

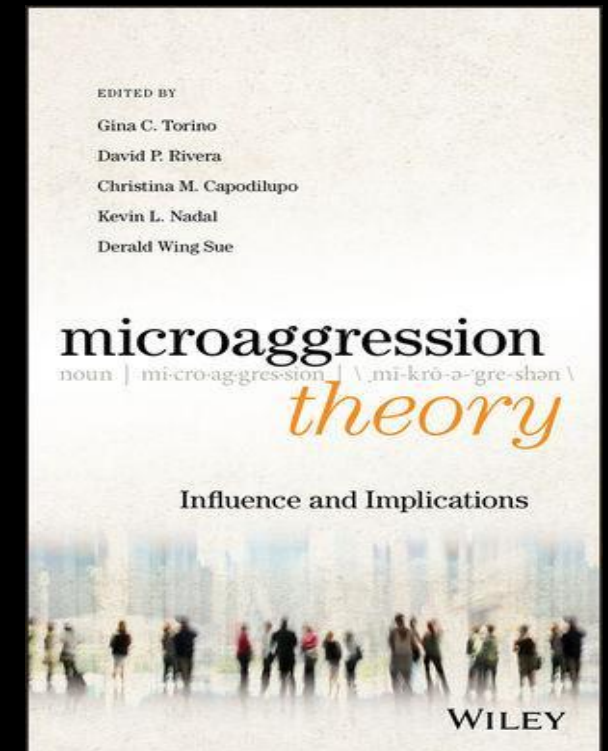


# **Taking off the Mask: Microaggressions and Returning to the Workplace**

Gina C. Torino, Ph.D.

# Thank You

- Ms. Amy Sanchez
- Mr. Michael Gonzales
- Dr. Derald Wing Sue
- Dr. Chester Pierce
- Dr. Joseph White
- Dr. Robert Carter
- Dr. Kevin Nadal
- Dr. Christina Capodilupo
- Dr. David Rivera
- Dr. Kevin Wolff
- Wiley Publishing
- My family, friends, and colleagues



# **The Only Way Out is Through**

-Robert Frost





A photograph of a person walking across a crosswalk painted with rainbow-colored stripes. The person is seen from the waist down, wearing a grey t-shirt, grey shorts, and sneakers. The crosswalk is on an asphalt road, and the rainbow stripes are vibrant and diagonal. The text "Safe Space" is overlaid in a large, white, sans-serif font in the center of the image.

**Safe Space**



# Background



# Implicit Bias

- Automatic or unconscious thoughts we make towards others
- Often based on stereotypes (positive or negative)
- Can act on implicit bias without recognition





# Audience Engagement

- Look at the first 2 pictures
- In 5 seconds, write down the occupation of the person (best guess)
- For the 3<sup>rd</sup> picture, state whether you would work with that person



**Picture #1**





**Picture #2**



**Picture #3**





## Picture #1

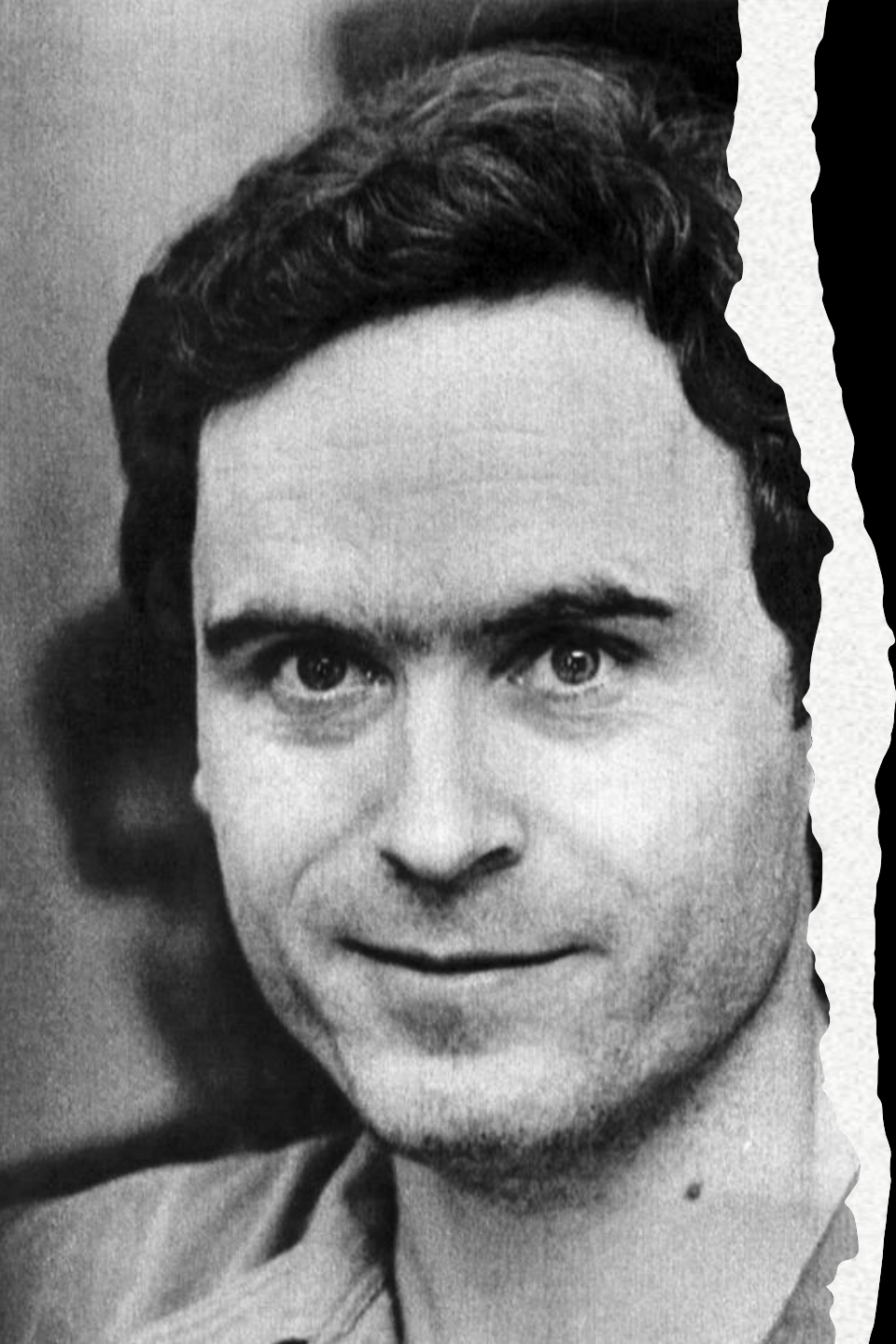
- Dr. Peter Donnelly
- Graduate of Columbia University
- Counseling Psychologist
- Multicultural Scholar
- Social Justice Advocate





## Picture #2

- Ms. Suvarna Raja
- Para-athlete
- Represented India in the javelin throw and shotput in the 2018 Asian Games



## Picture #3

- Ted Bundy
- Serial Killer from the 1970's
- Harmed several women
- Confessed to over 30 murders
- Was executed in 1989





# Implicit Bias





# Manifestation of Implicit Bias via Microaggressions



## **What are Microaggressions?**

Derogatory slights or insults directed at a target person or persons holding marginalized group memberships (e.g., race, gender, sexual identity, ability, religion, and social class)

- They are often unconscious (not always)
- Can be delivered behaviorally, verbally, or environmentally
- Not innocuous errors
- Used to maintain power differentials



New York photographer documents casual racism encountered every day by minorities | Daily Mail Online



# Microaggressions in the Workplace Prior to COVID-19

Theme	Microaggression	Message
Ascription of Intelligence	Telling a Black colleague, “you are so articulate.”	It is uncommon for Black individuals to be intelligent.
Colorblindness	When the topic of race is brought up in a discussion, one states, “I don’t see color, we are all human.”	Race is an unimportant dimension to one’s experiential reality.
Assumption of Criminality	Locking one’s purse in a drawer after a Black/Latinx colleague walks by one’s desk.	Black/Latinx individuals are criminals.

# Microaggressions in the Workplace Prior to COVID-19

Theme	Microaggression	Message
Inferiority	Not contacting qualified applicants that have Latinx, Black, or Asian names on the resumes.	White individuals or more qualified for positions.
Silencing/Invisibility	Ignoring a female colleagues' contribution during a meeting.	Women's voices are less important.
Assertiveness=Bitchiness	Being labeled a "bitch" by colleagues (men and women) when enforcing policies.	Women are supposed to be warm and nurturing and not firm or assertive.

# Microaggressions in the Workplace Prior to COVID-19

Theme	Microaggression	Message
Pathologizing cultural values/communication styles	Penalizing an Asian American employee that does not make eye contact during meetings.	Conform to Western styles of communication to move up within the organization.
Exclusion	Excluding marginalized group members from after work outings.	You are not a member of the team and a perpetual outsider.
Environmental microaggression	Lack of representation of People of Color, Women, LGBTIQ and Persons with Disabilities in top leadership.	High ranking leadership is reserved for dominant group members.
Universal Experience/Tokenism	A Black female colleague is continuously asked her opinions about issues facing Black communities.	The Black experience is universal, and one is expected to represent.



# **Impact of Microaggressions**



# Cumulative and Insidious Impact of Microaggressions

- “Death by a thousand cuts”
- Ambiguity of microaggressions
- Normalization and acceptance of microaggressions can reinforce inequities (e.g., not seeing adequate representation)
- Serve as threats to one’s sense of safety within organizations





# Psychological Impact of Microaggressions

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Race-based traumatic stress
- Adjustment issues
- Anger/frustration
- Suicidal ideation
- Increased cultural mistrust



## Physical/Behavioral Impact of Microaggressions

- Poorer physical morbidity and general health status
- Increased alcohol use
- Altered cortisol activation
- Associated with systemic inflammation
- Maladaptive coping (e.g., risky behaviors)
- Reduced medication compliance and cancer screenings
- More socially withdrawn and isolated





# **Workplace Impact of Microaggressions**

- Decrease in job satisfaction
- Lower organizational commitment
- Negative impact on job performance
- Higher rates of attrition

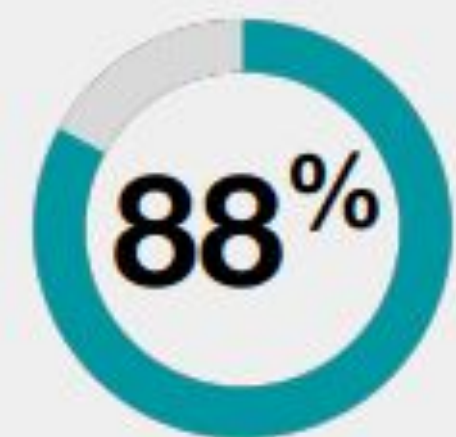
**Returning to the  
Workplace?**



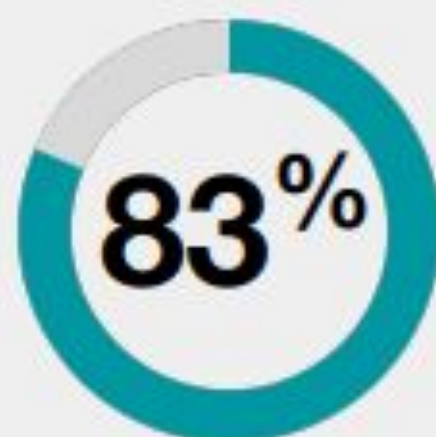


## Desire for flexibility remains strongest among underrepresented groups.

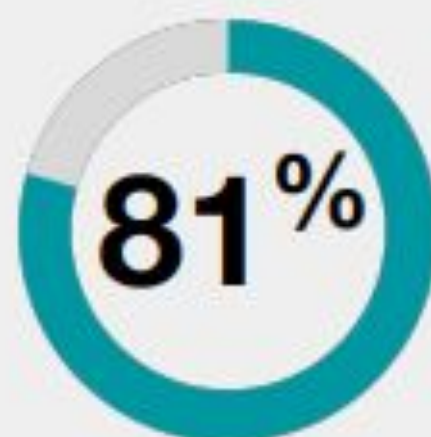
Percentage of U.S. survey respondents who prefer a hybrid or fully remote work arrangement, by race/ethnicity



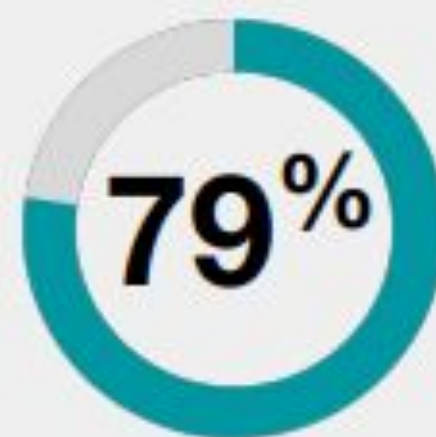
**Asian/  
Asian American**



**Black**



**Hispanic/  
Latinx**




**White**

# **Flexibility is a strong driver for inclusion**

- 83% of working mothers surveyed now want location flexibility—an all-time high since Future Forum started surveying in summer 2020





# **Women of Color on Returning to the Workplace (NYT)**

- Many Women of Color feel disconnected or disengaged at work
- Overlooked for projects
- Not fully connected to co-workers and colleagues
- White co-workers don't really "understand, respect or appreciate our cultural context or our journey"



# Women of Color on Returning to the Workplace (NYT)



“I’m nervous about going back [to work in person].”

“This was the first year I haven’t had my hair commented on and touched without my permission in my professional life.”

“I actually like not having to go to the office and be constantly reminded I’m the only Black woman there.”



# Reasons for Remote Working Preferences

- More flexibility and autonomy
- Do not have to experience the same intensity and frequency of microaggressions
- Less code-switching
- Increase in ability to manage stress
- Safety

# Prevention and Intervention









# Prevention

- Be intentional and seek out support and supervision
- Become sensitive to the unique experiences of your colleagues
- Provide ongoing training that targets deeper understanding of biases that lead to microaggressions
- Engage in active learning and decrease bias (e.g., offer IAT)  
<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>
- Center for Study of White American Culture:  
<https://cswac.org/upcoming-workshops/>

# Organizational Interventions

- Hire a DEI leadership position and include in upper administration/management
- When onboarding new employees, include implicit bias/microaggression training
- Train hiring committees and management to understand/prevent implicit bias in hiring/promotion processes
- Bring in guest speakers to discuss topics related to implicit bias/microaggressions





# Organizational Interventions

- Leadership--survey employees about concerns related to microaggressions (<https://inchorus.org/>)
- Continue with a flex/hybrid approach
- Weekly check-in's with employees to see how the transition is going
- Listening to employees is critical

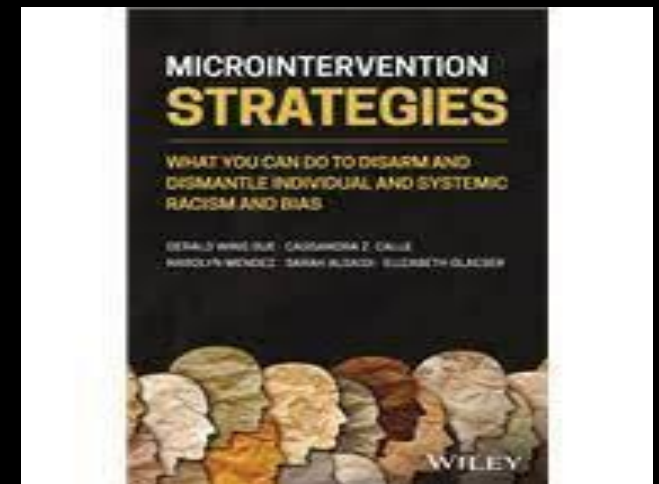


# **To respond or not to respond?**

- They happen quickly—need to use best judgment
- Is safety an issue if you respond?
- Do you want to be heard?
- Do you want to simply educate the person to make them aware of your experience?
- How will speaking up affect your relationship (colleague or manager)?
- If you don't respond, will that send a message that what has been said or done is acceptable?

# Microintervention Strategies

- Derald Wing Sue and colleagues, *Microintervention Strategies: What you can do to disarm and dismantle individual and systemic racism and bias* (2021):
  - Make the invisible visible
  - Disarm the microaggression
  - Educate the perpetrator
  - Seek outside support/authoritative help







# Interventions

- Make the Invisible Visible--“Not all Asians are good at math.”
- Disarm the microaggression—“OUCH!”
- Educate the perpetrator--“I’m sure you didn’t mean it this way and you may have meant well but, when you touched my hair, it was offensive to me because I felt exoticized.”
- Support—Speak to management

# What if I commit a microaggression?

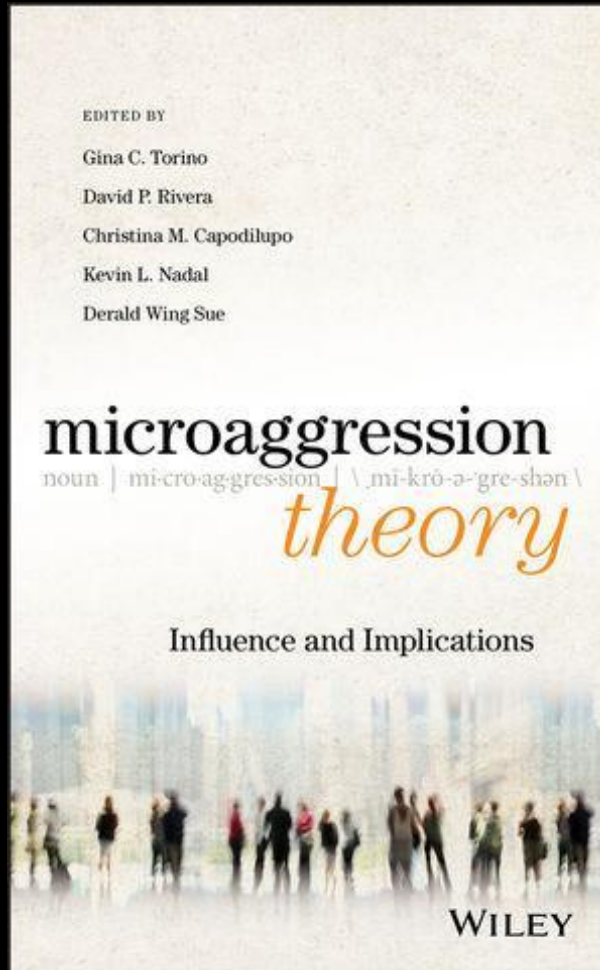
If you commit a microaggression and realize it or if you get confronted by a colleague, **do not get defensive.**

- Acknowledge the other person's hurt
- Take stock of your thoughts and feelings
- Ask the person to help you understand the microaggression
- Engage in an honest dialogue about what occurred
- Apologize and reflect on where the microaggression came from and how you can avoid similar instances in the future
- Take responsibility for increasing your understanding of your own biases and privileges

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# Thank you!

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