to-day challenges facing him as a Black man at work in a predominantly White context (Constantine, Miville, Warren, Gainor & Lewis-Coles, 2006). Instead, Max was using his spiritual beliefs as way to focus and judge the value of his actions and experiences. If Max feels that he is acting and behaving in a way that his spiritual Beloved approves of, then the approval of others does not matter much to him, whether those others are his wife, his children, his colleagues, the senior leadership of his company, members of the larger Black American community, etc. This was the ultimate standard by which Max judged himself: Would his Beloved be well pleased with him? If he could answer this question affirmatively, then Max had a sense of peace and fulfillment, and this was his ultimate concern.

Discussion

In summary, from a review of published newspaper articles over a twenty year period of time, it is evident that a larger discussion about racism was occurring in the local, public arena, with some attention being given to the exploration of racism at work. The frequency and reach of this public discussion is hard to judge from the document analysis, but it certainly was not overwhelming in frequency.

From review and analysis of our two interviews, it is clear that Max experienced racial microaggressions at work on a daily basis. They caused him emotional and psychological pain and suffering. In the description of his experiences, seven themes of importance emerged: Low expectations/always on guard; Geographic/cultural differences; House slave versus field slave;
Preparation for battle; Reclaiming power; Giving back; Devotion to the Beloved. From this list of themes, it is apparent that his engagement with these issues was quite sophisticated. Some of the themes have to do with his own self-concept and self-orientation; some have to do with self-protection; others have to do with developing a sensitivity to the diversity of others; some have to do with contributing to a larger community; and finally, some have to do with spiritual focus.

**Emotional intelligence.** It was clear that Max suffered emotionally from the racial microaggressions that he had to deal with in the workplace. He seemed to cope with the negative emotion in three ways, simultaneously. One, he carries around a well of anger and sadness in his heart. These emotions have not been expunged from his psychological knapsack, but remain alive, while somewhat quieted. Two, it seems that Max is able to use his devotion to his spiritual Beloved as a way to focus his energies and thus step out of the confines placed upon him by racism. Three, his own experiences with racial microaggressions at work have helped him become both very perceptive about the challenges of diversity in the workplace, and very insightful about how to accept and work with differences in style, manner, communication, worldview, etc. Max recounted many stories where others would turn to him for support with issues of workstyle differences and work team collaboration.

**Limitations.** This study is subject to a number of limitations. First, my unit of analysis was only one person. It would have been wonderful to be able to interview numerous Black male corporate leaders in depth. Second, my personal relationship with Max constitutes both a limitation and strength. I believe that he was somewhat more open with me because of the strength of our relationship; at the same time, he may have been guarded with some details. Three, since an individual who is no longer working in the setting of study was my unit of
analysis, it was impossible to observe the phenomenon. Furthermore, observing a phenomenon such as this one would be extremely challenging, since one cannot predict its occurrence.

Validity and reliability are two measures of the quality of good research design (Yin, 2009). Since this study is an exploratory one, and since I am not attempting to generalize its finding beyond the single individual that constitutes this unit of analysis, internal validity and external validity are not applicable (Yin, 2009). It is important for the construct validity of this study to be determined, and this can be achieved, at least in part, by sharing some semblance of my findings with the interviewee, Max, and garnering his feedback about my findings. This was completed via email, and Max confirmed the validity of the themes that emerged. Finally, in terms of reliability, I have generally described the procedures that I used to gather this data, including a list of my general interview questions and the parameters of my document analysis. Another researcher could follow my general procedures in an effort to replicate the study, and so I argue that the reliability of this study is sound.

Implications

This study has some implications for theory and practice. In terms of theory, clearly the findings of the study urge further investigation of the phenomenon. More data needs to be gathered from a variety of victims of racial microaggressions, and attention needs to be given to similarities and difference among victims, settings, and contexts. Exploration of theories of emotional intelligence, and other theories of aversive racism, implicit cognition, intergroup theory, and bifurcated consciousness could be explored in some depth, and the relationship between these theories and racial microaggressions at work should be explored further. As stated earlier, silence and invisibility gives power to racism; research and theory are needed to make the invisible, visible.
In terms of practice, this study gives managers and corporate leaders another opportunity to reflect on how race and racism is addressed in the workplace, from hiring and promotion practices, to mission and diversity statements, to training efforts, to organizational culture, and to the career development and learning of both individuals and work teams. Anand and Winters (2008) argued that the business world is increasingly identifying diversity as a core business process. If this is the case, then exploration of the micro-manifestations of racism at work should also be part of the content upon which diversity efforts are built.

This was a case study of the experience of a single Black American corporate leader with racial microaggressions in the workplace. The study found that, for Max, racial microaggressions occurred with frequency in the workplace and caused considerable emotional and psychological distress. Based on this study, it is apparent that conducting additional case studies of the experiences of individuals with racial microaggressions at work can become an important part of the dialogue around addressing and eradicating racism in the United States; telling these stories out loud is actually part of the anti-racism methodology espoused by critical race theory (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000).
REFERENCES


