Using the Critical Race Tools of Racial Microaggressions to Examine Everyday Racism in Academic Spaces

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We all come to this place with our own racial/ethnic, community and family histories
Chester M. Pierce

Racial Microaggressions

Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and Professor Emeritus of Education at Harvard University
“...one must not look for the gross and obvious. The subtle, cumulative mini-assault is the substance of today’s racism” (p. 516).

How Do We Define 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:
  • **Verbal and non-verbal assaults** directed toward People of Color, often carried out in **subtle**, automatic, or unconscious forms.
  • **Layered assaults**, based on a Person of Color’s race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, surname, or college type;
  • **Cumulative assaults** that take a physiological, psychological, and academic toll on People of Color.
Death by a Thousand Cuts
"That’s not what I meant"

"Great job on your presentation! You are so articulate."

"But I meant it as a compliment"

"You’re being too sensitive"

"It was just a joke"

"Primary Target"

"Secondary Target"

"Institutional Racism"

"Racial Microaggression"
Racial Microaggressions are a form of Unconscious Racism
A Model for Understanding Racial Microaggressions

Types of Racial Microaggressions
Some Examples of Racial Microaggressions

• “When I talk about those Blacks, I really wasn't talking about you.”
• “You're not like the rest of them. You're different.”
• “I don't think of you as a Mexican.”
• “You speak such good English.”
• “But you speak without an accent.”
• “How do Black people feel about…?”
“There are very few African American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me. There are very few African American men who haven't had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me...There are very few African Americans who haven't had the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off. That happens often.”
“And race matters for reasons that really are only skin deep, that cannot be discussed any other way, and that cannot be wished away. Race matters to a young man’s view of society when he spends his teenage years watching others tense up as he passes, no matter the neighborhood where he grew up. Race matters to a young woman’s sense of self when she states her hometown, and then is pressed, “No, where are you really from?”, regardless of how many generations her family has been in the country.”
Justice SOTOMAYOR Dissenting in SCHUETTE v. BAMN, 572 U. S. ___ (April 2014)
A Model for Understanding Racial Microaggressions

- Types of Racial Microaggressions
- Context of Racial Microaggressions
“I notice in a class I teach that after each session a white, not a black, will come up to me and tell me how the class should be structured or how the chairs should be placed or how there should be extra meetings outside the classroom, etc... One could argue that I am hypersensitive, if not paranoid, about what I know every black will understand, is that it is not what the student says in this dialogue, it is how he approaches me, how he talks to me, how he seems to regard me. I was patronized. I was told, by my own perceptual distortions perhaps, that although I am a full professor on two faculties at a prestigious university, to him I was no more than a big black nigger. I had to be instructed and directed as to how to render him more pleasure!” (Pierce, p. 277, 1970).
Presumed Incompetent:
The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia

Edited by
Gabriella Gutiérrez y Muhs
Yolanda Flores Niemann
Carmen G. González
Angela P. Harris
What's it like to be a faculty member of color at a predominantly white institution? Two essays this week by Vassar professors paint complex pictures of achievement, disappointment, pride and outrage. The pieces have captured lots of attention on social media, as well as from Vassar's administration. Many say the professors' experiences speak to faculty diversity concerns on many campuses, including those that don't fit the cloistered, elite Vassar profile.
A Model for Understanding Racial Microaggressions

Types of Racial Microaggressions

Effects of Racial Microaggressions

• Pain, Hurt…
• Anger, Stress (Racial Battle Fatigue)
• Self Doubt (Imposter Syndrome)
• Poor Academic Performance
• Poor Health Outcomes

Context of Racial Microaggressions
A Model for Understanding Racial Microaggressions

Types of Racial Microaggressions

Context of Racial Microaggressions

Effects of Racial Microaggressions

Responses to Racial Microaggressions

- Denial
- Self Policing
- Prove Them Wrong
- Resistance
- Counterspaces
- Various Art Forms
One response
Kimiko Matsuda-Lawrence, Harvard Sophomore
I, Too, Am Harvard

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Patricia J. Williams—The Nation
“They are treated with open disdain, the champagne flutes snatched from their hands at cocktail parties as they are mistaken for waiters. They are figured as criminals when they walk across campus. Their sexual prowess is interrogated, their beauty denigrated. They hesitate before asking questions in class—for a dumb question from a white person isn’t heard as a reflection on all white people, but any question from a black person tends to be scrutinized for inherent inferiority, “proof” that the student’s lonely little voice is the evil marker of where a ‘more qualified white person’ ought to be sitting” (On-line; March 12, 2014).
I TOO AM _________
Another response
Justice SOTOMAYOR’s Dissent
“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 carryout the guarantee of equal protection, **we ought not sit back and wish away**, rather than **confront**, the **racial inequality** that exists in our society.”
Still other responses...
[Some Comments to Racial Microaggressions]

- “It’s the accumulation of all these little insults that everyone denies are insults.”
- “I’m tired of all the ‘coded’ language around race and gender.”
- “The racial tone (the undercurrent) of the conversations is what angers me.”
- “Why is it that ‘diversity’ work is expected and then not valued by the university.”
- “What we are talking about is only the tip of the iceberg. I don’t think we want to see what’s underneath. They are symptoms of a much larger problem.”
- “Those subtle racial or ethnic comments at faculty meetings about research add to the stress I feel and remind me how difficult it is to come to those meetings. It’s part of the department culture. Maybe it’s a school-wide culture…”
What Can We Do?
“The black must be taught to recognize...microaggressions and construct his future by taking appropriate action at each instance of recognition.”

-Chester Pierce, 1974
Again, What Can We Do?
Acknowledge our own racial history and how we view ourselves and others

Confront our own biases

Actively work to develop our recognition, reflection, and action skills
THANK YOU

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