



Center for Critical Race Studies at UCLA

Research Briefs

June 2016 • Issue No. 3

Micro in Name Only: Looking Back to Move Forward in Racial Microaggression Research

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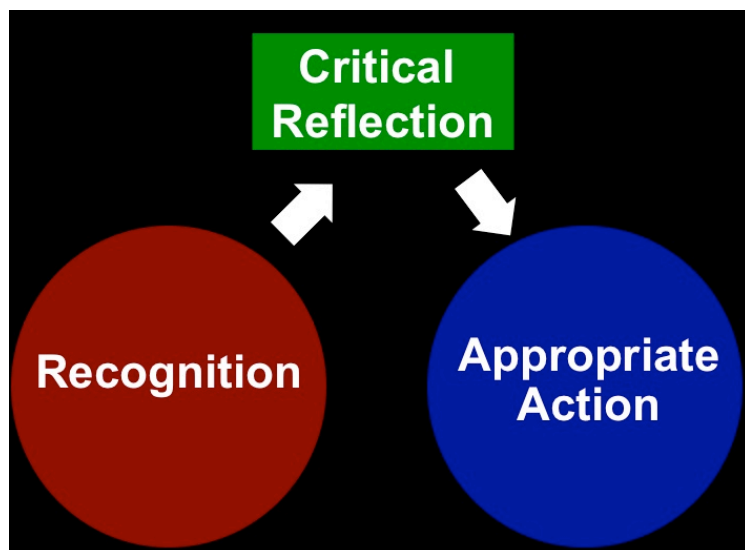
Racial microaggressions are a form of systemic racism that (a) are verbal and non-verbal assaults directed toward People of Color¹, often carried out automatically or unconsciously; (b) are based on a Person of Color's race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname; and (c) are cumulative, taking a physiological, psychological, and academic toll on those targeted by them (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015a; 2015b). In 2014, college students across the US thrust the concept of racial microaggressions into public discourse with social media campaigns² to call attention to the everyday racism Students of Color encountered on their college and university campuses. Racial microaggressions quickly became a term to explain experiences with racism in a "post-racial" era. Since then, numerous scholars and columnists have challenged racial microaggressions to argue that this concept attributes to the "coddling" and "hypersensitivity" of U.S. college students that can create a "vindictive protectiveness" that impedes student learning in higher education (Gitlin, 2015; Lukianoff and Haidt, 2015). The characterization of racial microaggressions as "vindictive" illustrates the lack of understanding about the theoretical origins of this concept, developed over 40 years ago by African American psychiatrist, Dr. Chester Pierce.

THEORETICAL ORIGINS OF RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

Pierce first coined the term "micro-aggression" over 40 years ago in 1970, to describe the "subtle and stunning" forms of racism encountered by People of Color. Pierce explained the "unimaginable magnitude" of racial microaggressions that have "cumulative" and negative effects for People of Color over ones' lifetime. In fact, Pierce used the terms "torture," "terror," and "disaster"³ to describe the dire consequences of the accumulation of everyday racism that frequently target People of Color (Pierce, 1995). Thus, it is quite ironic that racial microaggressions has been misconstrued by some as a form of "vindictive protectiveness"⁴ when this concept was theorized to acknowledge the harm everyday racism can cause People of Color—those groups whose rights have been the least protected throughout U.S. history (Takaki, 2008).

We extend the original theorizing of racial microaggressions by Dr. Pierce to address the serious consequences of systemic cumulative everyday racism. Macroaggressions is a term some use in order to more accurately align the nomenclature of everyday racism with its detrimental impact on Communities of Color. We strongly support the sentiment behind this renaming and know intimately that there is nothing *literally* "micro" about these harmful moments. In fact, we do not include the words "brief" or "small" in our definition as Pierce

Figure 1. A Pedagogical Process to Disrupt Racial Microaggressions



intended to imply that microaggressions are insignificant or fleeting. On the contrary, Pierce (1974) said, “These problems are **micro only in name**, since their very number requires a total effort that is incalculable” (p. 250). Rather than trivialize these interactions, the term “microaggression” positions this form of everyday racism at the most interpersonal and direct level of societal interaction within a larger system of institutional racism and ideologies of white supremacy.⁵ Thus, Pierce meant for the “micro” to allude to the mundane and incessant character of the aggression, not its severity.

According to Pérez Huber and Solórzano (2015b), the theoretical framework of microaggressions has evolved over the past 20 years.⁶ However, a significant amount of subsequent scholarship on microaggressions has tended towards discipline specificity; at times, forgetting the origins of the

theory and missing opportunities to offer more robust, critical analyses of white supremacy. For example, Sue’s (2010) popular work expanded our national conversation and understanding of the intersections of other forms of oppression (i.e. sexism, heterosexism, classism) with racial microaggression. His taxonomy, consisting of microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations, is referenced more frequently and differs in important ways from Pierce’s indicting microterror, microtorture, and microdisaster categorizations.⁷ Unfortunately, critics often misappropriate the less forceful and more individualistic orientation of Sue’s Counseling-based taxonomy to downplay the institutionalized white supremacist implications and detrimental health outcomes associated with everyday racism.

According to Google Scholar, Pierce’s total body of work on the subject, inclusive of his numerous

articles and chapters spanning over 40 years, has been cited less than 900 times. Comparatively, Sue et al.’s (2007) first article on microaggressions has been cited 1,414 times alone. Thus, although microaggressions have gained colloquial and empirical expansion over the past decade, broad knowledge (and acknowledgement) of Pierce’s invaluable role and relevant perspectives in the development of the theory remains elusive. This is unfortunate, given that Pierce’s original theorizing effectively addresses much of the current controversy regarding microaggressions.

CONCLUSION

Pierce (1974) argued, “The black must be taught to recognize...microaggressions and construct his [her, or their] future by taking appropriate action at each instance of recognition,” (p.520). We see the future of racial microaggressions research as a pedagogical strategy to recognize everyday racism, reflect on the ways racial microaggressions can be disrupted, and to take action against them. Figure 1 illustrates a pedagogical process to disrupt racial microaggressions. Through recognition, critical reflection, and action, racial microaggressions become more than a theoretical tool to understand the negative and often painful experiences of everyday racism for People of

Color. In an effort to more effectively recognize the impact of microaggressions, Watson (in progress) articulates interdisciplinary research utilizing telomere degeneration; a potential biometric of stress-related, accelerated aging. This research can help us more reliably track how the accumulation of encounters with everyday racism gets “under the skin” and contributes to the heightened morbidity and shortened life expectancy of African-Americans and other targeted groups.

We also see microaggressions as a tool to engage action that fosters a sense of empowerment and hope. We see this hope in the future directions of racial microaggressions research with youth (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015c). For example, a current series of studies examines the racialized storylines and visuals about Latinas/os that emerge in children’s picture books, and the exploration of racial micro-affirmations—everyday verbal and non-verbal interactions, visuals, or representations that affirm, acknowledge, and value People of Color (Pérez Huber & Verjan, Solórzano, in-progress). We are hopeful these and additional critical race projects on racial microaggressions will provide powerful, empirical counternarratives to the dismissals of the impact of racism

in the lives of People of Color. We also encourage Critical Race scholars to seek evidence-based⁸ pathways for researchers, educators, and practitioners to hone and sharpen the appropriate recognition, reflection, and response capacities championed by Pierce over 40 years ago.

ENDNOTES

¹ “People of Color” is intentionally capitalized to reject the standard grammatical norm. Capitalization is used as a means to empower this group and represents a grammatical move toward social and racial justice. This rule also applies to the terms “Students of Color” and “Communities of Color.”

² For example, students at Harvard University began a multi-media project to call attention to racial microaggressions on their campus that included public performances and the #itooamharvard social media campaign. See www.itooamharvard.tumblr.com.

³ According to Pierce (1995) microaggressions are analogous to the types of stress experienced by survivors of torture, terrorism, and disaster. Pierce discursively frames **microterrors** as threats of violence that inspire fear amongst People of Color. A **microtorture** occurs when perpetrators inflict mental or physical suffering in order to wear down their victims and induce conformity to white supremacist expectations. Pierce defines a **microdisaster** as , “...a sudden departure from the expected that is of sufficient magnitude to require relief and assistance; it is associated with physical and/or mental trauma and/or environmental loss”(p. 283).

⁴ Lukianoff and Haidt (2015, September) claim that acknowledging racial microaggressions in higher education creates a culture of “vindictive protectiveness,” where students are discouraged from engaging in discussions that may be “uncomfortable” and that

may impede critical thought. Moreover, they claim that this culture poses a “danger” to the quality of U.S. colleges and universities—a highly inaccurate interpretation.

⁵ See Pérez Huber and Solórzano’s (2015) “model of racial microaggressions” that visually articulates how everyday racism (racial microaggressions) is interconnected with systemic institutional racism, and reinforced by ideologies of white supremacy.

⁶ See brief by Pérez Huber and Solórzano (2015b) for further details about microaggressions research within Law, Education, Psychology, and Social Work.

⁷ Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, and Esquilin (2007) define a **microassault** as a, “...explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions...A **microinsult** is characterized by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity... **Microinvalidations** are characterized by communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color” (p. 274).

⁸ “Evidence-based” is a term and concept originating in the field of medicine. At its core, it represents the integration of patient (participant) values, clinical (practitioner) expertise, and research evidence (scholarship), into the decision-making process for patient care. When applied to education, or more specifically, CRT research on racial microaggressions, evidence-based pathways calls for a rigorous and holistic approach to pushing back against the impact of racial microaggressions; inclusive of participant values and voice, practitioner experience and expertise, and robust research. This defies many of the conceptual foundations of positivism as a movement and approach to thought. Additionally, other critical scholars in education, social work, and public health cite a need for evidence-based practice in their work.

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This Brief Series was made possible in part through funding from the offices of the Dean of the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies (GSE&IS). For more information please visit us at www.ccrs.ucla.gseis.edu