Racism, College, and the Power of Words: Racial Microaggressions Reconsidered

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Based on interview data from a collective case study, this article uses current notions of racial microaggressions to explore this "subtle" racism through the voices of six Latino/a students as they transition to a predominantly White university. Using critical race theory as a framework, I argue for greater understanding and increased use of the term racial microaggressions *within education generally and specifically with regard to higher education. I also, however, argue for specific changes in the existing framework of racial* microaggressions, *contending that the term microaggression is at times misused within academia and that this misuse has potentially negative consequences. Implications for discussions of racism writ large as well as for specific changes on college campuses are discussed.*

KEYWORDS: microaggressions, racism, postsecondary education, Latino/as, critical race theory

> They [White students on campus] look at me like I shouldn't be here, like I don't belong here. Like, "You need to go back where you came from, 'cause you don't need to be here."
>
> —Moriah

Moriah's[1] confidence was obvious within minutes of initially meeting her a couple months before she started college. Her focus and poise were accented by a comfortable laugh as she sipped her coffee across the table from me. As is evident in the following interview excerpt, Moriah was well aware of this self-confidence and spoke of it in an effortless, nonchalant way:

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Interviewer: What advantage might you have in terms of succeeding [in college] that others don't?

Moriah: I guess my wisdom—I don't know. My mom says I'm conceited, but like, . . . it's my confidence, and that I know that I'm gonna be the only one who can do it for myself, so I have to do it. I wanna be successful.

This confidence was quickly diminished, however, within weeks of starting college. Although she maintained a 3.65 grade point average throughout her first semester, by October she was considering dropping out. Her college, which was predominantly White, was not a welcoming place for her—she constantly felt she was treated as if she were an outsider. Moriah rarely saw any faces in the crowd that resembled her own, she often was stared at by White students as she walked through campus, and she witnessed various forms of racism on campus. Not surprisingly, she soon began to feel "miserable" and left campus nearly every weekend to visit the larger, more diverse city in which she grew up.

Unfortunately, Moriah's experience of feeling isolated and "out of place"— as well as being the target of racism—can be common among students of color at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) (Everett-Haynes & Deil-Amen, 2009; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Patton, 2006; Strange & Banning, 2001; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). Too often, however, with regard to underrepresented students at PWIs our collective focus is on measurable outcomes such as grade point averages, the rates of college acceptance, and graduation rates and what those trends can tell us. While these numbers are certainly important, they do not tell us enough about the students' *experiences* in college. Many times, the college experience for underrepresented students is reduced to "success" or "failure" based on grades and graduation rates alone. If a student graduates, there is a collective pat on the back and the student's college experience is moved to the "success" column on a spreadsheet. But, if that student was unhappy during her entire college career, if she left campus every chance she got, and if she couldn't wait to simply finish her degree, deeming her college experience a straightforward success is missing much of the story. There are important lessons to be learned from the lived experiences of underrepresented students at PWIs. Indeed, much can be learned from the resilience of underrepresented students who face isolation and racism, and embedded within their stories are crucial lessons about how institutions need to change to meet the needs of all students.

In this article I use interview and field note data to examine the racialized experiences of six Latino/a students as they transitioned to Midwestern University (MU), a prestigious, public PWI. Through the lens of critical race theory (CRT), I analyze the students' experiences with racism

and I argue for specific ways in which college campuses must address and combat racism. Specifically, I use current frameworks of *racial microaggressions* (Sue, 2010; Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007) to explore racism through the voices and experiences of the students themselves. I argue for greater understanding and increased use of the term *racial microaggressions* within education generally and specifically with regard to the transition to college for underrepresented students as a way to decrease racism on campuses. I also, however, draw on the field of critical applied linguistics to contend that the term *microaggression* is at times misused within academia and that this misuse has potentially negative consequences. Finally, I argue for an expansion of the existing framework of racial microaggressions to include the recognition and naming of a "contested microaggression."

College Campuses and Racial Microaggressions

Latinos[2] are at once the least educated and the fastest growing group within the United States (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). In 2006, Latinos/as made up 19% of the school-age population in the United States; in 2025, one in four K–12 students in the country will be Latino/a (Gándara & Contreras, 2009, pp. 304–305). In terms of college completion, Latinos are lagging behind other racial groups: In 2010, 30.3% of Whites aged 25 and over had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 19.8% of African Americans and only 13.9% of Latinos (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012, p. 151). What's more, although there has been "substantial growth" in postsecondary degree completion for other groups, Latino/a degree completion has "remained stagnant" (Gándara & Contreras, 2009, p. 24).

In 2005, when the students in the study presented here finished their junior year in high school, only 50% of U.S. Latino/a high school students graduated. Additionally, compared to 73% of White high school graduates, 54% of Latino/a graduates went directly to college; the majority of this 54%, however, attended 2-year institutions. Only 7% of bachelor's degrees were given to Latinos/as (U.S. Department of Education, 2006, 2007).

Given these statistics, it is crucial that we learn more about the college experiences of those Latino/a students who do enroll in selective institutions, many of which are predominantly White. However, despite the influential body of research on Latino/a students' experiences in K–12 schooling (e.g., Flores-González, 2002; Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Valdés, 1996, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999), in-depth qualitative research that explores the lives of Latino/a students as they transition to college is scarce. Specifically, although we know that encountering racialized and other discriminatory experiences can have a deep impact on the ways in which underrepresented students perceive—and interact with—their college environment (Camille, Fischer, Mooney, & Massey, 2009; Feagin et al., 1996; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Strange & Banning, 2001; Yosso, 2006;

Yosso et al., 2009), research that closely examines the perspectives of Latino/ a students who begin their college careers at selective, 4-year institutions is particularly rare (see e.g., Minikel-Lacocque, 2011, 2012; Yosso, 2006; Yosso et al., 2009).

Any effort to curb racism on college campuses must start with a discussion of racism itself. Today, racism is most often expressed in covert ways; indeed, overt racism is "usually not socially condoned," and instances of overt racist acts in the public discourse are "rare" (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 61). Racism, many argue, is more commonly expressed through *racial microaggressions* (Pierce, 1974; Sue, 2010; Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). Over three decades ago, psychiatrist Chester Pierce introduced this concept, insisting that it is the insidious, hard to identify, subtle racist injuries that we must pay attention to if we are to understand and combat racism (Pierce, 1974). While overt, violent expressions of racism by consciously racist individuals still exist and cause irreparable harm, this subtle, common form of modern-day racism most often comes from well-meaning individuals (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; Solórzano et al., 2000; Sue, 2010; Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007).

Although there are various working definitions available, relatively little is known about microaggressions; indeed, they are seldom researched. Studies that explicitly examine racial microaggressions in educational contexts are particularly rare, though the few that do exist address microaggressions on college campuses (Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso, 2006; Yosso et al., 2009). Yet, throughout the years scholars have argued that these subtle forms of racism have a deep and lasting impact on race relations as well as on the health and confidence of the targets of such racism (Pierce, 1995; Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Wills, 1978). Thus, while microaggressions are thought to have a significant impact on individuals as well as on race relations writ large, they are difficult to study empirically, and theories surrounding them are in a relatively nascent state.

A Taxonomy of Racial Microaggressions

Most of the current literature on microaggressions comes out of the field of psychology, and the majority of it is published by D. W. Sue and his colleagues (see e.g., Sue, 2010; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007; Sue & Capodilupo, 2008; Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007; Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, & Torino, 2008; Sue, Nadal, et al., 2008). Providing significantly more detail than the original notion of racial microaggressions, Sue and his colleagues (Sue & Capodilupo, 2008; Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007) developed a taxonomy of racial microaggressions, represented in Figure 1.

Thus, as Figure 1 shows, Sue and his colleagues have broadened the original notion of racial microaggressions to include both unintentional and intentional insults in the form of verbal, behavioral, or environmental "indignities."
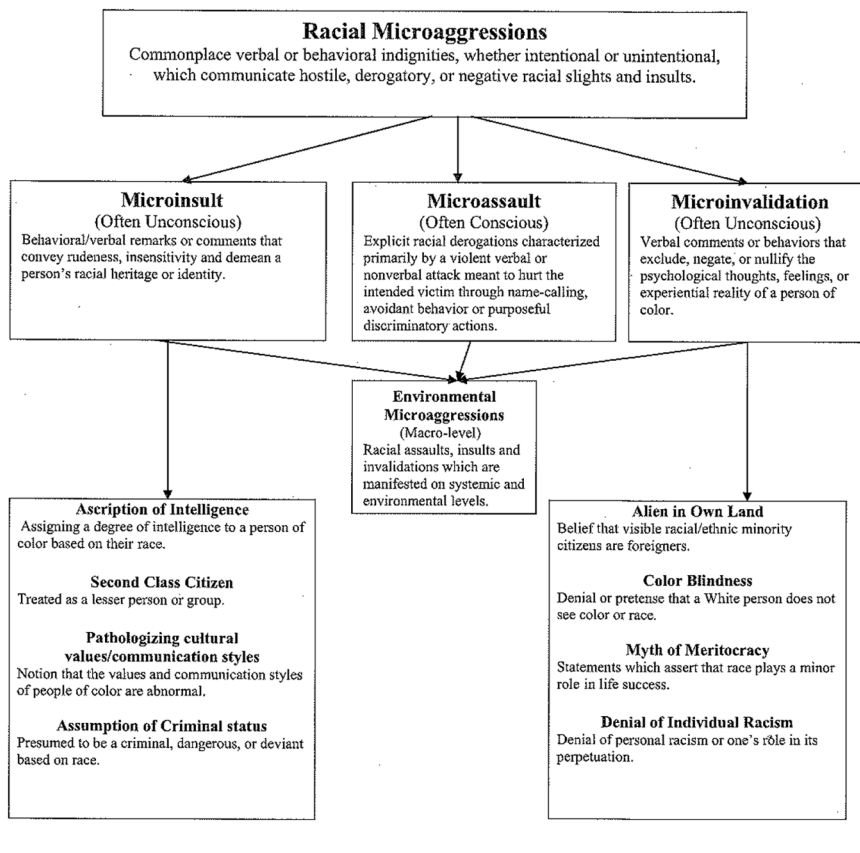
Racial Microaggressions
Commonplace verbal or behavioral indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults.

Microinsult	**Microassault**	**Microinvalidation**
(Often Unconscious)	(Often Conscious)	(Often Unconscious)
Behavioral/verbal remarks or comments that convey rudeness, insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity.	Explicit racial derogations characterized primarily by a violent verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior or purposeful discriminatory actions.	Verbal comments or behaviors that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color.

Environmental Microaggressions
(Macro-level)
Racial assaults, insults and invalidations which are manifested on systemic and environmental levels.

Ascription of Intelligence
Assigning a degree of intelligence to a person of color based on their race.

Second Class Citizen
Treated as a lesser person or group.

Pathologizing cultural values/communication styles
Notion that the values and communication styles of people of color are abnormal.

Assumption of Criminal status
Presumed to be a criminal, dangerous, or deviant based on race.

Alien in Own Land
Belief that visible racial/ethnic minority citizens are foreigners.

Color Blindness
Denial or pretense that a White person does not see color or race.

Myth of Meritocracy
Statements which assert that race plays a minor role in life success.

Denial of Individual Racism
Denial of personal racism or one's rôle in its perpetuation.

Figure 1. **Categories of and relationship among racial microaggressions.**
From Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquín, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist, 62,* 271-286. Reprinted with permission.

Further, the taxonomy also calls for racial microaggressions to be divided into the categories of *microinsults, microassaults*, and *microinvalidations*.

In the following, within the context of Latino/a students' experiences at MU, I bring together critical race theory and the concept of racial microaggressions. I argue that Sue's framework of microaggressions has much to offer the field of education with regard to understanding and combating racism. I also, however, challenge certain aspects of Sue's taxonomy and argue for specific changes and additions to be made. Indeed, the union of CRT and notions of racial microaggressions represents a symbiotic relationship. That is, the notion of recognizing and naming the offense of covert racism is in

line with the tenets of CRT; at the same time, CRT necessitates a critique of some of the ways in which microaggressions have been theorized.

Critical Race Theory

Various educational researchers have taken up CRT to, in part, refute ideologies regarding schooling that treat racial minorities as "other" and deficient (see e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000; Solórzano, Villalpando, & Oseguera, 2005; Yosso, 2005, 2006; Yosso et al., 2009). CRT theorists Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) insist that theories about race must be analyzed explicitly within educational research—in addition to class- and gender-based theories—if we are to sufficiently address inequality in the United States. In essence, the use of CRT in education foregrounds racial inequalities in schooling, challenges the ways in which schooling and race are conceived of within academia, centers the experiences of people of color, and calls for a focus on social justice.

The following six summative themes, identified by Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, and Crenshaw (1993), have come to define CRT and are commonly cited by CRT scholars:

1. Critical race theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
2. Critical race theory expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy.
3. Critical race theory challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law. . . . Critical race theorists . . . adopt a stance that presumes that racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage.
4. Critical race theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society.
5. Critical race theory is interdisciplinary.
6. Critical race theory works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression. (p. 6)

With specific regard to higher education, Morfin, Perez, Parker, Lynn, and Arrona (2006) point out that taken as a whole, CRT research in higher education has highlighted the microaggressions and racial harassment that faculty of color often face as well as hostile racial climates and racial profiling that students of color encounter at PWIs (see e.g., Patton, 2006; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000; Taylor, 2000; Teranishi, Behringer, Grey, & Parker, 2009; Villalpando & Delgado Bernal, 2002). Additionally, they underscore the function of CRT to challenge "the experience of White European Americans as the normative standard" (Morfin et al., 2006, p. 251).

Similarly, Teranishi and colleagues (2009) challenge the exclusive use of "normative framing" to examine equity issues within education. Dominant

paradigms, they explain, are often used to identify the ways in which distinct racial groups are "unevenly distributed across a particular outcome (for example, participation or graduation)" at the exclusion of a deeper probing of inequality (p. 59). CRT, on the other hand, highlights the "needs of marginalized populations, which are often overlooked, as opposed to the agenda served by normative frameworks" (p. 59).

For my purposes here, then, normative frameworks conceive of the needs of Latinos/as in higher education within the same paradigm that the needs of White, middle-class college students are understood. Thus, Latino/a college students are viewed from a deficit perspective. To combat this deficit orientation, the experiences of underrepresented college students must be brought to the foreground of academe. Specifically, CRT calls us to highlight these experiences by "providing thick descriptions of students' stories related to campus environments and college experiences" (Teranishi et al., 2009, p. 59). Through focusing on students' perspectives and insights into their own educational lives, I emphasize their voices as "expert" sources of knowledge. As Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explain, "a theme of 'naming one's own reality' or 'voice' is entrenched in the work of critical race theorists" (pp. 56–57).

In addition to calling on us to name racism and honor the perspectives of those who are injured by racism, CRT pushes us away from perceiving students of color as victims. Indeed, CRT requires us to recognize the resilience of students of color (O'Connor, 1997) as well as various other assets and forms of capital they bring with them to their college careers (Yosso, 2005, 2006; Yosso et al., 2009). Indeed, while much of the literature on racism refers to targets of racism as "victims," this article does not. In fact, the practice of referring to "victims" of racism is counter to CRT, as it eclipses the agency of those who are targeted by racism and places a label on those who do not self-identify as "victims."

Finally, it is insufficient to name and recognize racism and other forms of oppression; CRT also mandates a focus on redressing problems with the aim of working toward social justice. Scholars must "translate theory into practice" in pushing for change through and beyond their roles and work within academe (Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2005, p. 292). This article is an attempt at doing just that: Through applying theory to lived experience, I will highlight some of the ways in which the "practice" at PWIs can be altered to bring about change.

The Role of a (White) Researcher

Within the CRT framework discussed previously, neutrality and objectivity are understood not only as unattainable, but also as undesirable entities that lead to the misrepresentation of the experiences of people of color and detract from the kind of knowledge that becomes possible through

relationships (Yosso, 2005). As Yosso (2005) explains, CRT "challenges no-
tions of 'neutral' research or 'objective' researchers and exposes deficit-
informed research that silences, ignores and distorts epistemologies of
People of Color" (p. 73). Thus, in keeping with CRT, relationships are at
the core of the study presented here. Over the course of the study, I came
to know and care for each of the study participants. Indeed, the comfortable,
familiar relationships that developed between each participant and me al-
lowed for rich, in-depth conversations about the students' lives and experi-
ences during their transitions to MU. In short, it was my goal to understand
as best I could, through personal interactions, the lived experiences of my
study participants and then to relate those experiences responsibly.

Thus, the attempt to do so "responsibly" is at least twofold. First, honor-
ing and telling their personal stories does its part to push the conversation on
racism forward. As Morfin and colleagues (2006) explain, "A key aspect of
the narrative scholarship in CRT is its focus on how stories of racism are
quite personal and appear so for a reason: They attempt to make the reader
question whether any person should be subjected to the treatment detailed
in the story" (pp. 251–252). Second, my own positionality and subjectivity
must be recognized. As a White female researcher I do not claim to have inti-
mate, firsthand knowledge of being the target of any type of racism, nor do I
claim to understand experientially what it is like to be a person of color on
a predominantly White campus.[3] Thus, this article, though based on the ex-
periences and words of the students in my study, is inevitably my story of
what the students experienced. And, although I consistently shared my im-
pressions and writings with the study participants and asked for their feed-
back, it is, ultimately, my interpretation of their experiences that gets
publicly highlighted.

In some ways, this discussion echoes Geertz's (1973) foundational no-
tions of anthropological research. In Geertz's words, "The essential vocation
of interpretive anthropology is . . . to make available to us answers that
others . . . have given, and thus include them in the consultable record of
what man [*sic*] has said" (p. 30). In representing these students' stories,
then, we add them to the "record" of what people have said—a record
that has been dominated by experiences of Whites. And, both CRT and
Geertz call us to go beyond adding to this "record." As discussed earlier,
CRT requires a redressing of problems vis-à-vis a commitment to social jus-
tice. Relatedly, Geertz argues that part of the researcher's responsibility is
"stating, explicitly as we can manage, what the knowledge thus attained
demonstrates about the society in which it is found and, beyond that, about
social life as such" (p. 27). In the end, then, taking into consideration these
inherent issues of positionality, subjectivity, and representation, it is my
hope that my involvement in the discussion will add to a necessarily diverse
and multifaceted approach to combating racism.

The Study

The Larger Project

I spent 10 months getting to know Antonio, Crystal, Engracia, Jasmine, Mario, and Moriah, as I studied their transitions to Midwestern University. MU is located in Collegeville, a midsized, liberal-leaning city, and is the state's flagship university. MU's website boasts that it has "long been recognized" as a national leader in terms of "achievement and prestige." One need not spend more than a matter of minutes on the sprawling, attractive campus, however, to notice the stark lack of diversity: MU's student body is 88% White, 5.4% Asian American, 3.2% Hispanic, 2.8% African American, and only .8% Native American. Thus, the students in this study represent a distinct minority on MU's campus. Specifically, these students self-identify as Latino, Latina, Hispanic, Mexican American, Chicano, and/ or Puerto Rican, and all of the students told me they use more than one term to self-identify.

I met these young men and women in the summer of 2006, 2 to 3 months after they graduated high school. That summer I began interviewing them about their experiences in their K–12 schooling, college preparation, and expectations of college generally and of MU specifically. It is important to note with regard to the study from which this article is written, I did not explicitly set out to study racism; rather, the focus of the study was the transition to college for six Latino/a students. While this represents somewhat of a limitation, as one might wish more data were collected on these topics, it can also be considered a strength. That is, when the participants' experiences of racism came up in the study, they did so organically.

Methodology. To examine the lives and experiences of six individual students as they transitioned to MU, I conducted a qualitative case study, a methodology in which "the case itself is center stage, not variables" (Schwandt, 1997, p. 13). More specifically, in order to treat each student's experience as a separate case as well as compare and contrast these "cases," I conducted what is commonly called a "cross-case analysis," or what Stake (2005) calls a "collective case study." It was my hope that studying the experiences of these "cases," as well as their similarities and differences, would "lead to better understanding, and perhaps better theorizing, about a still larger collection of cases" (Stake, 2005, pp. 445–446).

Along with case study, grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) formed the basis for this study methodologically. The cyclical process at the heart of grounded theory includes collecting data, coding the data for themes and concepts, forming theories by proposing relationships between those concepts, testing the emergent theories against further data examination and further data collection, and starting the cycle anew. This theoretical sampling is done until no more analysis is needed for

understanding—in other words, until theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) has been reached.

Participant selection. In the larger study (Minikel-Lacocque, 2011) I examine the students' experiences with college access and support programs; thus, I wanted a range of student support programs represented in the experiences of the participants. I initiated participant selection by approaching the directors of three popular student support programs at MU that target underrepresented students. I also approached an academic advisor who directed summer student orientations for students of color.

Through these staff members, I advertised the study and asked for student volunteers who identify as Latino/a. Because an in-depth case study demands much of the researcher in terms of time and investment in the interpersonal aspect of the research, I had hoped to enroll six to eight students; anything over eight seemed unwieldy. I accepted students into the study on a "first-come, first-served" basis and had to turn away approximately 10 students, as many more students expressed interested in participating than I could accept. I originally started the study with seven students; however, one male student was unable to start courses at MU because of insufficient financial aid.

Data collection. Data collection for this study spanned from June 2006 to April 2007, and I used semi-structured in-depth interviews, observation, participant observation, and document analysis. I conducted individual semi-structured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2005) with six student-participants as well as six MU staff members. In addition to these individual interviews, I conducted one group interview, or "focus group," with the students in April of their first year at MU. Finally, I reopened my Human Subjects Approval to interview each student participant again during the months of March, April, and May 2009.

Data analysis. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed along with the field notes I recorded after each interview, observation, and participant observation. I coded these documents for salient themes, in line with the guidelines set forth by grounded theory discussed previously. Coding and theoretical sampling allowed me to test emergent themes I saw in the data by gathering more data from the participants about their experiences and returning to the data once again to further refine my coding scheme. Throughout the study, I wrote analytical memos (Glense & Peshkin, 1992) through which I was able to recognize and refine emerging themes.

As part of my research and analytical process, I consistently shared my interpretations with the student-participants and asked for feedback. I also gave the student-participants a draft of anything I wrote that included them and discussed my work with each of them. I did not move forward with any written interpretations of the research until I had given each student-participant the chance to read and approve what I had written. Importantly, however, there was great variety in the students' level of

involvement in this process: For example, one student consistently asked me when I would have something ready for her to read, and another welcomed the process but told me he was too busy to read what I had written. The others fell somewhere between these two extremes. None of the students, however, had suggestions for substantial changes; rather, they reflected on what they had read when we met for interviews or emailed me their brief comments.

The Present Study

Through the ongoing analytic processes described previously, I recognized that a salient, recurring theme was that of the students' experiences with racism at MU. This led me to examine existing scholarly work on present-day racism as well as specific research on campus climate as experienced by Latinos/as, within the fields of psychology and education, respectively. I then returned to the data, and using the lens of CRT discussed previously, I began to identify various ways in which the students in the study experienced and interpreted racism and race relations on campus. It became clear that many of the experiences they related, with some notable exceptions, involved being the target of *covert* racism as opposed to *overt* racism. Thus, what is presented here is an analysis of interview data collected as part of the case study described previously. Specifically, the present article is an analysis of the students' experiences of racism within the framework of racial microaggressions. The analysis highlights ways in which this framework can be useful, cautions against its misuse, and calls for specific changes.

The Students[4]

Antonio

"So, how would your friends from back home describe you?" I asked Antonio, who was dressed in an oversized white tee-shirt, baggy denim shorts, and immaculate white sneakers. He fiddled with the large pendant hanging from a thick gold chain around his neck as we wrapped up our first interview in a crowded Collegeville café.

"Funny—like I'm a real funny guy, I guess," he chuckled. "Uh, cool, laid-back. Calm, 'cause, yeah, I'm not good at rushing into things, so I take my time. Stuff like that. And I'm good to hang around with," he finished, adjusting the backwards baseball cap that sat atop his dark, gelled hair.

I also came to know Antonio as a confident, thoughtful, social young man and a budding social activist whose community involvement started before he came to MU and continues today. He is a sports enthusiast who played high school football and baseball but opted out of baseball his senior year to have more time to "have fun" before moving to Collegeville.

The son of a Mexican American father and a White mother from the Midwest, Antonio identifies as "Chicano" or Mexican American and has grown up in the same Midwestern urban neighborhood his entire life. His father, who was born in Texas and who obtained a GED, worked as a migrant worker before moving to Lakeside at 17. "My dad's whole family," he explained, "my dad and all his brothers and sisters and father, they are all migrant workers. They worked the fields in Texas, Oklahoma. They used to pick grapes and all that." His mother has a 4-year degree from a state university in Antonio's hometown.

Crystal

Crystal, who is from a large urban center in the Midwest, identifies as Hispanic, Latina, or "if they ask specifically," Puerto Rican. Her parents, who are now divorced, were born in Puerto Rico. When Crystal 8 eight years old, her father was sentenced to 15 years in prison on drug-related charges and was released just 3 years before she started college. Thus, for most of her childhood Crystal saw her father once or twice a year when they visited the prison. Neither parent has a college degree.

Crystal was identified as "gifted" early in grade school and was invited to take entrance exams for a public magnet school geared toward gifted students. Upon acceptance, Crystal and her family decided she would commute over an hour to school instead of attending her neighborhood school. Crystal did not attend each interview; thus, I did not get to know her as well as the others.

Engracia

I came to know Engracia as an extremely organized young woman, who was at once studious, serious, refreshingly direct, *and* bubbly, energetic, and very easy to relate to. The daughter of a Mexican father and Puerto Rican mother, Engracia always wore nicely put-together outfits, subtle make-up over her light skin, and her thick brown hair was always neatly styled. Engracia grew up in a large urban center about 3 hours' drive from Collegeville and made frequent trips to visit relatives in Puerto Rico. Her father works as a waiter, bartender, and dishwasher, and her mother, formerly a fashion model in Puerto Rico, is a hairstylist and recently bought her own salon. Neither parent has a college degree. Engracia identifies as "Puerto Rican and Mexican" and will use "Hispanic" if it is the only choice on a form. Engracia often spoke of her parents' deep and overwhelmingly positive influence on her schooling. Engracia attended competitive magnet schools prior to MU and has a long record of academic success.

Jasmine

When I first met Jasmine, I noted that her appearance differed from what one might expect of a soon-to-be college student. Her floor-length denim skirt was nicely pressed, and her black summery top was neatly accented with white piping. Her thick, wavy, brown hair reached down to the small of her back, and part of it was neatly pulled back. Jasmine's olive skin was flawless, without a stitch of make-up. I later learned that her dress, long hair, and lack of make-up were part of her religious expression as a Fundamentalist Christian.

Jasmine, whose mother identifies as White and Native American and works inside the home and whose father was born in Mexico and is a floor-layer, has had a complicated relationship with schooling for years. Growing up in a diverse city about an hour from Collegeville, Jasmine was frequently moved from school to school due to her parents' dissatisfaction with the public schools to which their family had access. Specifically, Jasmine's parents experienced a clash between their religious convictions and what was being taught in school. Jasmine, whose parents did not attend college, did not consider herself academically successful, was not involved in many school-based activities, and was worried about her lack of study skills as she entered MU. Jasmine identifies as Hispanic or Mexican, but she also "likes to say that [she] is White, too." She explained that most people do not believe that her mom "is White, with blond hair and blue eyes," and are surprised when she shows them a picture of her.

Mario

Mario, who identifies as Mexican American, Chicano, and/or Hispanic, was born in the Southwest, and his childhood consisted of varied experiences in terms of race and class. For the first 5 years of his life, he lived with his parents, both of Mexican descent, and sister in a trailer on his grandmother's land in the rural Southwest. His father, after serving in the navy for 6 years after high school, attended a Texas community college and was recruited and given a scholarship by MU. While his father finished his undergraduate degree at MU, Mario attended kindergarten through most of second grade in Collegeville. Upon his father's graduation from MU, Mario and his family moved back to Texas and the trailer, and his parents divorced. After living with his grandmother while his dad worked in a different part of the state, he moved with his dad and sister once again, and they eventually bought a house in a predominantly White suburb of a large Southwestern city, where Mario graduated from high school.

His father was the primary caregiver throughout his childhood, and when Mario was in middle school, his mother, a truck driver with a high school education, "started coming around again." Mario is often mistaken for "White, or half-White" because of his light complexion, and this constant

challenge to his identity was a significant struggle for Mario at MU, which I detail elsewhere (Minikel-Lacocque, 2011).

Moriah

"I think I want to be in your study," Moriah told me over the phone just 2 months before starting at MU, "because I have a lot to say about my schooling. I was *not* prepared for college." My first impression of Moriah, based on that initial phone conversation, was that she was sure of herself and tough. Indeed, when she confidently strode over to my table at a trendy café of her choosing, my first impression seemed to hold up. Dressed in jeans, sandals, and a green tee-shirt that displayed a message in Spanish too faded to fully make out, Moriah was a particularly striking young woman. Her brown skin framed a wide smile, and her focus and confidence were accented by an easy laugh.

Moriah, who identifies as Mexican American, Hispanic, and/or Latina, speaks highly of her parents but explained they were not involved in her schooling. Her parents, who have been together for roughly 20 years, are both factory workers and have limited formal education. Her mother, who was born in Texas and is of Mexican descent, eventually earned her GED. Moriah is unclear about how much schooling her father had before coming to the United States from Mexico at age 20. Moriah's parents have been her main source of motivation to earn a college degree and achieve a higher standard of living.

Findings: Racism at MU

In this section, I analyze the data on the students' experiences as they transitioned to college. The analysis is divided into the following six subsections: Getting Stared at and Feeling Isolated, Ignored at the Bus Stop and Angry Bus Drivers, Stereotyping, Insensitivity and Ignorance, Online Hatred at MU and Intentionality: Not So Micro, and The Nickname Story: A Contested Microaggression.

Getting Stared at and Feeling Isolated

As seen in the opening of this article, Moriah experienced isolation at MU. She often felt stared at and singled out as different than her fellow students, and the lack of racial diversity caused her to feel alone. Toward the end of her first semester at MU, Moriah parodied Hamlet's famous words by posting "To drop out or not to drop out, that is the question" on her dorm room door. Significantly, it was not academics that caused her to feel this way; rather, Moriah repeatedly explained that she felt "miserable" at MU because of her experience within the overwhelmingly White student population.

Antonio related similar experiences but was less outwardly bothered by them. In my first interview with him, he explained that he is treated differently in Collegeville than he is in his hometown, which is much more diverse:

> Antonio: Here, we're on a campus where most of the White people are, I guess. But in [my hometown], I live on the South side. And so that's mostly Spanish or like my own race, and . . . I don't know. There's discrimination there [in my hometown]. Of course there is everywhere. . . . But I could tell people look at me when I walk in stores [in Collegeville], like they look at me weird 'cause I got like my goatee and all that. Like I look really Hispanic and stuff like that. I'm not being treated *really* bad, but I'm treated different than [I] normally [am].

Staring at someone on the street—in both of the ways described previously—because he or she appears to be "other" certainly fits under the original definition of racial microaggressions; indeed, unwelcoming or untrusting stares can be considered "automatic" and "unconscious" acts of racial discrimination. In Moriah's case, the stares she received fall into the category of "microinsult" (Sue & Capodilupo, 2008; Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007); specifically, they have the potential to communicate Sue's (2010) microaggressive theme, *you do not belong* (p. 77). While this is also true for the types of stares Antonio describes, the stares he gets while walking into stores in Collegeville may also carry with them, in Sue's words, *assumption of criminal status*; that is, the store owners may presume—whether consciously or unconsciously—that as a person of color, Antonio is "dangerous, potentially a criminal, likely to break the law, or [potentially] antisocial" (Sue, 2010, p. 36).

In addition to the unwelcoming stares, the lack of diversity on MU's campus had an effect on all the students in the study. For example, after weeks of staying in her dorm room and feeling isolated, Moriah decided to attend a multicultural alumni event in the hopes of connecting with another Latina. Unfortunately, the experience only exacerbated her feelings of isolation, as we see in her following words:

> I was TRYING to integrate myself—but there were no other Latinos there—not one. So I wasn't even represented. I really wanted to leave, so I left. I wish I wouldn't have gone.

Thus, Antonio and Moriah experienced feelings of isolation, and they perceived a lack of being welcomed by the MU and Collegeville communities. Significantly, the ways in which Antonio and Moriah experienced microaggressions are not often visible to campus personnel who are charged with supporting students during their college career. These instances are unlikely to come up at a meeting with an advisor or other support staff, meetings that

are often focused on grades and course schedules, yet they have the power to affect students' experience in college. Put differently, these microaggressions—as well as those discussed in the following—can affect the students' quality of life and how they feel about being in college.

Ignored at Bus Stop and Angry Bus Drivers

Antonio had been coming to MU's campus during the summers with a college access program, *Pre-College*, since his sophomore year in high school. In our first interview, when I asked him about his perception of Collegeville, racism came up almost immediately:

> Interviewer: What were your first impressions of Collegeville?
> Antonio: That it was big, I guess. . . . I've seen discrimination, especially on the city bus. . . . There was a couple of times when there would be like a group waiting at the bus stop, and we'd see the bus, and it would just keep going by and it wouldn't stop. And [it] wouldn't be filled up either. It would just pass by.
> Interviewer: Was it supposed to stop at that stop?
> Antonio: Yeah, and they kept going. So we complained and all that, so they don't really do it anymore.

Antonio went on to explain that in a separate incident, he and his friends had recently taken the bus to the mall and happened to be on the bus when the high school–aged Pre-College program students were taking a group field trip to the mall. There was some commotion caused by the group's inexperience with using their bus cards. He explained:

> Antonio: They weren't trying to be annoying or anything. . . . The bus driver just got angry right away. He just got pissed and he was just like, "Go, go, go!" Like he was yelling at 'em, sorta. You could tell he was really angry and all that, getting all angry over nothing really, 'cause [the students] didn't do nothing. There was just a big group coming on the bus, and he was real angry, real quick.
> Interviewer: What do you think the reason behind that was?
> Antonio: Well, because we're all minorities, like in the [Pre-College] program.
> Interviewer: Discrimination?
> Antonio: Yeah, most likely. Because I don't think he'd get mad if it was just like a group of White kids, 'cause he'd think like that would be all good. He expected us to be all rowdy and stuff. . . . He was all angered and peeved and stuff.

In both of the incidents Antonio relates, we see instances of a *microinsult*. Specifically, the (White) bus driver not stopping to pick up Antonio and his Pre-College peers (even though they were waiting at a regular bus stop) potentially reflects Sue's microaggressive theme of *second-class citizen*, through which certain groups are treated as "lesser" (Sue, 2010, p. 28). This microinsult also possibly carries an assumption of criminal status and may echo findings of studies that claim that "Blacks" hailing a cab in Manhattan are 25% less likely to be picked up than Whites (Sue, 2010). The second microinsult, when the (White) bus driver seems to become disproportionately angry with the young Pre-College participants for not having their bus passes ready, also has the power to communicate the derogatory themes named by Sue such as assumption of criminal status and second-class citizen.

Stereotyping

During their first semester at MU, Antonio and Moriah both related instances of experiencing racial stereotyping, an offense that is in accordance with Pierce's (1974) definition of microaggressions as well as Sue's (2010) notion of microinsult. In the first example, as Antonio was explaining that he feels like he "sticks out more" in Collegeville as compared to in his diverse hometown, he recalled comments made by a Resident Assistant (RA) during a dorm meeting:

> Antonio: I stick out more. . . . Like I was at my friend's [dorm] floor meeting, and they were talking about Halloween, and [the Resident Assistant] was saying that you can't have racial costumes. So [the RA] was like, "No drunk Mexicans or anything." She was just putting things out there like as examples. I'm not originally from the floor, and they don't have any Hispanics up there. So I was just starting to laugh, 'cause me and two other friends . . . we just started laughing.

Later, when I explicitly asked Antonio if he had experienced racism during his first few months at MU, he first said "not really," and then told me the following story:

> Antonio: Well, not really . . . I'm known as being Mexican and stuff. Like, there's one guy on my floor, he was drunk, he was like, "Hey, Antonio, c'mere. This girl doesn't believe anybody is more hairy than me." He's like, "You're Mexican, you're hairy." I'm like, "Well, that has nothing to do with it." I'm like, "What?" I just laughed at him 'cause he was drunk. I was like, "Who cares?"

Antonio's lack of outward anger about these comments made by Whites begs the question, if the "subject" of the stereotype claims to be only mildly bothered (or not bothered at all), can one conclude an offense such as a microaggression occurred? Antonio is the expert when it comes to his own

reactions and experiences. I argue that we must in fact go beyond this question; indeed, key questions here are, What is being said by and through the comments? What is being "accomplished"? Or, in Geertz's (1973) words, "The thing to ask [about a specific behavior] is not what their ontological status is." Rather, he explains, "[t]he thing to ask is what their import is: what it is . . . that, in their occurrence and through their agency, is getting said" (p. 10).

It is clear that the perpetrators are using stereotypes of Mexicans and that they are "othering" Mexicans generally and Antonio specifically. While his reactions in both of these instances ostensibly fit with his laidback personality and easy laugh, it may be more complex than that. He brought up these offenses when we were discussing his identity in the context of MU more broadly; it was clearly something he remembered and wanted to discuss. Further, I expect that Antonio has endured countless racial offenses made by Whites and that every one of these, whether or not they registered on a conscious level for Antonio, have significantly contributed to his ideas about and relationships with Whites on and off campus.

For example, as we were discussing Antonio's social life, he explained that he only hangs out with "a couple people from my [dorm] floor, but not too many." Although his circle of friends does include some White students, he explained that the White students on his floor "stick to themselves," "hang out in their groups and are 'clique-y,'" and that they are "not [his] type." When I pushed him to explain what he meant by "not his type," he elaborated:

> Antonio: I don't know. Like kinda typical White people, sort of. . . . What I mean, like, a lot of them are dumb, kinda like. They do stupid things. . . . Some of them are cocky. I don't like that kind of people. It's just the drinking they do, too. And they can't handle their stuff [referring to alcohol]. They'd always be, like, out of it, like after they had like 2 beers. And I'm like, "GOD!"

Thus, it is possible that these microaggressions may register for Antonio on a deeper level and are in part responsible for his ideas of what a "typical White guy" is: someone who is stupid and gets drunk too often. Here we see Pierce and colleagues' (1978) claim ring true that "the cumulative weight" of racial microaggressions cause significant strain in racial relations writ large, this time for Latino-White relations (p. 66). Put simply, a lifetime of seemingly harmless racial microaggressions has contributed to Antonio's negative perception of what "White guys" are like. Viewed this way, we can see very real possibilities in terms of the significance, or Geertz's (1973) "import," of these offenses.

In a final example of stereotyping, we turn to Moriah once again. She and her boyfriend, who, in her words, is Puerto Rican and "looks Black," were offended while at a local pizza restaurant. Moriah recounts her

experience of what happened when a White woman, who Moriah guessed to be in her 30s, approached them:

> Moriah: She said to [my boyfriend], "Excuse me, excuse me." She's like, "Can you run fast?" I was like, "Just 'cause you're Black doesn't mean you can run fast!" [My boyfriend] was like, "I *can* run fast, but I wasn't gonna give her the satisfaction of going into that stereotype." I was like, "These people are so ignorant!" I was *so* mad!

Indeed, Moriah explained that while walking home that evening she was "shaking" because she was so angry and that the experience made her feel like yelling in the middle of the street.

In these examples, we witness various ways students can be faced with stereotyping as well as the distinct reactions on the part of Antonio and Moriah. In each of these instances, however, it is possible that the perpetrators did not consciously mean any harm; indeed, they are probably still unaware of the offense they caused. Another example of this "subconscious" type of racism, as experienced by Jasmine, is discussed in the following.

Insensitivity and Ignorance

In December of her first year at MU, Jasmine attended a Christmas party organized by her Bible Study group on campus. Jasmine had not found many activities in which she felt she belonged at MU, and her Bible Study group was the exception. She had been looking forward to the Christmas party for weeks, but unfortunately, a comment made by a White member of the group deeply offended Jasmine and caused her to end her affiliation with the group. She explained:

> Jasmine: I was having a good time and then we went around in a circle and shared our Christmas traditions. This girl was talking about how her family went in the back of a truck down to Florida for one Christmas, and she was with all her cousins in the back of a truck, stuck back there with presents and stuff. And then she's like, "I don't know why people would wanna come from Mexico in a truck to begin with because it was *so gross*!"

> And right away, I was gonna shout, "That was uncalled for!" But I was so angry and caught in the moment. And there were people actually *laughing* at this. That was a blatant racist comment, you know? That was not right. She shouldn't have said that. Why does she find it okay to say it? It was just like a smack in your face, that there's racism out there, you know? I was having a good time and then she just ruined it. In two seconds, she just ruined it.

Again, we see a White person make a comment in passing, and by all accounts in a seemingly lighthearted manner, that deeply offended one of the study participants. What's more, the person who made the comment

was completely unaware of its potential to hurt and offend. It is quite probable that the offender in this case never did become cognizant of the effect her words had on Jasmine that evening. The insensitivity toward (and lack of knowledge about) the immigrant experience revealed by this student's comment is something to be addressed in the effort to combat racism and other forms of oppression. It is important to note, however, that regardless of the reasons behind the comment, Jasmine found them hurtful.

The stories related thus far fall in line with Pierce's original conception of racial microaggressions; although they can cause strong reactions in the target, they can be seen by witnesses as "subtle," and most often the perpetrator is unaware of his or her actions. They also map nicely onto Sue's taxonomy of racial microaggressions, which provides language with which to understand, classify, and discuss the sometimes amorphous nature of these types of offenses. The incidents I describe in the following, however, point to certain areas of Sue's taxonomy that call for additions and alterations.

Online Hatred at MU and Intentionality: Not So "Micro"

> As far as I'm concerned, I say let minorities get into college, but only after all the academically qualified applicants get in first. Then when the minority students who are not prepared for college-level coursework flunk out of school they'll have no one to blame but themselves. You want a chance for a better life? Earn it! (Anonymous post to Midwestern University's website)

During the spring semester of the participants' first year, debates flourished on MU's campus regarding the university's "holistic" admissions policies, which take into account the racial background of an applicant. In classes and special forums alike, the campus community discussed, in essence, affirmative action and its place in MU's admissions process. During this time, Engracia sent me a link to an op-ed article in MU's online student newspaper, in which the (White) student author argued that this "holistic" policy is racist because it does nothing to help prepare academically underprepared minorities for the challenges they will face at MU. He argued that instead of utilizing such a policy, MU should focus on improving urban public schools so that minorities *are* prepared for college. While Engracia disagreed with the author's stance, it represented one side of the debate. Further, she was not overly bothered by what she considered to be an uninformed point of view. The long list of posted reactions to the article, however, were deeply upsetting. I include two of them in the following:

1. [T]he public schools are doing just fine. You're wrong to assume that public schools are good substitutes for good parents. Ultimately, this isn't a choice that the rich white suburbs are going to have to make for the poor black inner city. This is a choice that the inner city is going to have to make to abandon

their current culture, sell-out, and join the rest of educated America. This choice starts at home.

2. Yeah, suburban kids are coddled by rich suburban parents and teachers until they are ready to be handed off to White Bread University. The inner city parent, not giving a damn, stares at the wall all day, ignorant to the world around them. They say, "child, I don't give a damn what you do. Education and learning are fine, but so is drug dealing and making babies. I wish I had gold teeth . . . what was I saying?" C'mon, everyone gets what they earn. Being born on the wrong or right side of the tracks does not PREDETERMINE your life. If you PERSONALLY give a damn, . . . you will find PERSONAL success. The ultimate blame lies with you.

In these comments, we see what is commonly referred to as "the myth of meritocracy" expressed in distinct ways. In short, the myth of meritocracy represents the belief that we all, regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic background, are afforded the same chances for success: If we want to achieve success, we must simply "earn it." Specifically, if you are a student of color who is failing or even struggling in college, you are just not working hard enough. This belief in the singular power of hard work, coupled with the lack of acknowledgement of various inequalities such as the poor schooling opportunities in inner-city and low-income neighborhoods, is certainly communicated through the previous online posts. For example, the comments "This is a choice that the inner city is going to have to make" and "This choice starts at home" are infused with this assumption that the will to succeed alone will result in success. These portions of the previous online comments certainly fit with the original notion of racial microaggressions: racist comments made by someone who is most likely not aware of their racist nature and who may very well defend the (perceived nonracist) merit of these comments. In Excerpt 2 we also see the myth of meritocracy expressed, albeit in an overt way. Comments such as "C'mon, everyone gets what they earn" and "The ultimate blame lies with you" beg a deeper consideration of what should be classified as a "microaggression" and what is in fact outside of this category.

Further, portions of these online posts indeed go beyond what could be conceived of as "unconscious" and represent what many would consider to be intentional expressions of hatred. Perhaps the clearest examples of this intentional hatred are contained in Excerpt 2, in which the post's author claims that "inner city" parents do not "give a damn" and value "drug dealing and making babies" as much as they value education. These are not the subtle, often unconscious, frequently made comments that inspired the Chester Pierce to coin the term *racial microaggressions*. They are intentional, conscious, and less common when compared to microaggressions as originally conceived.

The openly racist comments posted anonymously combine traditionally covert and overt modes of expressing racism. These types of comments, often reserved for private settings in the past, are in a very public forum;

indeed, here we are privy to a specific variety of "private conversations" that can contain racial microaggressions (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 61). Through the Internet one can utter, from beneath the protective veil of anonymity, things he or she would be ashamed to say in person to a public audience. Indeed, the Internet has provided a unique opportunity to witness racist behavior that would otherwise be incredibly difficult or impossible to capture. To be sure, while the racism contained in these posts would still be present and palpable, without the Internet we would not have access to these verbatim expressions of racism.

The participants' reactions to the openly racist comments posted online were immediate and significant. Although the individual interviewing phase of the study was over by the time Engracia alerted me of the article, the group interview provided insights into the participants' reactions. Engracia and Crystal, the two participants who had read the article, initiated a discussion about it when we met as a group:

> Crystal: I mean, people are twisted. And the thing is that—yeah, I was just a *little* upset (*with a sarcastic tone*)—
>
> Engracia: I cried a little. Not cried like *tears*, but like one little tear fell down with that one comment . . . the comments were the worst. It was like, "Minority parents just stare at the wall all day ignorant of the whole world and tell their kids, you can get pregnant, no you can go to school, or you can get pregnant and sell drugs—that's much better. I can't wait to buy a gold tooth." I was like—
>
> Crystal: It was a really bad article. I don't know if you guys read it—
>
> (*The rest of the students shake their heads "no."*) It was this guy who went off on affirmative action and how it shouldn't be part of admissions. . . . And so here, on top of that, it was an opinion column so nobody had a name, and then under it they had comments. People were allowed to comment [anonymously]. And like you will hear the most ignorant comments. And I went *off* during our [college access group] meeting after I read the article. I was *so* pissed.
>
> Engracia: "Just [admit them] and let them fall on their faces when they get here." I was like, "I probably have a higher degree of [education than you do]."
>
> Crystal: That's what I'm saying. It's like, look at the minority students on this campus and . . . you can you really tell that a good chunk of them are involved, are doing things. And I just gotta say, ask the people in our [classes] who has the biggest GPA and then we'll talk. And then we'll talk.
>
> Engracia: I mean, the *comments*—
>
> Crystal: It will make you realize how ignorant like the majority of people are.

> Engracia: That was like the one time that [the racism on campus] really
> bothered me. . . . That was like the first time that I was like, "Holy shit!
> There are people [here] that don't like me." So that's why it was a big
> thing for me.

Thus, it is clear that the overt racism contained in the online comments
caused no confusion in terms of the participants' reactions; Engracia and
Crystal were deeply hurt and never questioned the intentions of the perpe-
trators. There was no gray area to these offenses. Indeed, it is the openly rac-
ist nature of these comments, as well as the students' reactions to them,
which brings me to question the prefix *micro* being associated with this
type of racism.

Sue (2010) includes the notion of a *microassault* in his taxonomy, and
his definition of this type of microaggression certainly does fit the type of
hatred present in these online posts: Recall that he defines microassaults,
which are often conscious acts, as "explicit racial derogations characterized
primarily by a violent verbal, nonverbal, or environmental attack[s] meant to
hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or pur-
poseful discriminatory actions" (p. 29). Sue explains that of the three types
of racial microaggressions, microassaults are the most similar to "old-
fashioned" racism. He also posits that due to the modern-day condemnation
of overt racism, microassaults are most likely to be expressed under certain
conditions, such as some degree of anonymity.

Thus, it is not the definition of *microassault* that I challenge; rather, I
question placing this type of racism under the umbrella term of *microaggres-*
sions, and I argue that doing so can be misleading. It is possible, I contend,
that using the prefix *micro*, which means "small," to identify this type of rac-
ism could be confusing at best and harmful at worst. Teaching targets and
perpetrators alike that offenses such as writing the online comments
included in this section, displaying Nazi Swastikas and Klan regalia, and
using racial epithets are *micro*assaults, a breed of *micro*aggressions, has
the power to mislead both groups.

While it is not my intention to create a hierarchy of pain caused by racist
offenses, the language we use is powerful and anything but neutral. More
specifically, a critical view of language claims that language is always polit-
ical—as it is inseparable from the social status of the interlocutors—and that
it reflects and reproduces social relations and their embedded power struc-
tures (Bourdieu, 1991; Pennycook, 2001). Drawing on the work of Foucault
(1980) and Lemke (1995), Hawkins (2005) explains, "Embedded [in lan-
guage] are ideologies, beliefs, and values, which are carried out and repro-
duced through the unfolding social interactions" (p. 27). Put simply, words
carry significant power. They have the potential to help maintain various in-
equalities—whether it be inequalities within a given conversation or in-
equalities on a societal level.

It follows, then, that using the prefix *micro* to describe the previous on-line posts as well as other blatant, intentional racist acts may very well carry with it a message that Sue's work is precisely trying to avoid. Given the history of racism in the United States, as well as the established pattern of racism's injuries being denied and diminished by those with more power historically (read: Whites), attaching *micro* to certain racist aggressions has the ability to maintain power dynamics with respect to racism. In other words, the use of this term may invalidate the anger and hurt caused by such acts as well as empower the perpetrators to believe their actions and words are somehow less egregious than those racist acts not classified as *micro*. Indeed, commonplace, unconscious microaggressive racist acts should not be lumped together with overt, intentional forms of racism that have no place in any category dubbed *micro*. Thus, I argue for this breed of racism to be called *racialized aggressions* rather than *micro*aggressions.

While the current discussion may be accused of being "nit-picky" or of mincing words, I contend that increased clarity surrounding the terms we use to understand and discuss racism is necessary. It is with the hope that educational settings generally, and college campuses specifically, develop facility with the notion of racialized microaggressions that I argue for greater clarity of the terms we use. Indeed, the scholarly work discussed here, once incorporated into universities' approach to combating racism (as well as that of practitioners outside the university such as teachers and therapists, among others), has great potential to affect change on campuses across the country. Without the increased clarity I am arguing for, however, this potential is significantly diminished.

The Nickname Story: A Contested Microaggression

Thus far, I have argued both for a change in the current language we use to talk about overt, intentional racism specifically and for greater clarity surrounding the definitions we use to understand and discuss racism generally. In this section, I return to the original notion of racial microaggressions (subtle, hard-to-name, everyday unconscious acts) and again argue for a change in—or, more precisely, an addition to—the language surrounding microaggressions. Here I consider what happens when the target of a microaggression contests the perceived racist act; specifically, I contend that when a microaggression is contested, it spills over into a new category of experience that must be recognized and named as such.

Scholarly conversations on racial microaggressions have historically focused on the act itself and not on what happens after the act is committed. The small amount of research on the aftermath of a microaggression includes reactions shared among same-race peers (Solórzano et al., 2000; Yosso, 2006), as well as various documentations of microaggressions that are addressed by the target and often end in physical assaults of him or

her (Feagin et al., 1996). There is also literature that theorizes about the psychology behind reacting or not reacting to microaggressions (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007) and finally, work that explores group reactions to microaggressions (Yosso et al., 2009).

Taken as a whole, however, the existing work in this area is minimal. Indeed, the paucity of research on—and language for—the aftermath of a microaggression represents a gap in this relatively new area of inquiry. This gap was particularly salient for me as I sat across the table from Mario and listened to his story of contesting a microaggression during his first few weeks on MU's campus. As we spoke, it became clear that the *aftermath* of the original microaggressive act, as opposed to the initial microaggression itself, carried most of the weight for Mario.

Mario had earned a spot on MU's prestigious marching band, an organization that is highly respected both campuswide and nationally. For years, it had been one of Mario's goals to become a member; thus, he was extremely excited to be a part of this group, which entailed adhering to a rigorous training and travel schedule. Due, in part, to the time-consuming and close-knit nature of the band, its members were Mario's immediate community at MU; most of his time outside of class was spent with them. The band's make-up reflected the racial demographics of the larger campus: The band was overwhelmingly White, and Mario was one of two Latinos in the group.

In October of his first year, Mario explained that one of the marching band's many time-honored traditions is the "nickname tradition." Upperclassmen in the band, and sometimes alumni, assign nicknames to each first-year student in the band. Thereafter, all band members from that point on are expected to address their younger peers by their assigned nicknames and never their actual names—no exceptions. These nicknames are not meant to be nice; indeed, Mario explained that according to the tradition, the more upset the recipient by the nickname, the better. The scenario was reminiscent of the lore surrounding fraternity and sorority hazing; underclassmen must submit if they want a coveted spot in the group.

In this case, however, Mario was given a nickname that he felt was racist, and he protested the name on the spot. His protests were denied. The involved upperclassmen and alumni refused to admit that it could possibly be racist and even offered an explanation as to how and why it was *not* racist. As seen in the following, Mario struggled with how to integrate the offense and seemed tentatively convinced that he should not be offended.

> Mario: Like when I got my nickname for the band, I thought it was racially motivated because my nickname is *Burro*.[5] And I was like, "Whoa!" Well, this came up because apparently last year there was a senior whose [last] name was Thoroughbred. And I reminded them a lot of him because he was also a football player [like I was] . . . so, they were like, "Wow, y'all are so alike!" So they always would call me . . . "Mini Thoroughbred." So

when the upperclassmen and an alumni [*sic*] came to one of the parties, the guy decided that my name would be *Burro* because *Burro* is like a small horse, and Thoroughbred is a horse. I thought it was like [a Mexican horse or donkey, in a negative way, 'cause I'm Mexican], and I was like, "Whoa!" [*sounding angry*] . . . I thought it was racially motivated. And [they said,] "It didn't have anything to do with race, like it shouldn't. It's just a nickname, you know." So I was like, "Uh, okaaaay" [*sounding hesitant*].

Interviewer: What did you do? Did you say [anything]?

Mario: Yeah. They were like, "No, it has nothing to do with race." They were like, "It really doesn't." I was like, "Whoa! [*sounding angry*] Does this have to do with race?" He was like, "No, no, no, no, no it doesn't. Don't think it does, you know, 'cause it really doesn't." And then so, okay, it made sense what it was. I was okay [with it], 'cause they would always call me "Little Thoroughbred" and stuff, so the fact that they went from his name and they gave me *Burro*, like the little horse, it was meaningful. I went home and *Googled* it. Someone told me, "Just go *Google* 'burro' and see what comes up, so you can figure out what it kinda meant. And everything that came up were horses and donkeys." I was like, "Okay." So, I'm okay, I was like, "Alright." At first, I was like, "Change it," just because I didn't like it, but if you don't like it, that's why it stays. Like every year, they pick like one freshman to be part of the "fat family" . . . *Fat, Porky* and then *Fatso*, and then *Chubby*. . . .

As Mario described his initial reaction to his nickname, it was clear to me he had been angry and that he initially felt confident in protesting "*Burro*" as his nickname. After his initial reaction, however, things got less clear for Mario; he indeed struggled with how to perceive this and how to make sense of it.

In the upperclassmen's refusal to value Mario's complaints that the name was racist *to him*, which is what should matter, we see Davis's (1989) words about microaggressions ring painfully true: The nickname assignment and the refusal to heed Mario's protest were indeed "stunning, automatic acts of disregard" (p. 1576). Mario's convictions that his nickname was steeped in racism ignored, he was left to face his bandmates' "unconscious attitudes of white superiority" (Davis, 1989, p. 1576). It seemed as if the band members did not truly hear Mario; a phenomenon we also see reflected in Davis's work on microaggressions in the legal system. Like the court of which Davis writes, it is as if the group of band members was "capable of this microaggression because cognitive habit, history, and culture left it unable to hear the range of relevant voices and grapple with what reasonably might be said in the voice of discrimination's victims" (p. 1576). In sum, the band members, in positions of power, denied Mario the right to define his own

reality; by negating his protests and claiming his reaction was invalid, they defined his reality *for* him. And, as Sue (2010) points out, "the power to impose reality upon marginalized groups represents the ultimate form of oppression" (p. 37).

As Feagin and his colleagues (1996), explain, these attitudes of White superiority can flourish in certain settings called "home territories." In their words, "home territories" are those spaces in which "the occupants have a broad freedom to act, which is coupled with a sense of control over the area" (p. 58). MU's marching band can certainly be considered a "home territory" for the White upperclassmen and alumni responsible for Mario's nickname and the refusal to change it. The marching band is made up of almost exclusively White students and is nested within a predominantly White campus. The band is very well respected both at MU and nationally, and a spot in the band is coveted by many. The band has many time-honored traditions, including the assigning of nicknames. The White upperclassmen and alumni were clearly at home and in control; they had the power, and they knew it. Echoing Davis's (1989) comments cited previously, they had years of history to fall back on: Unpleasant nicknames have always been given to first-year students, and the more disliked the name, the better.

Roughly a month later, Mario shared some of his additional thoughts:

> Mario: It was like, out of all the names there could have been, you know? A *trillion words*, you know? And I was just like, it had to be *that* close to being racial, you know? And that's why it still gets me, and it's still there. I mean, so, no matter what explanation they give me, there's still to me gonna be that little "thing" there. In a way that's part of like the White privilege and a lot of these other things you learn in sociology. . . . That's the whole thing of White privilege. It's an invisible privilege that they don't realize they have, but it's there. And it's apparent to everyone else that's there. And that's what's happening. I don't know. It's tough, but yeah, it exists, and it's there.

In this story, we see a racial microaggression expand and spill over into a new and different category, that of a *contested microaggression*, which I define as the process by which the target of a microaggression names and contests the perceived racist act. Given the very nature of microaggressions, it is most likely that these protests will be met with denial on the part of the perpetrator; however, more research is needed on this process. As Mario's story illustrates, a racial microaggression can be recognized as such by the target, can be named and protested, and the perpetrators may refuse to take responsibility.

Significantly, Mario's story is not named in the literature. Mario considers his band-mates to be his community at MU, and he looks up to the upperclassmen in the band. As a first-year student, along with his first-year peers, he is very much aware of the subordinate role he occupies in the band and

all its traditions. Like many other campus organizations such as sports teams and fraternities, first-year students need to work their way up through the ranks and earn the right be leaders in the group—and in this case, to some-day be doling out nicknames instead of receiving them. In other words, Mario's story differs from the typical microaggression in the literature in that it occurs within a space he "belongs" (albeit partially, as evidenced by this story). He does not experience a microaggression while walking on the street, or in the elevator, perpetrated by strangers whom he may or may not see again. He faces a microaggression within a group of people he likes and cares for. It is a group he happily participates in by choice; indeed, the perpetrators are in some ways his role models.

Conclusions

> Colleges and universities seem to function as incubators for the soon-to-be (or wannabe) guardians of the status quo. (Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2005, pp. 295–296)

I have argued here that racial microaggressions should be conceived as they originally were: as derogatory acts that are most often unconscious on the part of the perpetrator, as commonplace occurrences, and as offenses that have alternative, non–racially motivated explanations that often cause the targets to feel conflicted and invalidated. I have drawn on the field of critical applied linguistics to argue that adding intentional, overtly racist of-fenses to the category of "microaggressions" has a deleterious effect in the effort to combat racism for two reasons. First, it has the potential to diminish the harmful nature of the act as well as diminish the target's reaction to the aggression. Second, expanding the original notion of microaggression to include "microassaults" takes away from an essential message that the con-cept of microaggressions has the power to communicate to a wide audience: The insidious, slippery, sometimes hard-to-name nature of microaggressions is *precisely* where their power lies to cause damage. It is the "cumulative bur-den" of these commonplace acts that can have drastic effects for the target (Pierce, 1995). Furthermore, the fact that it is difficult for perpetrators to rec-ognize them as potentially racist offenses contributes to their commonplace nature. Thus, I have argued here for these overt, intentional racist acts to be called *racialized aggressions*.

Our understanding and use of the term *microaggression* is not complete, however, without more fully considering, and naming, what happens after an offense has occurred. As Sue (2010) points out, if microaggressions are recognized as problematic, then reactions such as anger are "understandable and normative" (p. 58). However, if a microaggression is not recognized as such and is considered acceptable, then any reaction to the act can be seen as "pathological" (p. 58). Indeed, a lack of awareness of the offense on the

part of the perpetrator places the target in a difficult position. In Sue's words, "they are damned if they don't (take action) and damned if they do (take action)" (p. 58).

Given this catch-22-type dilemma, those instances when the target *does* contest a microaggression need to be recognized and named as such. Within the notion of microaggressions, itself a relatively new area of study, research is needed on *contested microaggressions*. Understanding the experience from both the targets' and the perpetrators' points of view would significantly add to our understanding of the various processes at work surrounding a racially microaggressive act, thus helping in the effort to curb racism. This understanding, however, is not enough. Explicit attention must be paid to affecting change with regard to the college experience for underrepresented students.

Specifically, prior research offers four characteristics that are commonly thought to be necessary for nurturing a positive campus racial climate:

1. the inclusion of students, faculty, and administrators of color;
2. a curriculum that reflects the historical and contemporary experiences of people of color;
3. programs to support the recruitment, retention, and graduation of students of color; and
4. a college/university mission that reinforces the institution's commitment to pluralism. (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 62)

Missing from this list, notably, is the explicit mention of racism and available support systems to deal with racism. Thus, I argue for a fifth element to be added to the list, which should read, *programs designed to explicitly address racism*. In my many conversations with the students and the campus support staff in the study presented here and in my frequent visits to first-year courses, I learned that constructive, explicit discussions of racism are rare at MU, as are outlets that successfully support targets of racism. Until this has changed, we will continue to be "guardians of the status quo," as highlighted in the previous epigraph.

In the opening of this article, we witness Moriah's struggle to stay at MU. She did, in fact, graduate, and is now successfully employed. On that basis alone, many would argue that MU served her well and that her experience as a college student was a success. That is, however, a dangerous assumption. Moriah and the rest of the participants in the study presented here all faced various instances of racism, and these experiences deeply affected how they felt as students at MU. Is it enough that students get passing grades and possibly graduate?[6] Put simply, no. It is not enough. We must look beyond the normative frameworks for success (Morfin et al., 2006; Teranishi et al., 2009) and examine the college experience for underrepresented students. As CRT

calls us to do, we must "break new ground" and "reconstruct" in our efforts to redress inequality (Ladson-Billings & Donnor, 2005, p. 291).

Thus, I propose the creation of a program on our campuses that directly addresses racism. Specifically, this program would have as its central goals: (a) raising awareness and understanding of racism among majority students, (b) offering a common language with which to talk about racism, and (c) providing a support system to empower students to contest racial microaggressions when they do occur. In essence, I am arguing for an infrastructure to be built on college campuses as common practice. The infrastructure would include regular, visible classes and forums on race and racism; some required, some optional. Also included would be required, in-depth trainings for faculty and staff members to increase their sensitivity to and awareness of racism and its far-reaching effects. These trainings would enable them to successfully facilitate conversations in the classroom, whether these conversations be planned by the instructor or initiated by students. Additionally, new student orientations would consistently include open, direct conversations about racism on college campuses.

Importantly, this infrastructure needs to be focused not only on blatant, overt racist acts, but the seemingly "innocuous" microaggressions as well. The notion of "subtle" racism must be named in classes, support groups, and social settings so this insidious form of racism can become part of our common conception of racism. Incorporating this common, often over-looked, form of racism into the language we use is essential in the effort to understand and combat racism; specifically, White students, faculty, and staff must become well versed in these concepts.

We must take caution, however, when incorporating the notion of microaggressions into the battle against racism. Increased clarity surrounding the language of microaggressions is necessary if we are to commit to "open and honest discussions of race" in classrooms with the hopes of increasing "harmonious race relations" (Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009, p. 188). Indeed, having these conversations with students means opening up the scholarly conversation on racial microaggressions to a much larger and more diverse (racially and otherwise) audience than is present within academia. In making these scholarly, somewhat private, conversations about racism accessible to a public audience, the terms we use must be clear and consistent.

This research and the campus program proposed here have the potential to go a long way toward Geertz's (1973) call to sort out "the structures of signification" and determine "their social ground and import" (p. 9). This represents, however, only a part of what must be done. As Ladson-Billings and Donnor (2005) assert, "[b]ut even with the strides made by . . . new studies, they still represent a very small crack in the solid, almost frozen traditions of the university" (p. 295). This article is a part of the effort to add to

those cracks, an effort that must continue until the foundation crumbles, thus paving the way for necessary reconstruction.

Notes

I wish to thank the students who made this study possible. Thank you to Derria Byrd, Paula McAvoy, and Robin Fox for providing helpful feedback. Finally, the comments provided by the anonymous reviewers were invaluable. The shortcomings of this article are, however, my responsibility.

[1]All names, including names of people, programs, institutions, and geographic locations, are pseudonymous.

[2]The term *Latino* is commonly used as a catch-all term for all Latino subgroups, and Mexican Americans are commonly the largest of these subgroups (Gándara & Contreras, 2009, p. 8). Importantly, the term *Latino* includes people from many different racial backgrounds and thus does not refer to one "race." As Gándara and Contreras (2009) explain, despite the great diversity within the group labeled *Latino*, most U.S. Latinos "encounter surprisingly similar educational challenges" (p. 7). Because the self-identifications of the students in this study vary, I use the general term *Latino/a* as the default term. When referring to a specific student, however, I use whichever term he or she identifies with.

[3]Although the various forms of discrimination intersect and similarities can be drawn, and although my gendered positionality certainly enables me to understand discrimination vis-à-vis sexism, it does not give me an intimate understanding of being the target of racism. My point here is not, however, to claim that one "ism" is more painful, or more critical, than another. It is my intention, in part, to help call attention to the ways in which discrimination can manifest itself for students of color at predominantly White institutions.

[4]For more in-depth portraits of each student, see Minikel-Lacocque (2011).

[5]*Burro*, meaning "small horse" or "donkey" in Spanish, is commonly used as a derogatory term, most closely translated as "ass" or "idiot."

[6]See author's work (Minikel-Lacocque, 2011) for more information on each of the students' path through and after college.

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