



LATINO POLICY & ISSUES BRIEF

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RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS WHAT THEY ARE, WHAT THEY ARE NOT, AND WHY THEY MATTER

Lindsay Pérez Huber and Daniel G. Solórzano

Research has shown that racial microaggressions are significant obstacles in the educational, professional, and life trajectories of Latinas/os and other people of color in the United States (Pérez Huber and Solórzano 2015; Pierce 1970; Solórzano 1998; Sue 2010), yet these experiences are often dismissed.

Recently, microaggressions have been characterized as a form of “hypersensitivity” (Gitlin 2015) that threatens “academic freedom” and the sharing of political views (Volokh 2015). In June 2015, the *Los Angeles Times* editorialized on these viewpoints in “What’s a Microaggression?” when it claimed that training University of California faculty about racial microaggressions “discourages faculty members from expressing legitimate political opinions.” To respond to this criticism, we explain what microaggressions are, what they are not, and why they matter.

WHAT RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS ARE

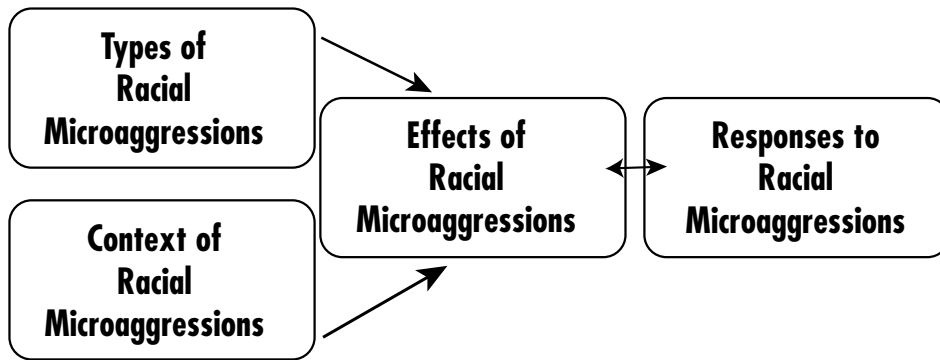
The concept of racial microaggressions is grounded in four decades of research. Chester Pierce coined the term *microaggressions* in 1970, and the concept has since been theorized and studied in the fields of law (Davis 1989), education (Solórzano 1998), psychology (Sue 2010), and social work (Ross-Sheriff 2012).

Racial microaggressions are everyday manifestations of racism that people of color encounter in their public and private lives. Specifically, they are a form of systemic racism in which verbal or nonverbal assaults are directed toward a person of color, often automatically or unconsciously. They are often based on not only a person of color’s race/ethnicity but also how they intersect with other real or perceived differences of gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, accent, or surname. The impact of racial microaggressions is cumulative, taking a psychological and physiological toll on those who are targeted.

A model for understanding racial microaggressions is illustrated in figure 1. The identification of a racial microaggression is based on four factors:

- **Type:** How one is targeted by a racial microaggression. Verbal microaggressions are frequently casual comments (regarding appearance, language, or country of origin). Nonverbal microaggressions can be kinesic (body language) or visual (images in textbooks, film, advertising).
- **Context:** Where the racial microaggression occurs (classrooms, faculty meetings, stores, on the street).
- **Effect:** The physiological and psychological consequences of racial microaggressions (self-doubt, anger, stress, racial battle fatigue, poor academic performance, poor health).
- **Response:** How one responds to racial microaggressions (denial, self-policing, proving aggressors wrong, resistance, establishing counterspaces, creating art). The response can influence the effects of racial microaggressions.

Figure 1. A Model for Data Collection and Analysis of Racial Microaggressions



Underlying every racial microaggression is institutional racism, the formal and informal structural mechanisms—policies and processes—that systematically subordinate, marginalize, and exclude people of color (Pérez Huber and Solórzano, 2015). Figure 2 offers a model for understanding how institutional racism perpetuates racial microaggressions and how a person of color experiences them. Typically, there is a perpetrator, the person engaging the microaggressive act, and a primary target, the person to whom the racial microaggression is directed toward. There can also be secondary targets,

others who are indirectly impacted by the microaggression. Targeted people of color can respond to the racial microaggression.

WHAT RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS ARE NOT

Racial microaggressions are everyday expressions of institutional racism (see fig. 2). Other theories have been offered to explain the unconscious forms of discriminatory behavior that constitute racial microaggressions. For example, one framework proposes that “implicit bias” explains the “unconscious mental processes” that influence the discriminatory biases that a perpetrator

unknowingly acts out (Greenwald and Krieger 2006). Implicit bias seeks to understand the intent of the perpetrator, which is no doubt significant. However, our theory of racial microaggressions is not as concerned with the *intent* of the perpetrator as with the *impact* that the microaggressive assault has on the targeted person of color (see fig. 2). Racial microaggressions can be best explained as the *enactment* of implicit biases on people of color.

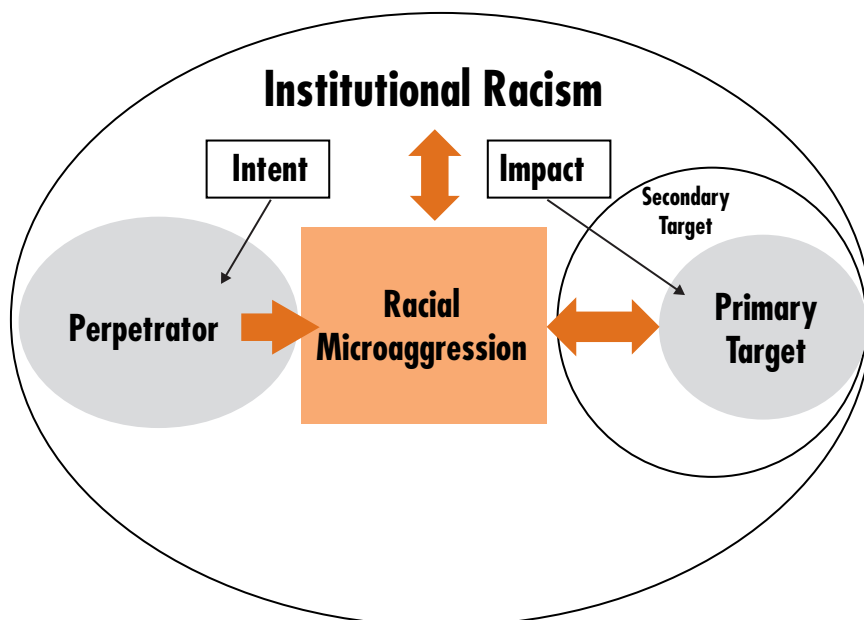
WHY RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS MATTER

Racial microaggressions matter because they provide a framework for people of color to “name” the pain caused by everyday racism, so that it cannot be dismissed (Freire 1970). Having a framework to name this everyday racism affords the opportunity to open a dialogue about how racism is manifested in today’s society.

Racial microaggressions also matter because they are symptoms of institutional racism—the larger structural problems that have historically marginalized and excluded people of color. Sadly, racism in the United States is still a fact of everyday life, just as it was in decades past. Media has drawn attention to senseless police shootings of African Americans and Latinas/os across the country. Drawing attention to any injustice is critical, but such high-profile events can mask the occurrence of the more subtle and frequent forms of racism that are identified as microaggressions. The “micro” in *microaggressions* does not mean “less than.” The “micro” in *microaggressions* means “in the everyday.”

Finally, racial microaggressions matter because they have debilitating and sometimes deadly consequences when experienced over a lifetime. Pierce explains that most racial microaggressions “are not gross and crippling. They are subtle and stunning. The enormity of the complications they

Figure 2. How a Person of Color Experiences Racial Microaggressions



cause can be appreciated only when one considers that these subtle blows are delivered incessantly” (1970, 265–66). High blood pressure, depression, anxiety, cardiovascular disease, and even increased death rates for people of color have been attributed to such race-related stressors (Franklin et al. 2014; Satcher et al. 2005).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The process of racial microaggressions, as illustrated in figures 1 and 2, must be disrupted. Refusing to acknowledge racial microaggressions means dismissing the everyday racism experienced by people of color. Pierce offers a strategy that focuses on recognition and action. He states that African Americans (and other people of color) “must be taught to recognize . . . microaggressions and construct his [and her] future by taking appropriate action at each instance of recognition” (1974, 520). Recognition provides a language for people of color to name the pain caused by racial microaggressions so that it cannot be dismissed as hypersensitivity.

We provide the following recommendations for disrupting racial microaggressions. As researchers in higher education, we developed these recommendations for colleges and universities, but they can be adapted to any institution.

1. A process of recognition by both perpetrators and targets is required to understand how and why microaggressions occur. Without it, effective action to disrupt microaggressions is impossible.

Figures 1 and 2 can be used to facilitate this recognition process.

2. Higher education institutions must take appropriate action by developing and implementing policies and practices that challenge racial microaggressions each time they are recognized. Remaining silent about racial microaggressions stops discussions about racism and helps to reproduce inequity and injustice.

Without careful documentation and analysis, racial microaggressions can easily be ignored, downplayed, or dismissed.

Therefore, ongoing recognition, reflection, and action are necessary to disrupt them.

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