

ARTICLE

Racial microaggressions: Bridging psychology and sociology and future research considerations

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Abstract

This article reviews racial microaggressions, specifically psychology and sociology's historical trajectory in informing existing literatures and disciplines, in its connections to meso and macro levels of systemic racism. In doing so, we contend that a sociological understanding of racial microaggressions presents opportunities to better understand the cumulative and deleterious effects of racial violence on racialized groups. Furthermore, we argue that beyond bridging the disciplines of psychology and sociology to allow for more interdisciplinary analyses of racial microaggressions will help to move conversations in ways that more meaningfully capture the monstrosity of white supremacy and its cumulative deleterious effects of daily racial terrorism at all levels of society.

"My own bottom line is this: Since it is usually impossible for me to be conscious more than 30 minutes without thinking of my race, all my professional life can be described as an effort to live as a Black in the USA."

Chester Pierce¹

1 | INTRODUCTION

Our aims in this review are to provide a timeline overview of racial microaggressions scholarship that is centered on the earlier works of Chester Pierce, Philomena Essed, and Derald Wing Sue, three major contributors who constitute much of the insight, theoretical groundwork, and research in this area. We then consider some of the major empirical research that have formed the bulk of scholarship in the last 20 years, much of which we argue are largely extensions of Sue's racial typology framework. Finally, our hope is to provide rationale for future research on racial microaggressions that is more interdisciplinary—that is, that accounts for the individual, interpersonal and psychological,

¹Authorship is alphabetical and considered to be equally weighted in this article.

acts of discrimination as well as structural and institutional causes of racism. We make no claims to cover every single research that has been done with regards to racial microaggressions. Rather, we take what follows as major contributors to this area. To be clear, ours is not the first review of microaggressions literature, although ours is one of the few that is specific to racial microaggressions—and the need for more sociological analyses. For example, Lilienfeld (2017)² published a review that took to task what he argued was the rapid rise of an underdeveloped concept. He not only called for the abandonment of the term microaggression, but also concluded with “18 suggestions for advancing the science status of the MRP³...” (138) Although Lilienfeld noted that his goal was to outline the shortcomings of MRP, the bulk of his review read like a public calling-out of Derald Wingfield Sue et al. This is not surprising given Sue's influence since the mid-2000s on microaggressions.

Any cursory examination of research on racial microaggressions in the past few decades will undoubtedly produce at least three interesting revelations. First, while widely acclaimed psychiatrist Pierce (1970) is often given credit for being the undisputed father of the term “microaggression,” his research and other scholarly contributions in this area are seldom detailed, and even more rarely interrogated for his insights, many of which we contend are taken for granted today. Although not a sociologist, many of Pierce's observations are sociological in nature, or at the very least bridge a multitude of disciplines together in conversations that allow for more complexity in better understanding how people of color are affected by everyday racism. Second, noticeably missing from the 1980s through the early part of the 2000s are sociological observations of racial microaggressions that took seriously both meso and macro-level structural factors that either produced and/or maintained various forms of racial violence; much of contemporary scholarship written by sociologists tend to be theoretically anchored by psychological theories of racial microaggressions that more often than not minimize the importance of racialized social structures. There are notable exceptions, with increasing frequency, from the fields of education and health sciences. Yet, glaringly missing from the scholarship on racial microaggressions are conversations that include historically (and currently) stigmatized and/or marginalized voices of the academic community, for example, Afro-Centrist/Futurist, Critical Latino/a Studies, Du Bosian thought, or Colonial/Post-Colonial and Settler Colonial theories. Finally, while a number of scholars (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007) have argued on the serious implications of racial microaggressions in terms of the cumulative health disparities on people of color, discussions are often limited to interpersonal interactions, or cross-sectional studies along the life course. When considering everyday racial violence along the full life course, and at the individual, institutional, and societal levels, the multiplier effects of racial violence produce a different story—one in which living in a racialized social system (Bonilla-Silva, 1997) as a person of color may be much more toxic to one's health than our current data suggests.

One often argued shortcoming of current scholarship has to do with the term itself. The “micro” in microaggressions is a diminutive that does not fully capture the cumulative harm that repeated violence does to a person. Thus, daily exposure to racial violence—interpersonal, institutional, or societal—has far greater health implications, for example, for people of color, than is typically realized. Indeed notable scholars such as Elijah Anderson and Johnny Eric Williams have publicly expressed their discontents with the term microaggressions in its obfuscation of white supremacy.⁴ As we have argued previously (Embrick, Dominguez, & Karsak, 2017), research (both theoretical and empirical) attesting to the deleterious effects of racial microaggressions have been limited to understanding the phenomenon as individual or psychological acts of discrimination and does not fully appreciate the cumulative nature of daily racial violence. The dominance of psychologists, psychiatrists, and educational psychologists, in current studies of racial microaggressions, leads to an overemphasis on coping strategies as the mechanism for thinking about how to best deal with the stressors that result from racial microaggressions (Grier-Reed, 2010). Adding a sociological component of racism to the conversation allows us to rethink the concrete realities of racial aggressions as not “micro” but as everyday acts of racial violence. It also allows us to interrogate the structural conditions that foster daily racial violence. And it also allows us to relocate some of our energies to thinking about how best to dismantle the root causes of racism (and those affected by it), rather than trying to figure out how to bandage the victims of racial violence. In this respect, the term racial microaggression does not fully capture the essence and harm of everyday racial violence towards people of color.

In the rest of this article, we do the following: First, we explore the various definitions of racial microaggressions, paying special attention to its origination with Chester Pierce and the significant contributions of Philomena Essed and Derald Wing Sue. Next, we unpack the concept of racial microaggressions as it has been used broadly in the social sciences, particularly with respect to the theoretical frameworks of racial battle fatigue (RBF) and critical race theory (CRT). Finally, we conclude with suggestions as to how in rethinking racial microaggressions we might move forward in ways that not only challenge existing scholarship—of which this is far from our intent—but allow us to fully grasp the consequences of what it means to be a person of color in a racialized social system (Bonilla-Silva, 1997).

2 | RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS

2.1 | The concept of microaggressions originated in psychiatric and psychological

practice and represents a way to understand microaggressions at the individual level. Racial microaggression is often defined as racial slights, often subtle, that serves as markers of belonging—that is, who belongs and who does not. In this respect, it may not matter that the perpetrator of racial slights is aware or unaware of how their responses may be hurtful. But the message is often more clear to those who do not fit into normative whiteness—you are not welcome here, you do not belong here, or some iteration of the two.

2.1.1 | Chester Pierce: The father of microaggressions

Leading practitioner and Harvard University psychiatrist Chester Pierce was a trailblazer whose contributions we argue are still waiting to be recognized. Although Pierce is known for his scholarship on racism, societal tensions, sports medicine, and the discriminatory aspects of the media, three of his greatest contributions was the development of a type of stress specific to the lives of Blacks called the mundane extreme environmental stress (MEES); a concept that explains how racism is promulgated called microaggressions; and a concept that explains what is taken away from Blacks through microaggressions, including: space, time, energy, and motion (STEM). Dr. Pierce developed all these concepts from what he heard repeatedly from his patients. In addition, Dr. Pierce proposed that racism should be considered a mental health problem while pointing out the similarities in objective and consequences shared between racism, terrorism, and torture. Unlike many of his psychiatrist and psychologist colleagues, Pierce differed in his acute awareness of the macro-structural levels of racism that informed racial attitudes and encouraged racial discrimination.

Microaggressions—In 1970, Pierce published a book chapter titled “Offensive Mechanisms” in which he took a psychiatric well-known concept of defense mechanisms deemed crucial in the reduction or avoidance of shame and guilt, permitting the individual to function without being overwhelmed by anxiety, and turned it on its head. While protesting the lack of concern with what he called, *offensive mechanisms* (which he saw as being about aggression and violence), Pierce argued that part of the role of social psychiatrists was to study offensive mechanisms and resulting offensive maneuvers. “For it is from feelings of superiority that one group of people proceeds to brutalize, degrade, abuse and humiliate another group of individuals” (p. 265). According to Pierce (1995, p. 281), one of gravest offensive mechanisms were microaggressions and Pierce defined them as such:

“subtle, innocuous, preconscious, or unconscious degradations, and putdowns, often kinetic but capable of being verbal and/or kinetic. In and of itself a microaggression may seem harmless, but the cumulative burden of a lifetime of microaggressions can theoretically contribute to diminishing mortality, augmented morbidity, and flattened confidence.”

For Pierce, microaggressions create mini disasters in the lives of Blacks. He noted, "...one must not look for the gross and obvious, this subtle, cumulative mini assault is the substance of today's racism." (Pierce, 1974, p. 616) A disaster is a serious disruption of normal functioning that last a short time but exceeds their capacity and coping resources. Individuals must offset this excessive loss, and this becomes cumulative without ever fully compensating. More interesting were the ways in which Pierce acknowledged racism as part of the formula for explaining the root causes of microaggressions and the importance of the daily and cumulative injuries suffered by his patients. He was further aware that the superiority feelings accompanying contemptuous condescension toward a target group were so rampant in our society that he argued it was virtually impossible for any negotiation between Blacks and whites to take place without the auspices of such offensive tactics (265).

The realities and importance of fully understanding how microaggressions affected Black lives were such as Pierce argued that their cumulative effect was of "unimaginable magnitude." Pierce conceptualized microaggressions to occur in the interaction between Blacks and whites and proposed that superiority stemming from racism could manifest as micro-offenses which "minimize the social importance of Black achievement so that Blacks see themselves as useless, unlovable and unable" (268). Microaggressions, thus, allow for Blacks to be denied equality in education and employment while also being more overtly terrorized by police departments in Black neighborhoods. Pierce implicated US culture as making microaggressions automatic and even obligatory on the part of whites. Furthermore, he argued that while these mechanisms may be seen as conscious, unconscious, or preconscious to white people, to Blacks they are salient and automatic. Pierce envisioned microaggressions as a public health issue due to its magnitude and lasting damaging effects on Blacks.

What is at play: Space, time, energy, and movement (STEM)—According to Pierce (1970), "dominance-submission dynamics depend heavily on psychological as well as physical manipulations by the victimizers (106)." The victim must confirm the superiority of the aggressor whose goal is to have total unquestionable obedience "in the service of the convenience, aggrandizement, entertainment, and pride of the offender (Ibid)." It is through this process of constant submission that the offender takes away the space, time, energy, and movement (STEM) of the victim. It erodes the opportunities for pride. The person will be free of victimization when she regains control of space, time, energy, and movement. For example, Blacks are subject to arrest when they cross boundaries from Black to white neighborhoods. Blacks are also discouraged away from white spaces that are alien and antagonistic to Blacks. Time is compromised when Blacks are deterred from white spaces that require circumventing and adding time. Energy is compromised when Blacks must spend time thinking over microaggressions and wondering what to do with those assaults. Movement is compromised as Blacks must stay away from white spaces and when attention is called on to them as suspicious. These are just some examples of how STEM correlates with microaggressions. Regaining control of STEM means that the individual no longer must play the inferiority role.

What it creates: MEES—The ongoing daily onslaught of discriminatory stress⁵ in such a variety of forms inflicted on Blacks during their lifetime in the US is tremendous. Daily microaggressions are occurring in schools, jobs, media, books, gyms, clubs, restaurants, street, courts, and politics. Blacks are subject to being described by anyone in the street who deputizes themselves to report them as suspicious and bringing police to interact which brings extreme vulnerability (see Anderson, 2011, 2015; Embrick, Weffer-Elizondo, & Dominguez, 2019). Many Black people are petrified of being shot at any time by a police officer (Embrick, 2015a, 2015b; Hughey, 2015), or being refused employment following a devaluing microaggression and wondering why people you have trained are now in positions not available to you (Embrick & Henricks, 2013). The stress involved is extreme and mundane. Pierce understood this because he lived it personally. He also experienced this through his patients and historical accounts of Black towns being destroyed and its residents killed. This extreme stress impacts the psyche and worldview of Blacks. Its cumulative consequence results in limited opportunities, poor mental and physical health, and decreased life expectancy. Pierce called this (MEES)⁶ and this has become a type of stress specific to the reality of African Americans. Grace Carrol and William Smith both sociologists, are among a multitude of scholars who have taken MEES further in studies. William Smith, in particular has argued that MEES results in what he has coined RBF. According to Pierce, cumulative nature of racism and microaggressions compromises the STEM of Blacks and leads to MEES.

2.1.2 | Philomena Essed: Everyday racism and intersectionality

Studying the theoretical underpinnings of racial microaggressions must begin with notable social scientist Philomena Essed, who pioneered the understanding of everyday racism. Essed, the daughter of Surinamese parents, spent her youth in Surinam and the Netherlands where her family settled and where Essed did her studies in Anthropology and later Social Sciences. Essed wrote several books but the important ones for understanding racial microaggressions are *Everyday Racism: Reports from Women of Two Cultures* (Essed, 1990) and *Understanding Everyday Racism: An Interdisciplinary Theory* (Essed, 1991). The original writings were in Dutch a decade earlier. Essed made a number of contributions on racism in the US and the Netherlands and in particular by looking at the experiences of racism on Black women. She formulated links between the micro and macro in order to explain racism that was quotidian yet stemming from structure. Although Essed did not use the language of microaggressions in teasing out the pervasiveness of everyday racism.

Writing in roughly the same time period, both Essed and Pierce share striking similarities with one another in their understanding of the cumulative effects of being exposed to daily racial violence. Whereas Pierce describes the structural links to microaggressions in the global sociocultural ideologies and mechanisms of white supremacy, Essed looks for a theoretical macro-micro link while considering three types of racism: cultural, institutional, and individual. Pierce describes how microaggressions are sustained in everyday interactions between Blacks and the white world. Essed criticizes the mainstream neglect of racism scholars who identify racism as a societal issue, but do not pay attention to the pervasive experiences of *daily racism* in the lives of Blacks. Like Pierce, Essed bases her theory on Blacks' subjective experience. While Pierce used the experiences of his patients to develop microaggressions as a concept, Essed considers Blacks to be sophisticated in their understanding of racism based on their daily experiences. Pierce argues that microaggressions work by constraining space, time, energy, and motion (STEM). Essed wrote that racism worked by: inferiorization; social or spatial distancing, and social or physical aggression. As we can see, there are many parallels between these two contemporaries.

Essed defines everyday racism as a process in which (a) socialized racist notions are integrated into meanings that make practices immediately definable and manageable, (b) practices with racist implications becoming themselves familiar and repetitive, and (c) are actualized and reinforced through these routines or familiar practices in everyday situations. Essed contends that racism is *vicariously* spread among Blacks which adds to its everyday occurrence. To Essed, racism is fully integrated in routine everyday practices. In setting out to better connect micro and macro levels of racism, Essed wrote, "To understand the specific nature of temporary basis, it is assumed to proceed from the level of individual attitudes to the larger economic, political, ideological processes in a society." (20). For Essed, traditional sociological approaches have defined macrostructure's aspects of racism more or less independent of the practices in daily life. Essed criticized aversive, symbolic, and modern racism as inefficient theories to understand racism while ignoring what she perceived to be a progressive culturalization of racism. She saw cultural pluralism replacing the "melting pot" integration processes and instead, pushing the genetic and culture of poverty arguments.⁷ Essed blamed cultural pluralism for complaints of reverse discrimination due to its leveling of all groups as being equal. She also criticized the move from "race" to "ethnicity" as a way to avoid taking responsibility for racism. In this way, she argues, ethnic identity becomes an instrument of control. Furthermore, Essed argued that racial and ethnic conflict are maintained through three main processes: (a) marginalization, a form of oppression; (b) containment, a form of repression; and (c) problematization, the ideological constructions legitimizing exclusion and repression of opposition. These are three major forms of racism which are ideologically structured and situationally construed (1991, p. 10).

Essed relied on two major theoretical attempts at integrating micro and macro dimensions of a system. One is the aggregation hypothesis proposed by Randall Collins in his (Collins, 1981) essay on "Micro-translation as a Theory-Building Strategy," where he argues that microsociological reality is composed of aggregates of microsituations. The other attempt is the representation hypothesis, the brain child of Cicourel (1981) who argued that macro social facts, or structures, are produced by interactions. Both the aggregation and representation hypothesis rely on routine

and repetition in practices that culminate in social structures. Essed departs from these theories giving greater weight to the mutual interdependence of macro and micro dimensions of racism. To this she contends, "Structures of racism don't exist external to agents—they are made by, agents—but specific practices are by definition racist only when they activate existing structural racial inequality in the system" (39).

As it pertains to microaggressions, it is important to make distinctions between overt and covert racism. In covert expressions of racism, Essed believes that negative intentions cannot be inferred from the act themselves. The definition of the situation seems negotiable. "The relation between racist ideology and racist practices is determined by the historical, material, and political context and the degree to which ideologies are saturated in the cognition of agents" (1991, p. 47). The fact that negative intentions are questionable in prejudicial encounters is found again in some of the ambiguity that Sue (2010a) has written about and that we know affects the individual as much as having the certainty of negative intention.

Essed formulated her thinking by studying the experiences of racism on women. An intersectionality analysis informs us that as women they were likely to experience more intense negative treatment than most men. Essed noted that when she asked women about incidents of discrimination, they did not respond affirmatively but did so during a more elaborate conversation. Essed argues that racism often appeared in implicit form and it involved what many considered trivial injustices. In order for the women to answer affirmatively, they would need to keep in mind and tally the numerous, often minor, painful accidents which are normally tolerated or repressed. She noted (1990, p. 58), "Women do not want to be seen as a bother, so they minimize their uncomfortability." Of course, these are internalized patriarchal narratives that make women not want to be seen as a bother. Yet, they were very much seen as a bother by men who disrespected them intensely, often cutting their options for further development.

2.2 | Racial microaggressions in the 2000s

The early part of the 2000s saw an explosion in interest and research, particularly in the field of psychology, on microaggressions, much of which extended Pierce's concept in tackling everyday racism outside of the Black/white binary, as well as across other forms of oppression: sexism, trans/homophobia, ageism, ableism, for example. That said, interestingly, it was also during this time period that much of the research published largely ignored or minimized the central contributions of Chester Pierce and Philomena Essed; although it is true that efforts were made across the board to at minimal acknowledge Pierce as the person who coined the term microaggressions.

2.2.1 | Derald Wing Sue: Racial microaggressions in everyday life

Although rapidly changing, much of the racial microaggressions scholarship since the early 2000s has been dominated by psychologist Derald Wing Sue. His seminal collaborative article (2007) and two books, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender and Sexual Orientation* (2010a) and an edited volume, *Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamic, and Impact* (2010b) were published within a span of 3 years. Since then, hundreds of articles have been written using his racial taxonomy, making Sue one of the leading spokespersons for microaggressions.

Derald Wing Sue began his career as a therapist in California before becoming a Professor of counseling and clinical psychology. Initially concerned with the lack of psychological understanding of Asians in the United States, Sue, along with his brother Stanley, founded the Asian Psychological Association in 1972. Sue's initial concerns were with multiculturalism and racial aspects to be considered in psychological practice, and this has remained a driving force in Sue's work. In fact, his books on multicultural counseling have been required reading by Psychology courses for years. Along with this practice focus, Sue's interest in microaggressions came out in 2007 with a publication in the *American Psychologist* titled, "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice," cowritten with Christina M. Capodilupo, Gina C. Torino, Jennifer M. Bucceri, Aisha M. B. Holder, Kevin L. Nadal, and

Marta Esquilin. Sue and his collaborators based their microaggressions work on Symbolic (Sears, 1988) and Aversive racism (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002). Symbolic Racism is based on a set of beliefs that Blacks violate cultural values like individualism and the belief in working hard to get ahead in life. Other values that feed negative perceptions are based on morality, capacity of self-restraint, and family traditionalism. The term *racism* is applicable because the belief that Blacks violate cherished values is often strongly associated with negative feelings or antipathy toward Blacks, while *symbolic* highlights the fact that the roots of the symbolic racism belief system are in these abstract, moral values, rather than in concrete self-interest or personal experiences. This allows Blacks to be targeted as an abstract collectivity rather than as specific individuals. Aversive Racism is a type of ambivalence developed by individuals who sympathize with the victims of past injustices and at times support public policies that promote racial equality. Aversive racists identify more clearly with a liberal political agenda and regard themselves as nonprejudiced and nondiscriminatory while unavoidably possessing negative feelings about Blacks. The aversive racist is unaware of these negative feelings about Blacks due to their beliefs in egalitarian values. As a result, negative racial attitudes can be expressed indirectly. Finally, aversive racists keep and reinforce negative evaluations of people of color by a persistent avoidance of interaction with other racial and ethnic groups. This avoidance is easily achievable given segregation in housing and employment settings. Both symbolic and aversive racism point out how pervasive racism is, how subtle it has become, how it calls on abstract collectivity and not individualized differences and how ambivalent many whites are when it comes to their racism which escapes into interactions with Black or others (as abstract collectives) which result in a microaggression.

2.2.2 | Sue's racial taxonomy⁸

Sue's racial taxonomy is predicated on three specific forms of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are most similar to old-fashion racism at the individual level. They are conscious and deliberate. Microinsults are communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity to ethnic and racial heritage or identity. These exchanges communicate less than worthiness as in being in a job because of Affirmative Action. Finally, microinvalidations "are characterized by communication that excludes, negates or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of a person of color" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). Sue (2010a) argues that microinvalidations may be the most insidious form of microaggressions because it cuts down opportunities for people of color and negate the significance of identity in the lives of people of color. Sue's taxonomy has been the basis of the majority of research on microaggressions. In a review of all microaggression studies from 2007 to 2014, which included 73 studies, Wong and company found that 72 of the studies used Sue's taxonomy and most were done using college students and faculty as data (Wong, Derthick, David, Saw, & Okazaki, 2014).

Sue (2010b) also writes about the psychological dynamics of microaggressions as including four different components. First, Sue believes that there is a clash of realities between the dominant group and socially devalued group explained as differences in socialization that foster implicit bias through cultural conditioning. The results of the conditioning become encoded in the emotional and neurological matter (Boysen & Vogel, 2008). Second, there are two layers of resistance that accompany the invisibility of unintentional bias and discrimination; the perpetrator's unawareness of his prejudices and his need to preserve his image as someone who is unbiased and a righteous person. Third, the perceived minimal harm of microaggressions in which literature speaks to the contrary with biological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral consequences. Finally, there is a Catch 22 of responding, which leads to the questioning of objective, "did he mean what I think he meant?" (Attributional ambiguity), "I do not know how to respond" (indecisiveness about the response), "He is denying my reality" (Denying experiential reality), and "this is hopeless" (impotence of actions). In addition, Sue identifies nine common themes, falling into three categories: Alien in one's own land, the ascription of intelligence, colorblindness, the assumption of criminality, denial of racism, myth of meritocracy, pathologizing cultural norms, second-class citizenship, and environmental invalidation.

In later writings on marginality and oppression, Sue (2010a) states that persecution can occur through imposition or deprivation. Imposition is the act of imposing unwanted and inaccurate realities onto people of color. Deprivation is the denial of the opportunity structure to people of color or accomplishments made by people of color. Much of history has erased what people of color have accomplished like the fact that women of color were among the first human computers (i.e., doing the logistical calculations by hand) and among the first to work with what became computers in NASA.

2.2.3 | Applications of Sue's racial taxonomy

Much of the research that follow Sue's taxonomy have used quantitative methods that count on people's capacity to recall individual's experience with microaggressions. Following the review article by Wong et al. (2014) which criticized recall-based studies, Ong and Burrow (2017) answered the call and attempted to go further by using methodologies to find macroaggressions longitudinally as they occur via the utilization of diaries. They published an article in *Perspectives on Psychological Science* in 2017 with a longitudinal focus. But the aims of their article really centered on issues of methods that did not really touch upon Sue's conceptualization of microaggressions.

2.2.4 | Avoidance of structure

Sue demonstrates an ambivalence and a lack of follow-through in the conceptualization when it comes to environmental microaggressions regarding how structural it becomes. In 2007, Sue explained that environmental microaggressions are macro-level microaggressions, which are more apparent at the systemic and environmental levels. Examples might include colleges or universities with buildings that are all named after cis-White heterosexual, upper-class males; television shows and movies that feature predominantly White programs, without representation of people of color; the overcrowding of public schools; or the overabundance of liquor stores in communities of color. Hence, a lack of inclusion and representation in institutions are microaggressions. Yet, what of the policy-based reasons for low-quality schools or zoning policies that allow for a high number of liquor stores to be concentrated in some neighborhoods—where and how would that fit in?

Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder (2008, p. 331) considered microaggressions as implicating an “unconscious worldview of white supremacy that directly assails the racial reality of Black Americans.” Here he briefly touches upon the importance of considering white supremacy. In a piece published in 2010, Sue argued that the term “environmental microaggressions” refers to “numerous demeaning and threatening social, educational, political, or economic indications that are transferred individually, institutionally, or societally to marginalized groups.” (25) Although Sue teases by including additional layers of complexity in this definition, he nonetheless shies away from naming a culprit or binding agents like a racialized system of domination or neoliberal capitalism. It is as if these problems existed on their own, or were produced by an invisible hand. More recently, Sue and company published an article in a (Sue, 2019) special issue on racial trauma in *American Psychologist* where they address the harmful impact of macroaggressions. While the authors make some attempt at acknowledging institutional and structural racism, it is short lived and not fully fleshed out.

Because the work on environmental microaggressions remains incomplete, there is an absence of research testing this concept within the taxonomy. Sue has undoubtedly put down a foundation for the concept of microaggressions that is adequate for the branches of psychology that are individualized and interpersonally based. He has conceptualized around the different motivations and the interpersonal interaction between perpetrator and victim. Much of Sue's work still under construction has to do with expanding the common themes, which have grown and diversified with LGBT and other minority groups which all seem to be more specific to their status themes.

However, the further conceptualization of environmental microaggressions and the invisible hand is a limitation for many sociologists interested in studying racial microaggressions.

2.3 | Enter the CRT framework

The CRT framework emerged out of critical legal studies in the 1980s that needed to address racism in law schools and other US legal institutions. Leading legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado spearheaded the movement to better understand the relationship between law, power, racism, and emancipation. The tenets of CRT maintain that white supremacy and racial power are maintained over time and affect legal processes in favor of the dominant group in society. As CRT became more popular as a racial framework, scholars in other disciplines such as sociology and education saw CRT as a way to better understand and conceptualize the ongoing amount of racism affecting people of color in the United States. Microaggression scholars utilizing CRT as a foundation for their work have mostly concentrated on health and education disparities as a consequence of racial microaggressions. Central to their motivations is to separate themselves from Derald Wing Sue, who, as a psychologist, is best known for microaggressions, and who is followed by scholars from many other disciplines including sociologists who have chosen to accept and rely on Sue's racial taxonomy. Proponents of CRT as the central framework from which to interrogate racial microaggressions include Smith (2004) and his work on RBF and Solorzano (1998).

Contrary to Sue's framework, which barely pays attention to Pierce, Smith, and Solórzano rely heavily on Chester Pierce's previous work on microaggressions, although to varying degrees. Both Smith and Solórzano incorporate (MEES) in their scholarship, although Smith (2004) goes a bit further by incorporating space, time, energy, and motion or (STEM). Pierce maintained that Blacks are bombarded constantly with oppressive agents, environments, and situations which constrain their space, time, energy, and motion. Smith's RBF can thus be viewed as a synthesis between Pierce's work and CRT.

2.3.1 | RBF and racial microaggressions

In 2004, William Smith developed the RBF framework, placing racial microaggressions within a historical, sociological, and psychological context, explaining the long- and short-term effects of resisting and struggling against racialized stressors. For Smith, racial microaggressions can range from racial slights, recurrent indignities and irritations, unfair treatment, stigmatization, hypersurveillance, and contention situation to personal attacks on Blacks' well-being. RBF is based on combat stress disorder, injury of posttraumatic disorder diagnosed with military personnel who have been to extreme stressful violence-ridden situations (Pierce, 1975, 1995; Smith, 2004). Smith argues that while the military soldier is exposed to a high-level of hypervigilance in a context of life-threatening conditions developing combat stress-related disorders, African-Americans develop racial fatigue syndrome from constant threats that attack the dignity and character in a racially hostile environment resulting in coping that depletes psychological and physiological resources needed for other critical, creative, and productive areas of life.

In addition to (MEES) and (STEM), RBF incorporates individualism, Black misandry, and John Henryism in its conceptualization of microaggressions. Individualism or collectivism is necessary to understand the effect of the culture and society on people of color. The United States significantly values individualism, a trait consistent with the white Anglo-Saxon culture. Individuality is in itself the basic unit of analysis and survival (Hui & Villareal, 1989). At the basis of this belief is that individuals are independent of another. This focus on individualism has being heightened via neoliberalism, which sees collectivism as a danger and individuals as being solely responsible for their demise and well-being. As anthropologist Jose Molina states, "You are the problem, but lucky for you, you are also the solution." Race scholars believe this focus on individualism is responsible for divergent beliefs among whites and people of

color in terms of racism and keeps the extreme levels of oppressive beliefs, context, and environment affecting Blacks and other people of color (Bobo, 2000; Bobo & Hutchings, 1996; Bobo & Kluegel, 1993).

Possessing an individualistic ideology becomes a significant problem for those offering human services and policymakers who focus attention on proximate risk factors while ignoring social conditions and more distant factors that cause disease, mental health problems, educational deficiencies, and race-based stress (Noguera, 2003). Among many, individualism becomes a racial code word that excuses white privilege and white supremacy while victimizing further Blacks and other people of color (Hymowitz, 2005). RBF also incorporates Black misandry into microaggressions, identified by Smith (2010) as the hating of Black men represented in gendered forms of racism. Finally, RBF looks at the impact of behavioral stressors on Blacks in the psychosocial construct, coined "John Henryism." John Henry lives in the American Folklore as a Black man who died of a heart attack after winning a competition against a steam-powered steel-driving machine. He epitomizes the value of hard work and determination in the face of overwhelming odds, setting up the expectations that RBF should and can be coped with; the key element being that through hard work stressors can be contained. In sum, Pierce, Smith, and others see all these factors imbedded in RBF as curtailing the life chances and decreasing the life expectancy of Blacks.

2.3.2 | CRT and racial microaggressions

Solorzano (1998) is notable in his use of microaggressions as a tool in CRT to understand educational disparities. As Solorzano (1998, p. 122) states, "critical race theory in education challenges the dominant discourse on race and racism as they relate to education by examining how educational theory, policy, and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups." The basic CRT model that Solorzano (1997, 1998) uses consists of five elements that interrogate: (a) the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination; (b) a challenge to dominant ideology; (c) a commitment to social justice; (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and (e) the transdisciplinary perspective. Solorzano explains that these components of CRT are specific to the study of educational disparities due to discrimination.

Solorzano incorporates *Stereotype Threat* in his formulations of microaggressions, a concept for which Steele and Aronson (1995) is well known. Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000, p. 62) state, "Any exploration of racial microaggressions concept must include an examination of the cumulative nature of racial stereotypes and their effects." Steele and Aronson sees stereotype threat to be responsible for people of color disappointing performance in tests, and this occurs when words that represent racial differences or race come up in questions, people of color become afraid of living up to the stereotype and that stress results in poor performance. Because Stereotype Threat has been most validated in education activities, Solorzano predicts that racial microaggressions in educational environments are based on Stereotype Threat.

In later years, Huber and Solorzano (2015) would moved further in their conceptualization of microaggressions by adding visual and institutional microaggressions. They define visual microaggressions as, "systemic, every day visual assaults based on race, gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname that emerge in various mediums such as textbooks, children's books, advertisements, film and television, dance and theater performance, and public signage and statuary" (223). Through this framework, they studied the historical image of the Mexican banditry as it appears in children's books and advertisements.

By 2015, Solorzano and Perez Huber are defining microaggressions as (a) verbal and nonverbal assaults directed towards People of Color, often carried out in subtle, automatic or unconscious forms; (b) layered assaults, based on race and its intersections with gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname; and (c) cumulative assaults that take a psychological, physiological, and academic toll on People of Color. Solorzano and Perez Huber consider racial microaggressions as a useful tool to study the everyday experiences of racism, which they say are inextricably linked to institutional racism (i.e., structures and processes), and ideologies of white supremacy that maintain racial subordination.

In sum, Solorzano et al. have included racial microaggression questions as a tool to accompany CRT and stereotype threat as a synergetic way to study visual and institutional microaggressions as they play a significant role in educational disparities. In doing so, they demonstrate that racial microaggressions are much more than just insults. The use of CRT has further allowed scholars to expand further in conceptualizing microaggressions as an intimate subordinating aspect of the racialized system of domination. This perspective, therefore, helped to move the discussion about subtle forms of racism in academic and nonacademic circles from the realm of individual interactions to an institutional realm. As such, it offers scholars interested in the subtler aspects of discrimination with an opportunity to study microaggressions more holistically.

2.3.3 | Sociologists enter the conversation

The past five or so years have seen many more sociologists entering into the debates and conversations of racial microaggressions, either expanding on racial groups affected, or using innovative methods in interrogating the power of racial microaggressions. On the former, we have seen more scholarship looking at indigenous groups (Senter & Ling, 2017), Latinx (Ballinas, 2017), and Pacific Islanders (Vila & Brunsma, 2014), for example. Hughey et al. (2015), using an experimental vignette design, found that exposure to microaggressions are correlated with racial attitudes associated with various forms of repression of people of color. Moreover, Zambrana et al. (2017), using a mixed-methods approach, found that faculty of color in historically white institutions regularly encounter racial discrimination from colleagues and administrators. While this news is refreshing, the number of social scientists still neglecting the structural and institutional side of the racial microaggressions equation is far too many.

3 | CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR MORE INTERSECTIONAL AND INTERDISCIPLINARY ANALYSIS

Our objectives in this review were to highlight the significant contributions of Chester Pierce, Philomena Essed, and Derald Wing Sue in microaggressions and racial microaggressions research. In doing so, we also considered the shortcomings in this area, much of which has been the result of the failures to fully realize the usefulness of a more interdisciplinary approach that fully captures the deleterious effects of daily racial microaggressions on people of color at the individual, interpersonal and psychological levels, as well as structural and institutional levels of racism. In witnessing the trajectory of scholarship in this area, with some exceptions (see again Smith, 2004; Solorzano, 1998), we see minimal engagement in the earlier works of Pierce and Essed, with much research extending Sue's Racial Taxonomy. The result, we argue, has been a stagnation in scholarship that realizes, or captures, the full dangers that people of color face daily when exposed to everyday racism in society.

As we have argued above, when considering everyday racial violence along the full life course, and at the individual, institutional, and societal levels, the multiplier effects of racial violence produce a very different story, one that may be much more alarming than we currently believe. In line with Pierce's observations, racial microaggressions, contrary to its moniker (read: micro), is as harmful to people of color as how we think about torture and terrorism—toxic, deadly, potentially excruciatingly painful. Better understanding the cumulative effects of racial microaggressions may help us to better understand racial health disparities such as black mothers' maternal mortality, the rates of heart disease among blacks, and more. While we have advocated for more sociological insight to better understand racial microaggressions, a better way moving forward would be to recognize the glaring omission of scholarship that include historically (and currently) stigmatized and/or marginalized voices of the academic community, for example, Afro-Centrist/Futurist, Critical Latino/a Studies, Du Boisian thought, or Colonial/Post-Colonial and Settler Colonial theories.

Finally, inspired by earlier works produced by Philomena Essed, particularly her research on *everyday racism*, we must recognize that the consequences of racial microaggressions do not affect all people in the same ways. We live intersectional lives and the multiplier effects of daily microaggressions are further compounded by our positions in society racially, ethnically, sexually, economically, and so forth. Men of color face daily challenges coping with racial microaggressions as Black men in a white supremacist society, and those stressors accumulate over time. But, as Essed (1990) has noted, women of color face the additional scrutiny, discrimination, and daily microaggressions of living in a patriarchal society. If we start thinking about racial microaggressions along an intersectional *and* interdisciplinary approach, we might suddenly find ourselves grappling with a larger picture of the realities of the lives and costs of being a person of color in a racialized social system.

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ENDNOTES

¹This quote from Chester Pierce was given at a Psychiatric Association conference in 1986; Pierce presented his thinking about extreme mundane stress and its consequences in a lecture named, "Unity in Diversity: Thirty-Three Years of Stress."

²We note that some scholars have rebuked Lilienfeld's review for its limitations in understanding the fundamental basics of racism in the U.S. For example, Williams (2019a) contends that Lilienfeld is misguided in his understanding of microaggressions and racism, in general.

³MRP refers to microaggressions research project; Lilienfeld (2017, p. 140) defines MRP as "the broad line of research focused on microaggressions and their potential impact on the behavior of recipients."

⁴For more information, see Williams (2019b) [Whitepaper]. "Racial Micro-aggressions: Another Means to Obfuscating Systemic White Racism."

⁵We understand discriminatory stress as stressors (physical, physiological, and mental) that cumulate as a result of discrimination (real or perceived, overt or subtle).

⁶For more on MEES, see Pierce (1975). The mundane extreme environment and its effect on learning. Learning disabilities: Issues and recommendations for research. In S. Brainard (Ed.), *Learning Disabilities: Issues and Recommendations for Research*. Washington, DC: National Institute of Education.

⁷For a good overview of cultural pluralism, "melting pot," and other classical assimilation theories, see Steinberg's (2001) book, *The Ethnic Myth: Race, Ethnicity, and Class in America*. New York, NY: Beacon Press.

⁸It is worth noting that Sue's Racial Taxonomy was developed through his observations, rather than systematic empirical data.

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