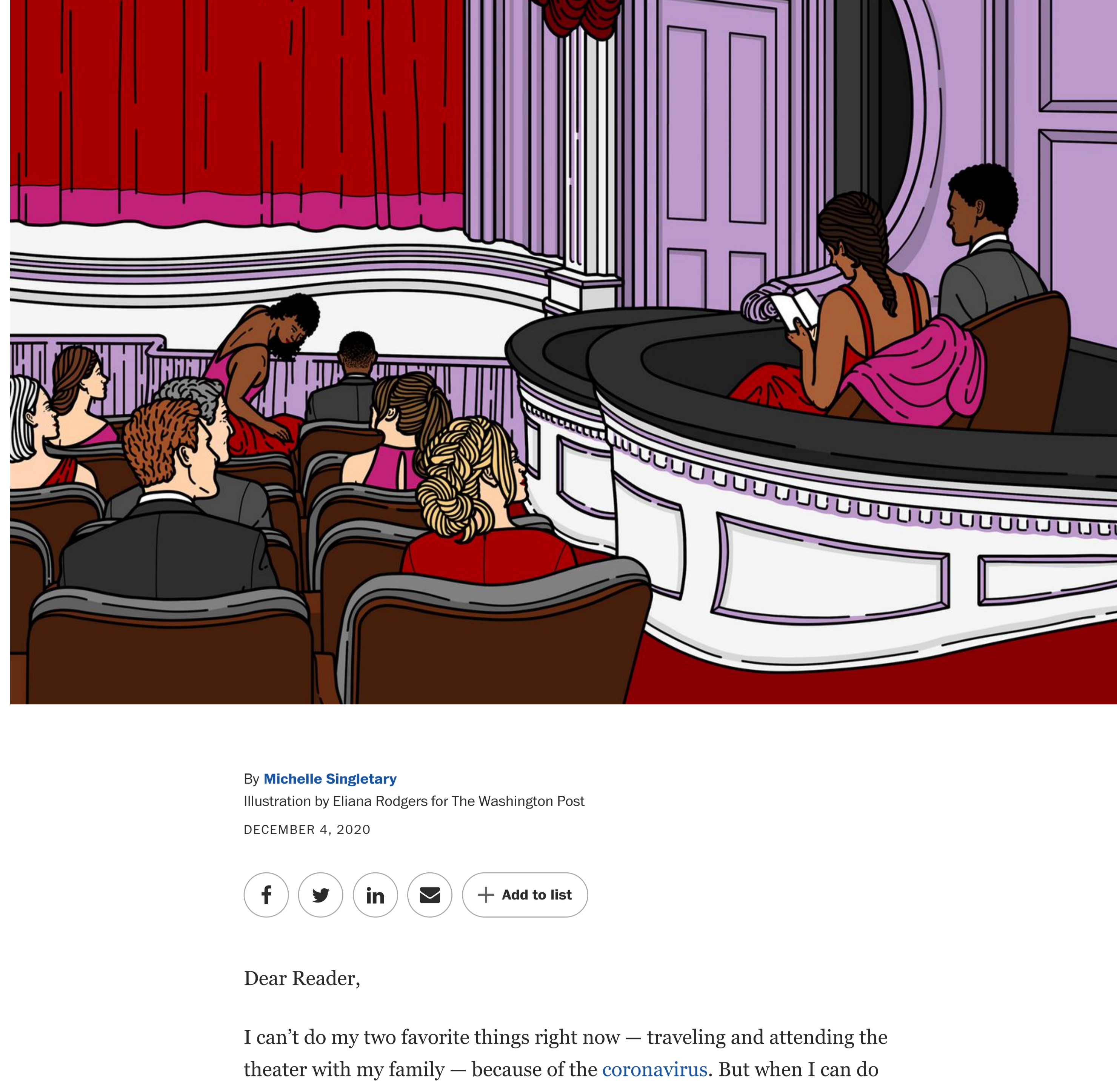


Racial microaggressions take a major toll on Black Americans

White people gawking at or complimenting Black people for doing ordinary things is literally harming their health, research shows



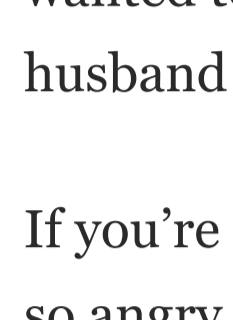
By **Michelle Singletary**
Illustration by Eliana Rodgers for The Washington Post
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Dear Reader,

I can't do my two favorite things right now — traveling and attending the theater with my family — because of the coronavirus. But when I can do these activities again, I have a simple request for White vacationers and theatergoers: Please stop staring at us. Don't compliment us for doing what comes naturally.

A while ago, my family was vacationing at a resort in Orlando. My husband was tossing our three young children around in the pool, to their audible delight. I was sitting nearby on a lounge chair, reading a book. There were other parents in the water playing with their children as well.



Sincerely, Michelle In a 10-part series, Michelle Singletary gets personal about common misconceptions involving race and inequality.

After another shriek of laughter from my kids, I looked up and saw a White man, perhaps in his mid-60s, splashing toward my family.

He waded up to my 40-something husband and said, loud enough for me to hear as well: "You have such a nice family. It's so nice to see you playing with your children."

My husband and I shared a glance. He could see me getting steamed. I wanted to say something about this man's offensive statement, but my husband just shook his head and mouthed, "Let it go."

If you're a Black person or a person of color, you understand why I was so angry.

If you're confused, let me explain why the compliment wasn't well received.

This White man felt duty-bound to congratulate my husband for playing with our Black children as if it were an anomaly. He didn't praise the White fathers spending time with their kids. No, he wanted my husband to know that he was proud of him for, in his mind, contradicting the stereotype of the absentee Black father.

But "most black dads are not absent," writes Josh Levs writes in "All In: How Our Work-First Culture Fails Dads, Families, and Businesses — and How We Can Fix It Together." Although Black children are more likely to have unmarried parents, this doesn't mean they are fatherless, Levs points out.

Even when Black fathers don't live with their children, they are more involved than White fathers in helping their children with homework, according to a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. And among the Black fathers who do live with their children, a higher percentage of them bathe, dress or diaper their kids compared with White dads, the study found.

So I'm sure that, while the White man at the pool had good intentions, he didn't recognize that what he said was insulting and biased.

"We were on our way to a family vacation in Aruba. ... A White man standing behind us said: 'I don't think you are in the right line. This is for TSA PreCheck.' He didn't take it upon himself to question other travelers. Just us. The only Black folks in the queue."

Pre-pandemic, it was infuriating when White folks stared as our family showed up at five-star resorts or hotels. It was as if they were trying to figure out how we could afford to vacation with them. As we moved about the properties, some asked my big, hulking husband if he was an athlete. Or they asked what we did for a living — out of the blue, with no relationship established to justify such brazenness. For the record, we live frugally throughout the year so that we can afford treats like this.

We typically keep such incidents to ourselves. We wouldn't want to be accused of being "too sensitive."

But this happens too often.

I'm still bothered about the White woman who asked me how we got our front-row seats to a multiracial performance of "Oklahoma!" at Arena Stage in D.C.

It was intermission. I chose to stay seated to read the Playbill.

The woman, sitting a few rows back, moved down, tapped me on the shoulder and said: "Wow, you have great front-row seats. Do you have a relative in the cast?"

There were several White theatergoers parked along the front row — right next to me. But she didn't ask any of them if they were related to someone in the play who comped their seats.

I wanted to say, "Heifer, I purchased my ticket, just like you."

I wouldn't have actually called her that name, that would be rude, but I wanted to school that woman on why her question was offensive.

The message she was sending was that my husband and I couldn't have afforded our orchestra seats, being Black and all. It might have surprised her to know that we are season-ticket holders at Arena Stage and we pay extra for premium seating. (We even add on the dinner and parking package.)

It wasn't the first time we were made to feel out of place. Often, when we attend a non-Black production, we get stares from some White patrons who seem to be thinking, "They know this isn't an August Wilson play, right?"

"It's the White customer who assumes a Black shopper at a luxury boutique is a clerk. Or a salesperson in Zurich redirecting Oprah Winfrey to cheaper handbags when she was inquiring about a \$38,000 purse. It's the so-called 'compliment' that a Black person 'speaks so well.'"

I'll share just one more incident, although there are so many more.

We were on our way to a family vacation in Aruba. The regular security lines were overwhelmed. My family hurried to take our place in the line reserved for people who had paid for TSA PreCheck, which speeds up the security process.

A White man standing behind us said: "I don't think you are in the right line. This is for TSA PreCheck."

He didn't take it upon himself to question other travelers. Just us. The only Black folks in the queue.

"I know what line this is," I said curtly.

As I started to say more, my husband, ever the peacekeeper, looked at me. He didn't have to say it this time.

But I'm tired of letting it go.

All the encounters I've shared are examples of racial microaggressions.

"Microaggressions are the everyday slights, insults, indignities, put-downs and allegations that well-intentioned White [people]," said Derald Wing Sue, a psychology professor at Columbia University and author of "Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation."

Black Americans disproportionately experience microaggressions, according to a Gallup poll this summer. "The flash points that spark national conversations on racism are often instances of violence, but for many Black Americans, their experiences with mistreatment and discrimination are much subtler and are woven into the routines of their normal, daily lives," Gallup said.

It's the White customer who assumes a Black shopper at a luxury boutique is a clerk. Or a salesperson in Zurich redirecting Oprah Winfrey to cheaper handbags when she was inquiring about a \$38,000 purse. It's the so-called "compliment" that a Black person "speaks so well." The president-elect Joe Biden found himself having to apologize to then-presidential candidate Barack Obama for saying, "You got the first mainstream African American who is articulate and bright and clean."

Sue writes in his book: "The power of microaggressions lies in their invisibility to the perpetrator, who is unaware that he or she has engaged in a behavior that threatens and demeans the recipient of such a communication."

In business, "microinequities" result in Black workers being overlooked, under-respected and devalued. Work performance suffers when microaggressions accumulate over time.

"Our research indicates that not only is it invalidating your experience of reality, but it has major psychological impact on what we call subjective well-being," Sue said in an interview.

But a lot of White people don't see the harm they are doing.

How has your race or identity shaped your financial decision-making? Share your thoughts with us.

"A lot of my White brothers and sisters believe that the everyday incivilities they experience with someone who is rude are no different from racial, gender or sexual-orientation microaggressions," Sue said.

When Sue began studying the impact of microaggressions, many of his White colleagues told him his work was making a mountain out of a molehill, that microaggressions were just macro nonsense.

But microaggressions can cause depression and self-esteem issues, Sue's research shows. "They are a constant reminder that we, as people of color, are second-class citizens in our own country," he said.

There's also the stress of how to respond.

"If you choose not to do anything about it, it takes a toll on you psychologically," Sue said. And physically. Studies have shown people subjected to microaggressions experience elevated blood pressure because they get upset or feel frustrated, maybe even angry at themselves for not saying something, he said.

Sue argues that it's important not to let incidents go unaddressed in the moment. He calls the reactions "microinterventions," strategies that people of color can use to make the "invisible visible," drawing attention to the insult.

"For example," he said, "if someone compliments me and says, 'Derald, you speak excellent English,' I would say: 'Thank you. I hope so. I was born here.'"

If your biased question, ill-conceived compliment, befuddled stare or racist statement is called out, don't get defensive or trivialize the incident. Black people need you to be able to accept the feedback, because it's literally detrimental to our psychological and physical health to stay silent and seethe in the face of racial microaggressions.

Sincerely,

Michelle

Read more from the "Sincerely, Michelle" series:



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