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MICROAGGRESSIONS, RACIAL

Those who are racially marginalized often experience various forms of racial microaggressions.

Racial microaggressions are one form of systemic everyday racism used to keep those at the racial margins in their place. Racial microaggressions are (a) subtle verbal and nonverbal assaults directed toward people of color, often carried out automatically or unconsciously; (b) layered assaults, based on a person of color's race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname; and (c) cumulative assaults that take a psychological and physiological toll on people of color. The concept of racial microaggressions allows educational researchers to understand how racism is embedded within educational policies, practices, and pedagogies that in turn mediate educational access, opportunity, and equity for students of color. Microaggressions explain the subtle yet harmful ways in which racism manifests as a systemic and endemic condition within U.S. educational institutions. This entry first presents a brief overview of racial microaggressions scholarship in education. Next, it provides a model for understanding how racial microaggressions occur in education. Finally, it uses this model to describe examples of racial microaggressions in education.

Overview of Racial Microaggressions

More than 40 years ago, Chester Pierce first described *racial microaggressions* as the subtle, daily, and cumulative forms of racism that negatively impact the mental and physical health of African Americans over time. Today, researchers in various fields acknowledge the importance of examining the role of racial microaggressions in the lives of people of color. For example, legal scholar Peggy Davis used this concept to describe how racial biases have become embedded within the U.S. justice system, which disadvantages African Americans. Derald Wing Sue and colleagues examined various types of racial microaggressions experienced by African Americans and Asian Americans, based on perceptions of racial inferiority held by Whites.

In the field of education, Daniel Solorzano first explored how Chicana and Chicano scholars experienced racial microaggressions in their undergraduate and graduate training. He found these scholars were targeted by microaggressions through experiences with exclusion, lower

academic expectations, and racist and sexist attitudes by Whites. In later work, Solorzano and colleagues confirmed similar findings in the experiences of African American undergraduates. These researchers found that racial microaggressions were a reflection of a negative campus racial climate, where students of color frequently felt marginalized and unwelcome on campus. Tara Yosso and colleagues have supported such findings in the undergraduate experiences of Latina/o students, who were targeted by racial microaggressions in ways similar to African Americans. Research on racial microaggressions in education highlights the importance of examining educational institutions as key environments where microaggressions occur and can impact the educational and perhaps life trajectories of students of color.

A Model of Racial Microaggressions in Education

Based on the literature developed within the field of education, Figure 1 illustrates a model for data collection and analysis of racial microaggressions. There are four main components of this model:

1. *Types of Racial Microaggressions*: How an individual is targeted by microaggressions (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, class, language, sexuality, immigration status, phenotype, accent or surname)
2. *Context of Racial Microaggressions*: Where the microaggression occurs (e.g., schools, classrooms, laboratories)
3. *Effects of Racial Microaggressions*: The physical, emotional, and psychological consequences of microaggressions (e.g., self-doubt, anger, stress, racial battle fatigue, poor academic performance, poor health outcomes)
4. *Responses to Racial Microaggressions*: How the individual responds to interpersonal and institutional racial microaggressions (e.g., denial, self-policing, proving them wrong, resistance, counterspaces)

People of color experience various types of microaggressions in a range of contexts. The types

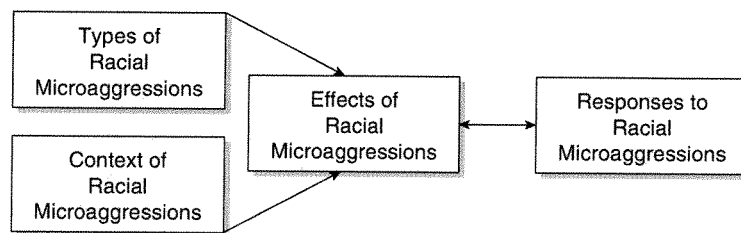


Figure 1 A Model for Data Collection and Analysis of Racial Microaggressions

Source: Daniel G. Solorzano and Lindsay Perez Huber.

and contexts of microaggressions lead to or result in negative effects for those targeted by them. The double arrow between the “effects” and “responses” in Figure 1 illustrates how an individual’s response can also influence how she or he experiences the effects of microaggressions.

Examples of Racial Microaggressions in Education

Educational researchers have provided examples of types of racial microaggressions people of color experience in education. For example, Solorzano has explained that visual microaggressions are visual manifestations of racism that are subtle, layered, and cumulative and that serve to subordinate people of color. Visual microaggressions occur in various forms of media such as films, television programs, music, art, textbooks, and advertisements. Also, Lindsay Pérez Huber and her colleagues have shown how racist nativist microaggressions are a type of microaggression that targets both immigrant and nonimmigrant Latina/o students based on race, class, gender, immigration status, and language. Moreover, microaggressions in education can occur within the context of both K–12 and higher education institutions. William Smith and colleagues have identified frustration, anger, disappointment, and anxiety as some of the effects of racial microaggressions experienced by African American college students. They explain that these symptoms are indicators of *racial battle fatigue*—the physiological and psychological consequences of microaggressions experienced by people of color over time. Finally, researchers have found that

students of color respond to racial microaggressions by creating and engaging in social and academic counterspaces, places where they find healing, empowerment, and a sense of community. New data sources for examining these and other forms of racial microaggressions are the rich autobiographical accounts of the lives of people of color.

Discussion

What is most dangerous about racial microaggressions is that they are often “invisible” and go unacknowledged, making it difficult to confront and respond to them. This often invisible form of racism is a symptom of a larger structural disease—White supremacy. Ideologies of White supremacy are at the root of microaggressions as acts that reinforce perceptions of racial inferiority. The identification of microaggressions was an important part of the NAACP’s argument before the U.S. Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Attorney Robert Carter, chief legal architect of the NAACP’s case, argued that segregation was psychologically damaging to Black students. In 1988 he lamented that the White supremacist foundation of those microaggressions had not been identified:

[T]he NAACP lawyers erred. The lawyers did not understand then how effective white power could be in preventing full implementation of the law; nor did it realize at the time that the basic barrier to full equality for blacks was not racial segregation, a symptom, but white supremacy, the disease.

Therefore, Solorzano and Perez Huber argue that an understanding of the links between race, racism, and White supremacy is needed before scholars can proceed to examine the ways in which racial microaggressions function to marginalize people of color in the United States. Race, as a socially constructed category, is used to differentiate racial groups based on a perceived superiority or dominance of one race over another (i.e., racism). White supremacy is the belief in the inherent superiority of one race (Whites) over others in order to justify unequal and oppressive social arrangements. Historically, Whites in the United States have always possessed the institutional power to enact that superiority. Therefore, consistent with Carter's argument, racial microaggressions are the symptoms and White supremacy is the disease.

Research in education has identified the academic constraints as well as the physiological and psychological consequences caused by microaggressions over time. However, research has also shown that people of color respond to racial microaggressions in powerful ways that counter negative perceptions and stereotypes based on race, gender, class, language, sexuality, immigration status, phenotype, accent, and surname. The concept and model of racial microaggressions seeks to give people of color who experience this form of racism a "name for their pain." In doing so, researchers and educators are given a conceptual tool to expose, challenge, and transform educational spaces to be more inclusive of a diversity that values the presence and knowledge of all students.

Daniel G. Solorzano and Lindsay Perez Huber

See also Antiracist Teaching; Antiracist Training for Educators; Race, Teaching About; Race and Education; Racialization, Process of; Racism in Schools; *Two-Faced Racism: Whites in the Backstage and Frontstage*

Further Readings

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