



Racial Microaggressions: Critical Questions, State of the Science, and New Directions

Monnica T. Williams 

School of Psychology, University of Ottawa

Abstract

Racial microaggressions are an insidious form of racism with devastating mental-health outcomes, but the concept has not been embraced by all scholars. This article provides an overview of new scholarship on racial microaggressions from an array of diverse scholars in psychology, education, and philosophy, with a focus on new ways to define, conceptualize, and categorize racial microaggressions. Racism, along with its many forms and manifestations, is defined and clarified, drawing attention to the linkages between racial microaggressions and systemic racism. Importantly, the developmental entry points leading to the inception of racial bias in children are discussed. Theoretical issues are explored, including the measurement of intersectional microaggressions and the power dynamics underpinning arguments designed to discredit the nature of racial microaggressions. Also described are the very real harms caused by racial microaggressions, with new frameworks for measurement and intervention. These articles reorient the field to this pertinent and pervasive problem and pave the way for action-based responses and interventions. The next step in the research must be to develop interventions to remedy the harms caused by microaggressions on victims. Further, psychology must make a fervent effort to root out racism that prevents scholarship on these topics from advancing.

Keywords

microaggressions, racism, taxonomy, research, interventions

Over the past year, increasing attention has been paid to issues of social justice, in particular as it relates to the experience of racism in the United States and globally. The year 2020 was punctuated not only by a global pandemic but also by the disturbing murder of George Floyd at the hands of the Minnesota Police Department, and the whole world watched in horror (Weine et al., 2020). Most racism is not as blatant and lethal as what happened to George Floyd. Overt and blatant expressions of prejudice have declined over the past several decades (Forman & Lewis, 2015), only to have resurged over the past few years in concert with the Trump presidency (Baboolal, 2020). Nonetheless, increasing attention is being paid to how subtle forms of prejudice are enacted in everyday situations. Racial microaggressions have been described as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). The term was originally coined by Chester Pierce as a way to describe the more subtle types of racial maltreatment commonly experienced by African Americans (Pierce, 1970), but many racial and

ethnic groups are subject to microaggressions as well, including those of Asian, Hispanic, and Indigenous ancestry, to name a few. Additional types of microaggressions have also been documented, such as LGBTQ+, gender, and religious microaggressions. Microaggressions have been identified internationally, in the United States, as well as Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, Malaysia, and Israel (e.g., Anderson & Finch, 2017; Choi et al., 2020; Doharty, 2019; Gatwiri, 2021; Houshmand et al., 2019; Nasir et al., 2021; Shoshana, 2016).

Although microaggressions may be considered harmless by dominant individuals, they are a form of everyday discrimination, as explicated in prior discussions in this journal (Williams, 2020a). Essed (2002) uses the term “everyday racism” to describe the concept of racial microaggressions, noting that “Everyday racism is racism, but not all racism is everyday racism. From everyday

Corresponding Author:

Monnica T. Williams, School of Psychology, University of Ottawa
Email: monnica.williams@uottawa.ca

racism there is no relief" (p. 202). Consequently, microaggressions and everyday discrimination have been linked to numerous mental-health problems as well as physical health problems and poor quality of life (Williams, 2020b). However, because of complex social racialization processes, dominant-group members are typically unaware of the presence of microaggressions occurring all around them or that they may even commit themselves.

For example, Esmeralda, a 30-something Mexican American woman, goes to her local grocery store to get some cold cuts. She is the only one standing at the deli counter until a White woman steps in front her, seemingly without noticing that she was even there. The service worker then comes out, smiles at the White woman, and takes her order without even asking who was there first. Esmeralda then politely points out that she was there first. The service worker says, "Don't worry, you're up next," but finishes serving the White woman before helping Esmeralda. Esmeralda's experience at the deli counter is a common occurrence for her, so she decides this time she will let someone know. When she shares the incident with the store manager, Esmeralda is asked if perhaps she is being "too sensitive"; after all, it is hard to manage the deli when the store is crowded, and this mistake was surely unintended. When Esmeralda gets to her car, she cannot decide if she wants to scream or cry. This one event included at least five microaggressions—being unseen, being ignored, being treated like a second-class citizen, victim blaming, and invalidation (Sue et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2021). None of the offenders in this example would admit to doing anything racist, nor would they implicate other White people. The fact that microaggressions are so hard to prove because of in-group collusion and their deniability makes it even more frustrating (Williams, 2020a).

Psychology, as a discipline, can benefit from a better understanding of microaggressions to improve research, training, and clinical practice. Although the harms of microaggressions are well-documented, there are still many unanswered questions and areas in need of new research. Psychology is starting to take note, as evidenced by more scholarship and academic journals with special issues and sections devoted to these topics (e.g., Torres-Harding & Skinta, in press).

It is my great pleasure that *Perspectives on Psychological Science* can take a leading role in advancing the science in this area. With contributions from a distinguished array of diverse scholars, this special issue is intended to promote scientific dialogue surrounding this critical topic. Important highlights are described in the sections that follow, including foundational issues,

theoretical points, classification issues, consequences and harms.

Foundational Issues

With an increased impetus to engage in antiracist clinical research, there is a need for shared nomenclature on racism and related constructs. Many people, even researchers and academics, have an incomplete understanding of the meaning of racism. In the first article in this special issue, we define racism as a system of beliefs, practices, and policies that operate to advantage those in the dominant racial group (Haeny et al., 2021; this issue). Individual factors that contribute to racism include racial prejudices and racial discrimination. Racism manifests in multiple forms (e.g., cultural, environmental, scientific) and is both explicit and implicit. Race itself is racist, given that it is a concept developed to divide and privilege people on the basis of physical appearance and presumed ancestry. Yet despite being a made-up concept, it has some very real and damaging outcomes. Given the negative impact of racism on the well-being of racialized people, understanding it is essential to inform approaches for eliminating the resulting disparities in mental health. Without an understanding of racism, we are unable to understand racial microaggressions—one key manifestation of racism and the subject of this special issue.

Given the widespread nature of racism, it is important to consider the processes that cause people to develop racial biases in the first place. This starts early in life, but how early do children become aware of race? And when do their own views of themselves and others become infused with this bias? Waxman (2021; this issue) provides an overview of the existing experimental evidence documenting developmental entry points of racial bias in infants and young children, describing how this process unfolds. If there is to be any hope of interrupting racial bias at its inception, then it is critical to build strong cross-disciplinary bridges that span the psychological and related social sciences to shed light on racial issues facing our society's children and their families.

Racism is by definition systemic. Skinner-Dorkenoo and colleagues (2021; this issue) examine how racial microaggressions themselves contribute to the perpetuation and reinforcement of systemic racism, beyond simply the interpersonal context. They examine this by using the nine types of microaggressions identified by Sue et al. (2007) and find considerable evidence that each form of microaggression contributes to the maintenance of systems of racial oppression. They conclude with a discussion of the cultural systems

approach—which, if used, might begin to remediate these persistent issues—and they suggest future work that directly addresses the link between microaggressions and systemic racism.

Theoretical Issues

There has been some scientific controversy about the very nature of racial microaggressions. Syed (2021; this issue) draws attention to core assumptions about the nature of society that underlies debates on this issue. For proponents of microaggressions research, the starting assumption is one of a racist society. That is, microaggressions have their source and power within an inequitable, racially stratified society. In contrast, Syed argues cogently that critics of microaggressions begin with the assumption of an equitable society or, at least, would not endorse the assumption of a racist society. These two different starting points lead to dramatically different conclusions about the concept of microaggressions, and what (if anything) should be done about them. So long as these assumptions are not explicitly recognized, Syed argues that debates on methods, findings, and interventions cannot be reconciled.

Hodson (2021; this issue) also addresses theoretical matters, documenting three trends in psychology coinciding with the academic pushback against microaggressions: (a) concept-creep concerns, especially around notions of harm; (b) expansion of right-leaning values in moral judgments (moral foundations theory); and (c) emphasis on “prejudice symmetry,” with the political left deemed equivalently biased against right-leaning targets as the right is against left-leaning targets. Hodson argues that psychology has paid little attention to power dynamics in this debate and has strayed from its mission to understand and combat prejudice against marginalized groups, rendering the field distracted and poorly equipped to tackle the complexities of microaggression concepts. Drawing on the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Hodson also discusses the need to better capture Black experiences and “tell it like it is,” or psychology risks becoming an irrelevant discipline.

Beyond the issue of microaggressions on the basis of race, additional complexity arises with the consideration of compounding stigmatized identities. Since Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in 1989, researchers of bias have struggled with how to capture the intricacies of multiple marginalized identities and the resulting microaggressions experienced by those with such identities. Although scholarship has increasingly explored experiences such as racialized sexual harassment or sexual racism, there is no strong consensus on how this might be measured systematically in ways that allow us to better understand those with

additional marginalized identities. With an emphasis on the experiences of queer and trans people of color, Singh and colleagues (2021; this issue) explore intersectional identities through real-world experiences, review existing measures, and propose a framework for the development of a better approach to measuring intersectional microaggressions.

Taxonomy and Classification Issues

Despite significant advances in the literature on racial microaggressions, key challenges remain regarding definitions and taxonomies. Mekawi and Todd (2021; this issue) present some notable definitional challenges, discuss implications for the creation of taxonomies, and offer directions for how a revised definition and corresponding taxonomies can be used to further racial microaggressions research. The authors note that racial microaggressions are observable events that occur independently of intention or impact on targets (e.g., Williams, 2020a). Moreover, they assert that racial microaggressions are most validly defined by people of color and can have different meanings depending on situational context. Further, they propose refinement and expansion of Sue and colleagues’ (2007) racial microaggression taxonomies to help further advance racial microaggressions research.

In line with the need to refine microaggression taxonomies and expand categories, Williams and colleagues (2021; this issue) tackle this very topic. They note that Sue and colleagues’ (2007) original taxonomy was only theoretical and not empirically based, given that the requisite research had not yet been done when their seminal article was published in the *American Psychologist*. A comprehensive review of published articles focused on qualitative and quantitative findings of microaggressions taxonomies was conducted ($N = 32$). Sixteen categories of racial microaggressions were identified, largely consistent with the original taxonomy of Sue and colleagues but expanded in several notable ways—specifically, some existing categories were refined and new categories were proposed. The goal was to create a unified language of microaggressions, accounting for all observed categories, to allow for improved understanding and measurement of this important construct.

Alternatively, philosophers Freeman and Stewart (2021; this issue) critique Sue and colleagues’ entire framework—what they call the act-based account of microaggressions—by calling out its theoretical and practical shortcomings (e.g., Sue et al., 2007; Sue & Spanierman, 2020). They rightly point out that current taxonomies focus on the actions of offenders rather than the impact on targets. They introduce an alternative and

compelling new taxonomy for racial microaggressions, called the harm-based account. The three categories they propose include epistemic microaggressions (harm to the target in their capacity as a knower); emotional microaggressions (those resulting in emotional harm); and marginalization-based self-identity microaggressions (resulting in a variety of existential and identity-based harms). They provide a disturbing example of how these harms may play out and compound in the lives of real people.

Johnson and colleagues (2021; this issue) introduce the concept of secondary microaggressions, or the ways in which members of dominant groups negate the realities of people of marginalized groups. They explicate three terms: *gaslighting*, *'splaining*, and *victim blaming*. Gaslighting describes the act of manipulating others to doubt themselves or question their own sanity. Specifically, people confronted for committing microaggressions often deny their biases and are able to convince the targets of microaggressions to question their own perceptions. The authors describe the term 'splaining (humorously derived from terms such as "mansplaining" or "Whitesplaining"), an act in which a person of a dominant group speaks for or provides rationale to people of marginalized groups about topics related to their oppression. Victim blaming refers to assigning fault to those who are harmed and is used to discredit people of marginalized groups who speak out against microaggressions (or any injustices). Finally, they discuss abandonment and neglect, or a bystander's failure to address or acknowledge witnessed microaggressions—an issue only now receiving empirical study (e.g., Baker, 2017; Williams et al., in press). The authors tie these concepts to resultant psychological harm on interpersonal and systemic levels.

Consequences and Harm

Bridging taxonomies and the harmful consequences of microaggressions, Spanierman and colleagues (2021; this issue) review the theoretical and empirical literature on racial microaggressions from the past 13 years ($N = 138$ empirical articles) to refine racial microaggressions theory and update the definition to address mischaracterizations in the literature. Rather than defining new categories, they distill microaggressions down to four major categories: pathologizing differences, denigrating and pigeonholing, excluding or rendering invisible, and perpetuating color-blind racial attitudes. In line with Freeman and Stewart's (2021, this issue) critique, they emphasize the targets' perspectives. They, then, synthesize qualitative and quantitative research documenting the harmful physical and mental health sequelae of racial microaggressions. Finally, the authors

describe the empirical findings on collective resistance and self-protective strategies to mitigate the harm caused by racial microaggressions.

Drawing on stress across the life span, biopsychosocial models of racism, and daily process research, Ong (2021; this issue) proposes a conceptual framework for investigating daily stress processes, cumulative stressor exposures, and social structural factors (e.g., institutions, social roles, statuses) that may affect the experience of racial microaggressions in everyday life. Ong describes microaggressions as dynamic in character, considerably varied across individuals, and shaped by the interplay of stressor exposures across multiple timescales and levels of analysis. The article invites researchers to employ methods that incorporate the dynamic features of daily life into accounts of the mental health of people of color, giving sufficient attention to process, person, and context.

Racial, ethnic, and language minorities face substantial challenges and are placed at considerable risk by structural inequities evidenced in society, which includes kindergarten-through-12 schools. Teachers must develop an awareness of microaggressions. This includes the capacity to be culturally sensitive, provide culturally responsive pedagogy, and regularly self-assess their own biases to facilitate positive academic outcomes for students. Racism and racial microaggressions are observed daily in schools and classrooms. With a focus on educators, Steketee and colleagues (2021; this issue) provide an overview of racial microaggressions in the school context and their damaging effects on students. Provided are poignant real-life examples of microaggressions against students, along with ideas for positive interventions to support the continued development of cultural humility, culturally responsive pedagogy, and an equity-responsive climate.

Future Directions

The authors featured in this special issue have offered important and impressive scholarship that will make a lasting impact on the academic landscape. We no longer need to waste time, energy, or resources debating whether microaggressions are real or whether they cause harm. These works allow us to move ahead to tackle the important issues at hand. The authors here have provided some wonderful scholarship on how we can define racial microaggressions, understand them, organize them, and even measure them in their more complex forms.

One key question that we cannot yet answer definitively is what to do about them. There are still few techniques for preventing microaggressions or stopping microaggressions in progress. A few interventions have

empirical support (e.g., Kanter et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2020), but most are still theoretical (e.g., Sue et al., 2019). And how do we best intervene to help those harmed by the incessant barrage of these covert assaults? Several authors in this issue offer insight into mitigating harm (e.g., Spanierman et al., 2021; Steketee et al., 2021). Although we value these expert perspectives, approaches remain largely untested. There are, to date, no empirically tested interventions for repairing the harm caused by microaggressions. These questions remain to be answered in the next leg of our journey.

Racism poses a challenge to even the advancement of research on the topic. As elucidated by the authors of this special issue, racism is systemic and affects the field of psychology as a whole (e.g., Buchanan et al., in press; Haeny et al., 2021; Skinner-Dorkenoo et al., 2021). Thus, solutions to racism must also be systemic in nature. Although special issues on race and culture are an important start, they are not enough. Not only do academics of color encounter systemic racism trying to publish their scholarly works, but also manuscripts focused on marginalized populations or from under-resourced nations are subject to bias from editors and reviewers with downstream effects on the selection of articles published in top journals (Harris et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2020). Journals must do more to integrate these topics into regular issues and publish more work by diverse scholars for the field to begin to decolonize and truly become equitable.

Transparency

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ORCID iD

Monnica T. Williams  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0095-3277>

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