

## Racial microaggressions as a tool for critical race research

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This conceptual article utilizes critical race theory (CRT) to explain how everyday forms of racism – racial microaggressions – emerge in the everyday experiences of People of Color. We provide a framework for understanding and analyzing racial microaggressions that demonstrates how everyday racist events are systemically mediated by institutionalized racism (i.e. structures and processes), and guided by ideologies of white supremacy that justify the superiority of a dominant group (whites) over non-dominant groups (People of Color). To demonstrate the conceptual utility of the framework, we utilize historical and contemporary examples of racial microaggressions, and offer varied ways to use the framework in critical race research. We argue racial microaggressions can be a powerful ‘tool’ for identifying, disrupting, and dismantling the racism that marginalizes, subordinates and excludes People of Color in and outside of education.

**Keywords:** racial microaggressions; critical race theory (CRT); everyday racism; institutionalized racism; macroaggression; white supremacy

Recently, the concept of racial microaggressions has received national attention across the US. In spring 2014, Students of Color at colleges and universities throughout the US engaged in social media campaigns to bring attention to these subtle, everyday forms of racism they encounter on their campuses (see St. Olaf microaggressions 2014; Vega 2014). In these campaigns, the students challenge claims of a ‘post-racial’ society where racism is no longer a significant barrier in the lives of Communities of Color (Hodge and Vega 2014). At Harvard University, African American students organized and performed a play called, ‘I, too, Am Harvard’ that included skits and monologues about their experiences with racial microaggressions as students (see ‘I too Am Harvard’ 2014; Vega 2014). Even Music Television Network (MTV) has taken an interest in the concept of microaggressions, using the term ‘racial bias’ to explain the everyday racist slights experienced by People of Color. In 2014, the network launched the ‘Look

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Different' campaign, with a website that offers viewers a chance to learn about their raced and gendered 'biases' ([www.lookdifferent.org](http://www.lookdifferent.org)).<sup>1</sup>

Despite this very recent national attention, the concept of microaggressions has been utilized in academic research since the late 1960's (Pierce 1969). Dr Chester Pierce, an African American psychiatrist, medical doctor, and scholar first introduced the term microaggressions in 1970. Pierce (1988) argued, '[a]ll blacks must have a firm theoretical grasp of racism in order to dilute its crippling effects' (33). In effect, Pierce has meticulously theorized the concept of racial microaggressions for over 40 years to understand how African Americans experience this form of everyday racism. Building on Pierce's conceptual work, scholarship has examined racial microaggressions in education settings from a critical race theory (CRT) perspective (Allen 2010; Cappiccie et al. 2012; Ek et al. 2010; Gildersleeve, Croom, and Vasquez 2011; Jay 2009; Katsarou 2009; Kohli and Solorzano 2012; Matias 2012; Masko 2005; Mosley 2010; Orozco 2012; Pérez Huber 2011; Rollock 2012; Rolón-Dow 2011; Smith, Yosso, and Solorzano 2006; Smith et al. 2007a, 2007b; Solorzano 1998; Solorzano and Villalpando 1998; Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000; Urrieta and Villenas 2014; Yosso et al. 2009). This article follows in that theoretical tradition. To that end, racial microaggressions are a form of systemic, everyday racism used to keep those at the racial margins in their place. They are: (1) verbal and non-verbal assaults directed toward People of Color, often carried out in subtle, automatic or unconscious forms; (2) layered assaults, based on race and its intersections with gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname; and (3) cumulative assaults that take a psychological, physiological, and academic toll on People of Color (Kohli and Solorzano 2012; Pérez Huber and Cueva 2012; Solorzano and Pérez Huber 2012; Pierce 1970, 1995).

We argue that the concept of racial microaggressions is a useful 'tool' for research on race, racism and the everyday experiences of People of Color. It allows us to identify the often subtle acts of racism that can emerge in schools, college campuses, classrooms and in everyday conversations and interactions. In this article, we offer a racial microaggressions framework that demonstrates how everyday racist events are systemically mediated by institutionalized racism (i.e. structures and processes), and guided by ideologies of white supremacy that justify the superiority of a dominant group (whites) over non-dominant groups (People of Color).

The first objective of this article is to provide this framework as a tool to illustrate the inextricable and complex relationship between the everyday microaggressions experienced by People of Color, with institutional racism (i.e. structures and processes), and ideologies of white supremacy that maintain racial subordination. The second objective is to provide examples of how the framework can be used to analyze historical and contemporary forms of racial microaggressions in the lives of People of Color. Through these examples, we illustrate how a racial microaggressions framework can

be a robust conceptual tool to understand how People of Color experience racial microaggressions and how those everyday assaults emerge from ideologies of white supremacy. Before undertaking these objectives, we briefly explain the conceptual development of racial microaggressions, originating from the research of Dr Chester Pierce. We then explain how we position our theorizing of a racial microaggressions framework from a CRT perspective, noting how this is different from other approaches used to examine microaggressions. Next, we provide a model that serves as the foundation for the analytic framework developed later in the article. Finally, we use the model to analyze one historical and one contemporary example of racial microaggressions, illustrating its conceptual utility across time.

### **Dr Chester Pierce and the conceptual development of racial microaggressions**

What is needed for example is a sweeping new theoretical concept. ... The poor black may need care based on other models such as the negotiation of 'offensive mechanisms.' (Pierce 1969, 308)

Pierce first described the subtle forms of racism experienced by African Americans as 'offensive mechanisms' in a 1969 chapter titled 'Is Bigotry the Basis of the Medical Problem of the Ghetto?' As a medical doctor and psychiatrist, he explored the means to support the psychiatric needs of African American communities. In this chapter, Pierce suggests that existing theories used to address these needs were inefficient and new frameworks be developed to consider the role of race and racism in the lives of African Americans. As a result, Pierce (1969) develops the concept, offensive mechanisms. He explained:

To be black in the United States today means to be socially minimized. For each day blacks are victims of white '*offensive mechanisms*' which are designed to reduce, dilute, atomize, and encase the hapless into *his* '*place*.' The incessant lesson the black must hear is that he is insignificant and irrelevant. (303)

In the 1970 chapter 'Offensive Mechanisms,' Pierce extends this concept and first introduces the term *microaggression* to explain these 'subtle and stunning' forms of racism. He states:

Most offensive actions are not gross and crippling. They are subtle and stunning. The enormity of the complications they cause can be appreciated only when one considers that these subtle blows are delivered incessantly. Even though any single negotiation of offense can in justice be considered of itself to be relatively innocuous, the cumulative effect to the victim and to the victimizer is of an unimaginable magnitude. Hence, the therapist is obliged to pose the idea that offensive mechanisms are usually a *micro-aggression*. (265–66, emphasis in original)

Here, we see Pierce begin to extend and transition from the term ‘offensive mechanisms’ he uses in earlier work, to the concept he names here as, ‘micro-aggressions.’ Although all his work was on African Americans, it is not until 1980 that Pierce explicitly uses the term ‘racial microaggression.’ In the chapter, ‘Social Trace Contaminants: Subtle Indicators of Racism in TV,’ Pierce (1980) tells us that:

The subtle, stunning, repetitive event that many whites initiate and control in their dealings with blacks can be termed a *racial microaggression*. Any single microaggression from an offender to a defender (or victimizer to victim) in itself is minor and inconsequential. However, the relentless omnipresence of these noxious stimuli is the fabric of black–white relations in America. (251, emphasis added)

Pierce does not use the term again in his writing until 2000 when he and his colleagues explicitly use race and microaggression in an encyclopedia entry on ‘Blacks, Stress in’ (Profit, Mino, and Pierce 2000). Pierce and his colleagues explain:

The chief energy demand on blacks is how to recognize, evaluate, anticipate, and dispose of *race-inspired microaggressions*. These are automatic, subtle, stunning, seemingly innocuous messages, often non-verbal, which devalue the blacks; e.g. a black man and a white man enter an elevator whereupon the single white female passenger clutches her handbag as she moves as close as possible to the white man. Microaggressions, the major and inescapable expression of racism in the United States, take a cumulative toll on black individuals. As such they enter into the formation of black group stress. What may be more important is that these cumulative, minor but incessant put-downs often remain as psychopollutants in the social environment. Their lingering intractability is a major contributor to the continuing traumatic stress suffered by blacks as individuals and as a group. (327–328, emphasis added)

We borrow from and extend this rich conceptual history of racial microaggressions provided by Chester Pierce to develop the framework for understanding and analyzing racial microaggressions. First however, we explain the theoretical perspective we use to advance this conceptual development.

### **Theorizing racial microaggressions from a CRT perspective**

We approach the concept of racial microaggressions from a CRT perspective. CRT is an explanatory framework that accounts for the role of race and racism in education and works toward identifying and challenging racism as a larger goal of identifying and challenging all forms of subordination.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, Solorzano (1998) outlines five tenants of CRT that guide the use of this framework. They include the: (1) centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; (2) challenge to dominant ideologies and deficit perspectives; (3) centrality of experiential knowledge; (4) interdisciplinary

analyses; and (5) explicit commitment to social justice. Approaching an examination of microaggressions from a CRT perspective means we engage an interdisciplinary analysis that centers the lived experiences of People of Color to understand how everyday racism, and other forms of oppression, intersect to mediate life experiences and outcomes. Moreover, we engage CRT as a strategic goal of recognizing, analyzing and dismantling racism and other forms of subordination encountered by Communities of Color.

It is not only important to explain our use of CRT, but also how this theoretical approach is different in the study of microaggressions. Currently, Derald Wing Sue et al's work on microaggressions is widely cited in the fields of psychology, education and beyond. In this work, Sue (2010) and his colleagues provide a 'taxonomy' of microaggressions that articulates how microaggressions are delivered (verbal, behavioral, environmental) and the various forms they take (microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation) (Constantine 2007; Constantine and Sue 2007; Sue 2010; Sue and Constantine 2007; Sue et al. 2007a, 2007b) that has proved very useful in microaggressions research. Sue (2010) argues that white supremacy serves as the foundation for the individual and institutional racism People of Color experience, and thus examines how the unconscious participation in microaggressions is harmful to whites.<sup>3</sup> Theorizing microaggressions from a CRT perspective does not focus the analyses on how whites experience racial microaggressions. Rather, a CRT analysis centers on the lived experiences of People of Color, those targeted by microaggressions. Moreover, we challenge dominant ideologies of meritocracy and colorblindness prevalent in education by acknowledging how white supremacy has historically and continues to mediate the everyday experiences of People of Color. Finally, our approach is interdisciplinary, building from Chester Pierce's work in the health sciences. Moreover, we do this to honor the Scholars of Color who had the courage and took the risks to engage this research, particularly at times when critical perspectives on race were unpopular and delegitimized (Griffith 1998).

### **Analyzing everyday racism: a racial microaggressions model**

Theorizing racial microaggressions from a CRT perspective challenges us to more clearly articulate the structural and systemic forms of racism that operate in everyday racist acts. To meet this challenge, we offer a racial microaggressions model that can help researchers analyze how everyday experiences with racism are more than an individual experience, but part of a larger systemic racism that includes institutional and ideological forms. Figure 1 illustrates this model.

A critical race analysis centers the lived experiences of People of Color. Thus, at the center of the model is the experience with the racial microaggression (in white). The second layer of the model (in black) is institutional

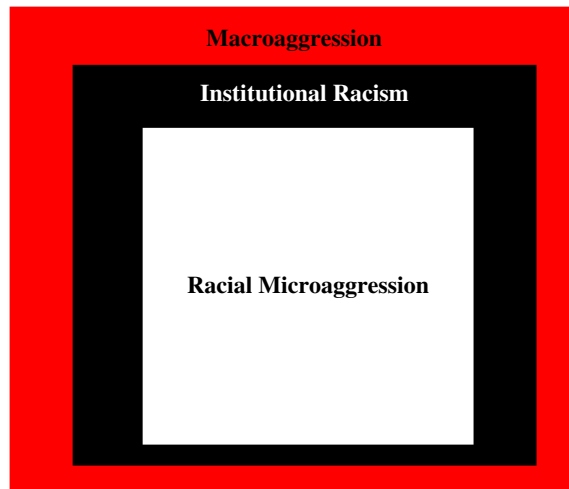


Figure 1. A racial microaggressions model.

racism, which provides the structural articulation of how racism operates institutionally to perpetuate everyday racism. For this reason, the layer of institutional racism in the model surrounds the racial microaggression. The final layer in the model, the macroaggression (in grey), encompasses both institutional racism and the racial microaggression. The macroaggression provides the ideological foundations for the reproduction and perpetuation of institutional and everyday racism – white supremacy. We explain further by providing the following definitions of these components in the model.

### ***Racial microaggression***

As mentioned earlier, racial microaggressions are a form of systemic, everyday racism used to keep those at the racial margins in their place. They are: (1) verbal and non-verbal assaults directed toward People of Color, often carried out in subtle, automatic or unconscious forms; (2) layered assaults, based on race and its intersections with gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname; and (3) cumulative assaults that take a psychological, physiological, and academic toll<sup>4</sup> on People of Color. Microaggressions allow us to ‘see’ those tangible ways racism emerges in everyday interactions. At the same time, they have a purpose. For instance, whether conscious or not, microaggressions perpetuate a larger system of racism. Microaggressions are the layered, cumulative and often subtle and unconscious forms of racism that target People of Color. They are the everyday reflections of larger racist structures and ideological beliefs that impact People of Color’s lives. Thus, the layers illustrated in Figure 1 represents the inextricability of microaggressions with institutional racism and macroaggressions.

### ***Institutional racism***

Institutional racism can be understood as *formal or informal structural mechanisms, such as policies and processes that systematically subordinate, marginalize, and exclude non-dominant groups and mediates their experiences with racial microaggressions*. Institutional racism is a key component to understanding the function and permanence of racism in the US.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, systemic racism is imbedded within social institutions that in turn, serve as structural mechanisms that perpetuate racism (Marable 2002). Without a structural understanding of the racism that manifests in the everyday lives of People of Color, it remains an elusive concept that becomes difficult to ‘see’ in any tangible way. However, when institutional racism is understood as a mechanism that strategically guides policies and processes in education, government, politics and the law, the depth and breadth of institutional racism’s significance in the everyday lives of *all* (whites and People of Color alike) emerges. The concept of institutional racism then, articulates the larger structural conditions that exist which allow racial microaggressions to occur.

Manning Marable (2002) uses the term ‘structural racism’ to explain the imbeddedness of racism within US social institutions. In this work, Marable (2002) states ‘[I]t is not the objective reality of difference between “races” that produces disparities and social inequality between groups; it is structural racism that reproduces “races”’ (28). Here, Marable highlights a critical function of institutional racism and its relationship to what we call macroaggressions. He explains that the ‘objective’ perceptions – the dominant set of ideologies or beliefs – about racial groups cannot alone produce actual inequalities in the lives of People of Color. It is the structural forms of racism that (re)produce the actual or perceived social arrangements that legitimate the inequitable positions of whites and non-whites in US society. This leads us to define the final layer illustrated in the model – macroaggression.

### ***Macroaggression***

The final layer in the model, the macroaggression, encompasses both institutional racism and racial microaggressions. We define a macroaggression as *the set of beliefs and/or ideologies that justify actual or potential social arrangements that legitimate the interests and/or positions of a dominant group over non-dominant groups, that in turn lead to related structures and acts of subordination*. These ideologies provide the ‘mental frames’ or ‘common sense’ (Lakoff 2006) understandings and perceptions of dominant and non-dominant groups needed to justify the oppression experienced by the latter. Thus, macroaggressions provide the ideological foundations that justify the actions of racism in the many forms they take, including institutional racism and racial microaggressions. To further clarify the role of the



macroaggression in this framework, we use Judge Robert Carter's (1988) reflection on the landmark *Brown v. Board* (1954) Supreme Court decision. He stated:

... the 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. (1095)

Carter provides us with a powerful metaphor to better understand racism as a 'symptom' of white supremacy, 'the disease.' Carter's reflection urges that an analysis of white supremacy must be included within an analysis of racism – in our case, a framework of racial microaggressions – to move beyond the acknowledgement of 'symptoms' and understand the 'disease' from where they emerge. The concept of macroaggressions allows for this analysis – to identify the ideologies of white supremacy (the disease) that uphold institutional racism, from where racial microaggressions (symptoms) emerge.

Our conceptualization of racial macroaggressions is different than many other scholars who define racial macroaggressions as the overt, 'large scale' (i.e. state acts) of racism experienced by People of Color (Gildersleeve, Croom, and Vasquez 2011; Smith et al., 2007a). We argue that the terms 'micro' and 'macro' should not define acts of racism as subtle or blatant. In fact, Pierce (1974) makes a similar argument about the limitations of terminology when he stated, '[t]hese problems are only micro in name, since their very number requires a total effort that is incalculable' (520). We concur with Pierce that we are limited by the terms we use to describe the complexities of racism and the harm they can cause. We certainly do not intend to depreciate everyday racism by using the term micro. To the contrary, we would agree with scholars like Dumas (2014) who argue that microaggressions are in fact a form of 'everyday suffering' that have become socially and systemically normalized and effectively minimized. We make a strategic effort to re-appropriate the power of the term microaggression that has endured throughout the decades to capture a historically situated meaning for everyday racism.<sup>6</sup> We offer a racial microaggressions analytic framework as a response to Pierce's (1988) urging that 'All blacks [and other People of Color] must have a firm theoretical grasp of racism in order to dilute its crippling effects' (33). The definitions, frameworks, and examples presented here are necessary conceptual steps toward advancing efforts to dismantle racism and the many forms it takes in the everyday lives of People of Color.

### Applying the framework

Now that we have explained the model and defined its components, we apply it to two examples of racial microaggressions, one historical and one



contemporary. We do this to demonstrate the conceptual utility of the model. Furthermore, with both historical and contemporary examples, we also demonstrate its utility to analyze microaggressions across time. The first example utilizes a historical artifact, an archival photograph, to illustrate an example of a racial microaggression, institutional racism, and macroaggression in the 1930s Jim Crow state of North Carolina. In the second contemporary example we use the 2013 class-action lawsuit, *Floyd et al. v. City of New York*. This case challenged New York Police Department (NYPD) racial profiling practices and the unconstitutional stop and frisks in predominately African American and Latina/o communities in New York City. Here, we explain how the model can be conceptually expanded when additional facts and data are available about the everyday racist acts, as the *Floyd* case provided. As a result, we build on the racial microaggressions model (Figure 1), providing additional components for a more in-depth analysis. This analysis articulates how People of Color are targeted by and experience racial microaggressions, and how those experiences are connected to institutional racism and ideologies of white supremacy. Thus, we refer to this more complex model as a racial microaggressions analytic framework. First, we begin with the historical example.

### ***Example 1: photograph as historical artifact***

Photography, particularly historical photography, provides an insightful venue to America's racist past. Scholars such as Abel (2010) and Smith (2004) recognize the significance of visual photography to capture historically situated meanings of race. We agree such historical images are powerful and is why we chose to use a photograph as our first example of racial microaggressions. Figure 2 is a 1938 photograph cataloged by the US Library of Congress titled, 'A Drinking Fountain on the County Courthouse Lawn' taken in Halifax, North Carolina. Photographers working for the US Farm Security Administration Historical Section were charged with visually documenting 'continuity and change' in America during the 1930s and 1940s, with a particular focus on visual signage (Library of Congress 2013). This photograph is included in a collection titled, 'Photographs of Signs Enforcing Racial Discrimination.'<sup>7</sup>

In the photograph, a young African American boy stands next to a water fountain located on the lawn of a county courthouse. The entrance of the courthouse can be seen in the background to the left. A sign is posted on a tree to the left of the water fountain that reads, 'COLORED.' The boy seems to gaze at the photographer as the photo is taken.

The model in Figure 2 can be used to analyze the young boy's experience with racial microaggressions in this photograph. We argue that the racial microaggression in the photo is the 'colored' water fountain that the boy stands next to. Although the 'COLORED' sign would not be considered

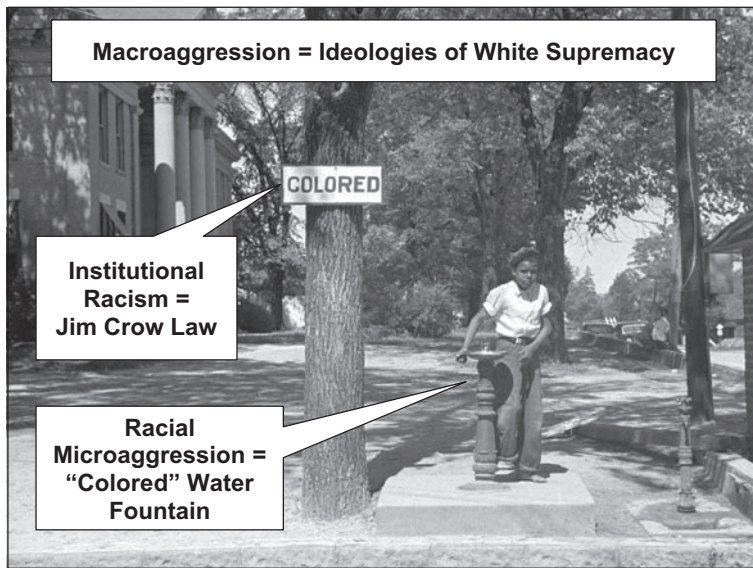


Figure 2. ‘A Drinking Fountain on the County Courthouse Lawn,’ photograph by J. Vachon, 1938.

subtle today, this was an everyday form of *de jure* racism (Jim Crow) experienced by this young boy at this particular historical moment (1930s), and in this particular geographic location (the Southern United States). Separate public facilities for African Americans in the Southern United States were an everyday experience in 1938.<sup>8</sup> We argue that consistent with our definition of racial microaggressions, the separate water fountain was a form of systemic, everyday racism used to keep those at the racial margins in their place. This was a non-verbal assault directed towards the African American boy. Separate facilities for People of Color in the 1930’s ‘South’ were normative in dominant society, practiced and enforced accordingly in automatic and unconscious ways by many whites, accepted as a ‘natural’ way of life (Alexander 2012). If we could speak to this young boy as a grown man, he might no doubt, describe the cumulative psychological and physiological toll he had experienced during his life, subjected to this form of everyday racism.

Where a racial microaggression occurs, institutional racism operates to enforce it. The institutional racism we identify in this photo is the Jim Crow *de jure* policy that maintained separate public facilities for whites and People of Color upheld at the time in the South – the Jim Crow ‘Colored Only’ law. In the photo, we argue that the signage posted on the tree that reads ‘COLORED’ represents Jim Crow. Jim Crow law is the institutional racism that functioned as a structural mechanism to systemically subordinate, marginalize, and exclude People of Color through policies like separate public facilities. In effect, Jim Crow laws were the forms of institutional

racism that enforced and maintained the everyday racial microaggressions we see in this photo.

Although ideologies remain unseen to the eye, there are powerful ideologies at play that justified Jim Crow laws and mediated this young boy's everyday experience with racial microaggressions. Thus, the macroaggression we identify here are ideologies of white supremacy. These ideologies justified the social arrangements maintained by Jim Crow (institutional racism) that systematically subordinated People of Color at the time, and mediated experiences with racial microaggressions. Without the ideological foundations of white supremacy neither institutional racism nor racial microaggressions could be justified or sustained.

With this historical artifact we identified the various ways racism manifests, from the everyday, to the institutional, to the ideological. Furthermore, the racial microaggressions model illustrates how each of these forms of racism are intricately connected in the experience of the young boy in the photograph. Returning to Carter's (1988) metaphor of symptom and disease, the water fountain and signage only allow us to see symptoms, while the macroaggression identifies the ideologies of white supremacy that are present, the disease. In the following section, we expand on this model to provide a more detailed analysis of racial microaggressions that includes how a Person of Color experiences a microaggression, using a class-action lawsuit as a contemporary example, *Floyd et al. v. City of New York* (2013).

### ***Example 2: contemporary legal case***

The federal class-action lawsuit *Floyd v. City of New York* (2013) challenged NYPD racial profiling practices and unconstitutional stop and frisks in predominately African American and Latina/o communities in the city. The legal opinion held in *Floyd* provides information about why and how the lawsuit was brought to the court. The opinion provided key evidence presented by the plaintiffs through an independent statistical analysis of data collected over a two-year period on stop and frisks and crime complaint reports conducted by the NYPD (Fagan 2010). In two expert reports presented to the court, plaintiff attorneys provided data on how and why NYPD practiced stop and frisks, the frequency of these practices in particular neighborhoods, and the race, gender and suspected crimes of those stopped. Using the final court opinion (*Floyd v. City of New York* 2013) in *Floyd* and the expert reports (Fagan 2010, 2012), we expand the racial microaggressions model to articulate with greater detail how the plaintiffs experienced these racist acts. We argue that the illumination this conceptual expansion offers provides more than a model, but an analytic framework to examine racial microaggressions. We present and explain a racial microaggressions analytic framework in this example.

In *Floyd*, African American plaintiffs David Floyd, Lalit Clarkson, Deon Dennis, and David Ourlichtand represented ‘hundreds of thousands’ of New Yorkers stopped by NYPD officers for ‘suspicion-less’ stop and frisks that disproportionately targeted African Americans and Latinas/os in the city (Fagan 2010). According to an expert report presented in the case, African Americans and Latinas/os constituted 84% of stops from 2010 through 2012 under the city’s stop and frisk policy, although these groups comprise only 50% of the city’s total population. Further, nearly all of those stopped were released by officers who found no basis for summons or arrest (Fagan 2012). During 2010–2012, there were over 1.6 million stops by police in New York City. Approximately 1.3 million of those stopped were African American and Latina/o, mostly male (Fagan 2012). This would mean that NYPD stopped and frisked more African Americans and Latinas/os than the entire city populations of Buffalo, Rochester, Yonkers, Syracuse, Albany and New Rochelle combined (New York State’s six largest cities after New York City). The *New York Times* reported NYPD superior officers provided explicit orders for police to target ‘male blacks 14 to 20, 21’ years of age under the same policy (New York Times Editorial Board 2013). Using the example of unlawful stop and frisks in *Floyd*, we apply and further develop the racial microaggressions model.

In the opinion of the case, the court recognized that People of Color, and more often African American and Latino males, are targeted by racial profiling practices such as stop and frisk ‘on the way to work, in front of their house or just walking down the street, without any cause and primarily because of their race’ (Fagan 2012, 3). We argue that the NYPD practice of stop and frisks were the racial microaggressions that targeted the plaintiffs (and the many, many others as reported in the case). However, with the additional information *Floyd* provides about how these racial microaggressions often happened in New York City, we can expand on the racial microaggressions model to include a more detailed analysis of how a Person of Color experiences a racial microaggression. Thus, we will add the following additional components to the model. We present these components first in Figures 3 and 4, then add them to the racial microaggressions model in Figure 5, creating a racial microaggressions analytic framework.

To understand how a Person of Color can experience a racial microaggression, we must first understand how they happen. We begin with Figure 3 that identifies a ‘perpetrator,’ the individual enacting the microaggression, and the ‘primary target’ – the individual targeted by it. In the case of *Floyd*, the police officer is the ‘perpetrator’ and the ‘primary target’ is David Floyd. However, there can also be ‘secondary targets’ impacted by the microaggression committed by the perpetrator. The ‘secondary targets’ may not have been the intended target of the microaggression, but they can also experience its effects.<sup>9</sup> For example, a friend that was walking with Floyd while he was stopped, or a relative who was told of the event and also

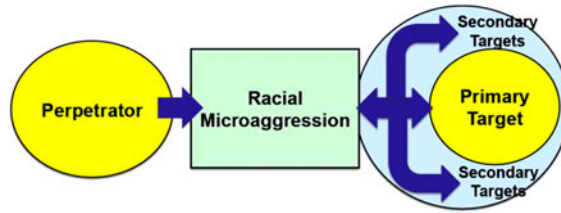


Figure 3. Perpetrator-target model component.

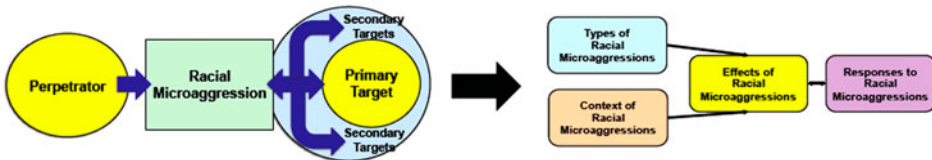


Figure 4. Types, context, effects, responses model component.

experienced emotions of anger, violation, and disappointment. As Critical Race Theorists, we focus on the experiences of the primary and secondary targets, the Person or People of Color that experiences microaggressions. Yet, it is important to understand that the perpetrators of racial microaggressions often unconsciously engage in microaggressive acts and thus, can commit the act with little thought or attention paid to the interaction. Furthermore, this unconscious intent of perpetrators make confronting microaggressions difficult for People of Color, and is one way racism can be perpetuated while rendered invisible. This is the danger of subtle racism

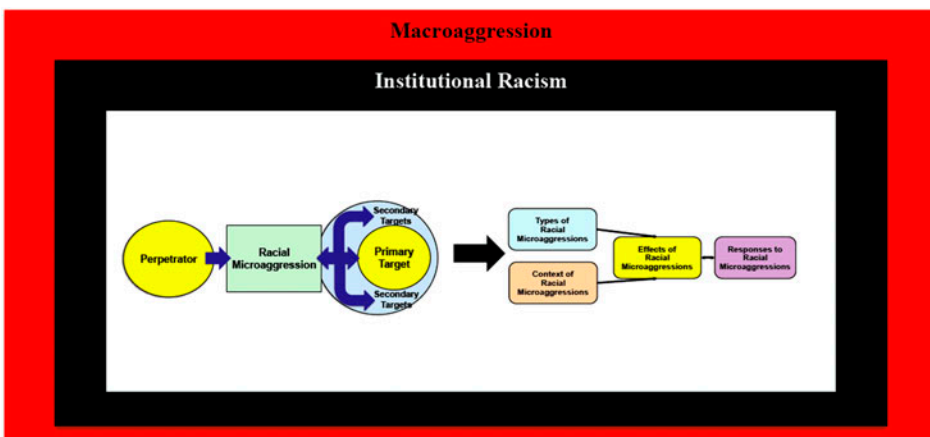


Figure 5. Racial microaggressions analytic framework.

Chester Pierce cautioned – for the People of Color targeted by microaggressions, there can be serious and lasting repercussions, especially when experienced consistently over one’s lifetime (Pierce 1969, 1970, 1974).

While Figure 3 would explain how Floyd was targeted by this racial microaggression, we add an additional component to understand how Floyd experienced the microaggression. To understand how one experiences microaggressions, we must understand the type and context of the microaggression, and the effects and responses to them. To illustrate, we add the following component in Figure 4 and explain each of the elements.

### ***Types of microaggressions***

There are various types of microaggressions People of Color experience, based on race and/or ethnicity, gender, class, language, sexuality, immigration status, phenotype, accent, surname, and/or culture (Kohli and Solorzano, 2012). From a CRT perspective, we know that racism often occurs at intersections with other forms of oppression. Thus, in analyzing ‘types’ it is important to acknowledge that a microaggression may be based on multiple characteristics and positionalities that define the identities and experiences of People of Color.<sup>10</sup> In the *Floyd* case, when a police officer engages in practices of stop and frisk, based on raced and gendered stereotypes of perceived criminality, racial and gendered microaggressions are at play.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Context of microaggressions***

There is also a context — *where* and *how* the microaggression occurs. In the example of stop and frisk, the *Floyd* case told us that stop and frisks often occurred in the streets. Microaggressions can also occur in schools, classrooms, on the play yard, in laboratories, at meetings, and on college campuses, among others. The context of the microaggression not only refers to the location or space that the microaggression occurred, but also the larger circumstances and conditions present that allowed it to happen. The remaining components of this model account for the ways microaggressions impact People of Color who are targeted by them.

### ***Effects of microaggressions***

Through years of research, Chester Pierce (1970, 1974, 1989) found that there were negative psychological and physiological effects of microaggressions. Moreover, Pierce argued that the effects were cumulative, taking a toll on the bodies, minds, and spirits of People of Color over time. For example, those young men targeted by stop and frisk practices may become angry or frustrated, their blood pressure may rise, and heart rates may



increase (Clark et al. 1999; Gravlee, Dressler, and Bernard 2005; Smith 2004). Over time, he/she may develop feelings of self-doubt and more serious symptomatic conditions such as high blood pressure, depression, and anxiety (Hill, Kobayashi, and Hughes 2007; Pérez Huber, and Cueva 2012). Mundane extreme environmental stress (MEES) (Carroll 1998), racial battle fatigue (Cueva 2010; Smith 2004; Smith, Allen, and Danley 2007; Smith, Yosso, and Solorzano 2006), and racial trauma (Truong and Museus 2012), are conditions researchers use to describe such race-related health consequences. Some studies have attributed more fatal conditions such as cardiovascular disease and even increased morbidity to race-related stressors such as microaggressions (Adelman 2008; Gee et al. 2009; Geronimus et al. 2006; Pierce 1969).

As a result of the legal charges brought by *Floyd*, a report by the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) (2012) compiled ‘testimonies’ from New Yorkers who had experienced stop and frisk. The report detailed the ‘human impact’ of the stop and frisks conducted by the NYPD, that found those stopped experienced trauma, humiliation and endured ‘fear as a way of life’ (7). Furthermore, the report found stop and frisk not only impacted individuals directly targeted by them, but entire communities who reported feeling the presence of NYPD as a ‘military-style occupation’ due to these everyday acts of racism consistently committed in their communities (19). These findings confirm that and the and the primary and secondary targets, as articulated in our model, can experience the effects of microaggressions. However, just as important is understanding that People of Color are certainly not idle to them. The final element of this analysis addresses the ways People of Color respond to microaggressions.

### ***Responses to microaggressions***

Pierce (1995) explained, ‘The most baffling task for victims of racism and sexism is to defend against microaggressions. Knowing how and when to defend requires time and energy that oppressors cannot appreciate’ (282). Pierce highlights the significance of developing responses to racial microaggressions. Such responses can vary, according to the type and context of the microaggression, as well as the effect it had on the individual. Moreover, one’s response can be influenced by the effect, and vice versa. These responses can include engaging in counterspaces, places located within or outside of educational institutions where People of Color develop strategies for healing, empowerment, and building a sense of community (Grier-Reed 2010; Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000; Solorzano and Villalpando 1998; Yosso et al. 2009).

The Center for Constitutional Rights (2012) reported that even before *Floyd*, New York communities were taking action against stop and frisk and other forms of police misconduct. Community-based organizations were



created that conducted ‘know your rights’ trainings and other public education campaigns, as well as ‘copwatch’ programs to document police misconduct in their neighborhoods. We would argue these were collective responses to the racial microaggressions perpetrated by police enforcement. Another response was the *Floyd* case itself, where plaintiffs challenged New York City’s stop and frisk policy by filing a class-action lawsuit on behalf of the countless People of Color targeted by these racial microaggressions. This response to the microaggressions perpetrated by NYPD proved to be transformational. The outcome of the case acknowledged that NYPD was liable for the unconstitutional patterns and practices of racial profiling and stops by its officers, and prompted a citywide examination of such discriminatory practices.

In Figure 5, we illustrate how these additional components can be added to the racial microaggressions model, providing a more complex analytical framework. With the data and information presented in *Floyd*, we were able to identify the perpetrators, and the primary and secondary targets of microaggressions. In addition, we were able to analyze the type, context, effects, and responses plaintiffs had to them.

Now that we have explained how racial microaggressions were experienced in *Floyd*, the model calls for us to identify the institutional racism in the case. The most obvious form of institutional racism is the stop and frisk policy itself, as a formal structural mechanism that systematically subordinated the plaintiffs targeted by racial microaggressions. The more conspicuous form of institutional racism operating within this example is what the court opinion called the ‘unwritten’ policy of ‘targeting the right people for stops’ or, the informal structural mechanisms of institutional racism that subjected many members of the African American and Latina/o communities in the city to be held under suspicion of criminality.<sup>12</sup> According to the opinion delivered by US District Court Judge Shira Sheindlin:

[T]he City adopted a policy of indirect racial profiling by targeting racially defined groups for stops based on local crime suspect data. This has resulted in the disproportionate and discriminatory stopping of [b]lacks and Hispanics. ... Both statistical and anecdotal evidence showed that minorities are indeed treated differently than whites ... despite the fact that whites are more likely to be found with weapons or contraband. (*Floyd et al. v. City of New York* 2013, 16)

In effect, the *Floyd* ruling acknowledged both formal and informal mechanisms of institutional racism that mediated police stop and frisk practices, or the racial microaggressions. Moreover, it was found that these racist practices disproportionately targeted African Americans and Latinas/os compared to whites, who were more often found ‘with weapons and contraband’ when stopped. What the *Floyd* ruling did not address, is how the perpetrators of these racial microaggressions developed their racist beliefs and perceptions

about African American and Latina/o communities. This is addressed by the final component of the model, the macroaggression.

Identifying the macroaggression in *Floyd* exposes the powerful ideologies at play that articulate racist perspectives of Communities of Color. The *Floyd* case found police officers engaged racial profiling strategies based on racist perceptions of People of Color, and that these practices were formally and informally enforced by the city's written and unwritten stop and frisk policies. What the case does not explain is that without widely-held, normative, racist beliefs about People of Color maintained by many of the police officers that served in the NYPD, these stop and frisk policies and practices could not have emerged in such a pronounced way.

Based on the evidence presented in the *Floyd* case, the opinion revealed that African Americans and Latinas/os were: (1) Stopped more than whites 'even when other relevant variables' were held constant; (2) were more likely than whites to be arrested for the same suspected crimes and; (3) were more likely than whites to be 'subjected to the use of force' even when whites were more likely to require further enforcement action in a stop (*Floyd et al. v. City of New York* 2013, 12). Based on the facts of the case, we would argue that the macroaggression here, are ideologies of white supremacy. Thus, the macroaggression that operates in *Floyd* is in fact, the ideological beliefs in white superiority that led to actions of law enforcement to criminalize Men of Color through such policies<sup>13</sup> (see Alexander 2012).

We acknowledge that for some, being stopped and frisked by police because of your race would not be understood as subtle racism. For example, in a study examining the racist experiences of African American college students, Smith et al. (2007) used the example of racial profiling, or, 'driving-while-black' as a macroaggression experienced by African American males. In the framework we provide in this article, we define racial microaggressions as taking on both covert and overt forms. Thus, in our definition of microaggressions, we state that they are 'often subtle,' but argue they can also be blatant. Thus, using this framework, racial profiling strategies such as 'driving-while-black' would be microaggressions, racial symptoms of a larger disease. That is, the disease of white supremacy, the macroaggression that justifies racial profiling.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have provided a brief history of the conceptual development of racial microaggressions, according to Chester Pierce. This history was provided to honor these significant contributions and demonstrate how our work builds on the conceptual foundations created by him. We explained how further theorizing microaggressions from a CRT perspective centers the experiences of People of Color targeted by them and challenges race research to focus on the systemic nature of racism. We then presented

a model to understand how racial microaggressions emerge from institutional racism and ideologies of white supremacy. A historical artifact was utilized to apply this model to an experience with racial microaggressions in North Carolina in the 1930s. The model was then applied to a contemporary ‘stop and frisk’ example with *Floyd et al. v. City of New York* (2013). Due to the additional facts and data provided by the case, we were able to expand the model to articulate a more complex understanding of how People of Color experience racial microaggressions. This conceptual expansion provides a framework to analyze racial microaggressions in Critical Race research. The framework allows for an understanding of racial microaggressions beyond a perpetrator-target interaction and illustrates that these everyday racist acts have a purpose, whether committed consciously or not, to perpetuate and justify a larger system of racial domination.

We acknowledge that there is much more work to be done on racial microaggressions. Here, we have explained the theoretical implications of this conceptual tool to examine every day racism. However, we believe there are also pedagogical implications. Microaggressions can be a powerful tool for People of Color to ‘name their pain,’ as Paulo Freire (1970) describes, to engage anti-oppressive strategies for liberation. Furthermore, the two examples presented demonstrate the possibility for using historical and contemporary artifacts as pedagogical tools for teaching about racial microaggressions. Finally, an important discussion outside the purview of this article remains. That is, if racial microaggressions emerge from ideologies of white supremacy, and are understood as a form of ‘white violence’ (Leonardo 2010), how can we explain the race-based forms of discrimination People of Color engage against each other? For example, many NYPD officers in the *Floyd* case were white, but many were also People of Color. What does this mean for the ways we understand racial microaggressions? This is a question we intend to theorize in a future study, as we hope others will do as well. As we have built from the conceptual foundation of Chester Pierce, we hope others find the concepts, models and frameworks provided here useful for their own work in Critical Race Research, and continue to build and move the field forward

Our analysis of the examples in this article demonstrate that every day and systemic racism have certainly not gone away, only changed form throughout the decades. Despite recent Supreme Court decisions that have come down that maintain arguments steeped in color-blindness, we know racism today is alive and well. For example, in May 2014 the US Supreme Court upheld the ban on the use of race in college admissions in *Shuette v. BAMN* (2014).<sup>14</sup> Justice Sonia Sotomayor stated in her dissent to the decision:

In my colleagues’ view, examining the racial impact of legislation only perpetuates racial discrimination. This refusal to accept the stark reality that race matters is regrettable. The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is

to speak openly and candidly on the subject of race, and to apply the Constitution with eyes open to the unfortunate effects of centuries of racial discrimination. As members of the judiciary tasked with intervening to carry out the guarantee of equal protection, we ought not sit back and wish away, rather than confront, the racial inequality that exists in our society. (46)

As Justice Sotomayor stated in her dissent, race is not something that can be ‘wished away’ by refusing its existence in US society. The recent murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in the summer of 2014 at the hands of white police is a solemn reminder that there is a long road ahead to social justice for Communities of Color.<sup>15</sup> Yet, we are given a sense of hope from the success of *Floyd*. It serves as a reminder that transformation and justice is possible if we continue the work to name, resist, and challenge everyday racism.

## Notes

1. MTV has partnered with the Ohio State University’s Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity and a coalition of other organizations to develop the ‘Look Different’ campaign. This multi-year project was launched in 2014 and seeks to assist youth in identifying their raced and gendered biases. It also provides a process of ‘debiasing’ through participating in a ‘racial bias cleanse’ (see <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/kirwan-institute-partners-with-mtv-on-multi-year-campaign-to-help-youth-combat-hidden-biases-inequality/>). As the analysis reflects in this article, we would argue that the deconstruction of racism is not possible through the simple recognition of racial bias, as racism is a symptom of white supremacy. Therefore, the deconstruction of racism must include a detachment from white supremacist ideologies.
2. Here, education is broadly defined as a process that occurs within and outside of formal schooling institutions. In effect, we recognize that racial microaggressions occur within these varied contexts, as evident in the examples we present later in this article.
3. Sue (2010) theorizes racial microaggressions within the context of the counseling psychology field, and specifically to provide counseling practitioners with strategies address the unconscious racism inform their practice with clients of color. In this context, the focus on the perpetrator is important and much-needed. Here, we acknowledge these contributions, while differentiating a theory of racial microaggressions from a CRT perspective.
4. We use the term ‘toll’ in the same way as Chester Pierce (1974, 1989), to describe the cumulative effects of racial microaggressions over time.
5. Derrick Bell (1992) uses the concept of ‘racial realism’ to describe the permanence of racism in the US. In his work, he cautions us in focusing intently on efforts that merely change racism’s form. Rather, he argued, we must develop and implement ‘strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph’ (374). Institutional racism articulates a systematic positioning of race and racism in the US that leads to racial realism. Racial microaggressions then, become a tool, or ‘strategy’ in understanding how everyday racism occurs in order to confront and dismantle structures of oppression.
6. Through this re-appropriation of terminology, we engage a discursive shift of power that allows us to (re)create and (re)envision the meaning of microaggression. Historically, People of Color have engaged similar strategies with

terminology, particularly for terms to describe racial/ethnic identity (i.e. black, Chicana, Chicano).

7. Full title of collection is, ‘Photographs of Signs Enforcing Racial Discrimination: Documentation of Farm Security Administration – Office of War Information Photographers’ (see [http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/085\\_disk.html](http://www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/085_disk.html)).
8. One could also argue that *dejure* and *defacto* racism also occurred in other parts of the US.
9. Shelley Harrell’s (2000) research on race-related ‘stressors’ offers insight into the discussion of primary and secondary targets of microaggressions with what she terms ‘vicarious’ racist experiences. She asserts that, ‘racism exerts its influence not only through direct personal experience, but also vicariously, through observation and report. The inclusion of vicarious experiences is critical in understanding the nature of racism’s effect on individuals’ (45). Harrell offers insight on how secondary targets of racial microaggressions vicariously experience the racism of the primary target, even when this racism was not directed to them.
10. For other types of microaggressions, see Solorzano (1998) on gender microaggressions and Pérez Huber (2011) on racist nativist microaggressions. See also Sue (2010) on sexual-orientation microaggressions.
11. We would argue racial profiling practices like stop and frisk would be both racial and gender microaggressions, as research has shown racial profiling strategies disproportionately impact Men of Color (Glover 2009; Johnson 2003; Marable 2002; Smith, Allen, and Danley 2007).
12. Could this be an example of what Michelle Alexander (2012) refers to as the ‘New Jim Crow.’
13. While we argue for this different conceptual understanding of macroaggressions, it is not our intention to claim there is only one way to conceptualize macro or microaggressions. We do not attempt to articulate universal definitions, but alternative perspectives we believe useful for examining the everyday forms of racism in the lives of People of Color.
14. In *Schuette v. BAMN* (2014), the US Supreme Court ruled to uphold Michigan’s Proposal 2, passed in 2006, to ban the use of race (among other characteristics) in state college and university admissions. Justice Scalia delivered his concurring opinion that cited the dissent of Justice Harlan in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) that the constitution is ‘color-blind and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens’ and that in passing Proposal 2, ‘the people of Michigan wish the same for their governing charter’ (17). See concurring opinion retrieved from Supreme Court of the United States at [http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/13pdf/12-682\\_8759.pdf](http://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/13pdf/12-682_8759.pdf). In 2013, a similar argument is made in *Shelby County v. Holder* where the Supreme Court ruled to overturn a key section of the Voting Rights Act that required states with a history of discriminating against racial minority voters (mostly in the South) to get federal permission to change voting requirements.
15. Michael Brown was an unarmed 18-year-old African American teenager who was shot and killed by a white police officer while walking in his neighborhood of Ferguson, Missouri. The murder led to weeks-long demonstrations and riots against police violence in this city and cities across the country. The Los Angeles Times comments that Brown’s murder has become an ‘international incident’ that casts a grim spotlight on race relations in the US (Makinen 2014).

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