

JLER

Vol 7, No 2

Copyright © 2021, CLEAR, INC.

<http://journals.sfu.ca/cvj/index.php/cvj/index>

BOOK REVIEW

Solórzano, D.G. & Pérez Huber, L. (2020). *Racial Microaggressions: Using Critical Race Theory to Respond to Everyday Racism*. Teachers College Press.

Reviewed by:

Verónica N. Vélez,

Associate Professor, Western Washington University

What conceptual and methodological tools are needed to better understand and address the realities of everyday racism that People of Color experience persistently and pervasively across a range of institutional contexts? After years of collaborating – in research, teaching, and activism – Solórzano and Pérez Huber come together to incisively answer this question in *Racial Microaggressions: Using Critical Race Theory to Respond to Everyday Racism*. Anchored in Critical Race Theory (CRT), particularly its extension into the field of Education, they offer a vivid, humble, and undoubtedly necessary contribution to expand our understanding of racial microaggressions, which they define as, “one form of systemic, everyday racism used to keep those at the racial margins in their place” (p. 34). I write this review mere days after the violent events of March 16, 2020 in Cherokee County, Georgia that took the lives of eight individuals, six of whom were Asian women. Sadly, these events are nothing new in a country whose investments in white supremacy are directly responsible for the continued dehumanization of Asian American and Asian immigrant women and, by extension, other People of Color. Solórzano’s and Pérez Huber’s contribution to expand our understanding and urge our interruption of daily racialized assaults hit especially acute with the timing of these murders. This review offers a glimpse into the rich theoretical history, methodological approaches, and modes of resistance highlighted by Solórzano and Pérez Huber to advance our grasp of racial microaggressions.

Solórzano and Pérez Huber begin by describing in their introduction how they were first introduced to racial microaggressions. Solórzano details his journey to CRT and marginality as conceptual entry points to his understanding of this phenomenon. Crediting Peggy Davis’ (1989) scholarship in the *Yale Law Journal* as the first time he came across the word “microaggression,” Solórzano followed Davis’ citational footprint to the work of Chester Pierce, a pioneer in the study of racial microaggressions. From there, Solórzano went on to conduct several studies on the topic, including key research on campus climate in connection with the *Grutter v. Bollinger* affirmative action case at the University of Michigan Law School. Pérez Huber recounts her journey’s origins as an undergraduate student at the University of California, Irvine, where Mentors of Color animated a desire to pursue interests in race, ethnic studies and education. As a graduate student of Solórzano’s at UCLA, Pérez Huber was originally drawn to the work of CRT and racial microaggressions to name what she experienced navigating educational institutions as a Woman of Color. Later, in her work with the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and through protest against the anti-immigrant bill, H.R. 4437, she began considering the layered assaults

Chicanxs/Latinxs experience, particularly for those who identify as undocumented. This led to research and theoretical pursuits to capture the complexity of intersecting realities faced by undocumented Chicana/Latina women. Coming together to theorize and write about racial microaggressions, Solórzano and Pérez Huber have produced an impressive body of scholarship, which is summarized in the introduction. Equally, if not more impressive, is how their theoretical and conceptual developments have always been in constant conversation with real life and with ongoing struggles for social justice.

Grounded in their personal journeys, Solórzano and Pérez Huber open Chapter 1 with stories – counterstories – of experiences with racial microaggressions, narrated by People of Color. According to Solórzano and Pérez Huber, counterstories “open a discursive space to disrupt the normativity of whiteness and allow for the recognition of race and racism, when in so many spaces, racism is often dismissed.” (p. 21). Through a series of examples, these counterstories set the stage for the chapter’s focus – namely, to provide a historical context and conceptual groundwork for understanding racial microaggressions. In addition to providing a rich interdisciplinary history to define race and everyday racism, underscoring in particular the work of W.E.B. Du Bois, Solórzano and Pérez Huber provide considerable attention to noting the contributions of Chester Pierce, a Black psychologist who in the late 1960s and early 1970s began writing about racial microaggressions as “offensive mechanisms.” Though he didn’t coin the term until the 1980s, he had already produced a vast body of work on the topic, linking it to the physical and psychological deterioration of Blacks in particular. Chapter 1 concludes with a concise, yet thorough, introduction to CRT in Education, which will serve as the theoretical anchor for the rest of the book.

Chapter 2 extends the framing of CRT to consider one of its methodological tools – critical race hypos – for understanding and teaching about the types, contexts, effects, and responses to racial microaggressions. Solórzano and Pérez Huber make clear that racial microaggressions are not only verbal in nature. They can also manifest visually in advertisements, films, and even children’s books, as well as through body language that can signal a dislike or distrust of People of Color. Racial microaggressions occur in a variety of contexts such as schools, at the mall, or in the workplace, which mediate the subtext, or how microaggressions are conveyed. Solórzano and Pérez Huber stress that the effects of racial microaggressions, both physiological and psychological, can compound over time debilitating one’s overall health. Lastly, common responses to racial microaggressions by People of Color were discussed, which also vary based on the type and context of the microaggression as well as its consequential effect. A model is provided to visualize this relationship which is primarily interested in the impact or effects of racial microaggression on People of Color, and less so on the intent or implicit bias of the perpetrator. Nonetheless, understanding how perpetrators respond when “called out” by People of Color for racist comments and behaviors is important for nuancing our understanding of racial microaggressions.

Chapter 3 tackles recent debates about whether the “micro” in racial microaggression adequately captures the gravity of insult and impact that racial microaggressions deliver. Solórzano and Pérez Huber open this chapter with a clear and powerful argument, stating, “racial microaggression could not exist without the policies and processes that allow them to happen, or the ideological beliefs in white supremacy that justify them” (p. 51). They go on to note how racial microaggressions cannot be understood or experienced outside of its intimate relationship with institutional racism. They remind us that the “micro” in racial microaggressions is not meant to signal “small” or “slight” but rather its incessant nature in everyday life. Even so, they introduce

the term, “macroaggression,” using the visual of a tree, to underscore the rootedness of racial microaggressions in ideologies of white supremacy. Several examples of historic and contemporary racial microaggressions are highlighted to demonstrate the interconnectedness of this relationship.

Chapter 4 explores how racial microaggressions take place within and between Communities of Color. Linking back to their conceptual anchor in CRT, Solórzano and Pérez Huber remind the reader that while People of Color can internalize racism, they have never possessed the political or economic power needed to enact racism. Internalized racism, like institutional racism, is produced by the ideologies of white supremacy. These ideas are socialized through a variety of institutions and come to shape the viewpoints of People of Color, contributing to beliefs that uphold colorism (i.e. preference for whiteness), for example. Similar to how they approach other arguments in the book, Solórzano and Pérez Huber turn to history to ground their understanding of internalized racism. They look back to the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, in particular the Clark Doll Experiment, as evidence of the damaging effects of Jim Crow laws. Lastly, Solórzano and Pérez Huber discuss the intergroup conflict that can arise between Communities of Color as a result of internalized racism. Citing recent tensions that surfaced during the Trump presidency, they stress the power of racial realism (Bell, 1992) to reorder white supremacy even when People of Color find themselves in positions of power to change social conditions.

Chapter 5 shifts the focus on antidotes to racial microaggressions – racial microaffirmations. Having accounted for the painful experiences of everyday racism in prior chapters, Solórzano and Pérez Huber turn to stories of hope, joy, and possibility. Influenced by the work of Steele (1988), Sherman and Cohen (2006), and economist Mary Rowe (2008) who first coined microaffirmations to describe effective mentorship practices for faculty, Solórzano and Pérez Huber define racial microaffirmations “. . . as the subtle verbal and nonverbal strategies People of Color engage that affirm each other’s dignity, integrity, and shared humanity.” (p. 85). They go on to provide several examples. For instance, they draw attention to what Black scholars and journalists have described as racial codes, or simple gestures – a head nod – that validate the humanity of Blacks, particular in hostile or predominantly white spaces. They also point to the work of Ward (1996) and Guzman (2012) who examine the culturally specific and affirming practices of Mothers of Color toward their daughters. Lastly, Solórzano and Pérez Huber share microaffirmation examples from their own lives, ranging from the importance of culturally rooted aesthetics to attending Raza graduations. They end by highlighting recent scholarship on racial microaffirmations which is only just commencing in the field of Education.

In Chapter 6, Solórzano and Pérez Huber conclude by summarizing key lessons they’ve learned in their shared journey to study racial microaggressions. They stress three lessons. The first is that any analysis of racial microaggression must include a recognition and examination of the structural conditions that lead to everyday racism. The second is that resistance to racism has always existed on behalf of People of Color. Third, it is imperative that continued research on racial microaggressions support and value the contributions of Communities of Color toward racial justice. Solórzano and Pérez Huber also highlight promising areas for future research. Some examples include inquiry on K-12 Youth of Color, visual microaggressions, and quantitative empirical research that examines the negative health consequences of everyday racism. They end by speaking directly to praxis, suggesting possibilities for intervention.

In the remainder of this review, I raise several questions that emerged from reading this powerful and timely text. My comments concern three themes: 1) ongoing debates about whether

the “micro” in “microaggression” is still appropriate and sufficient for naming contemporary forms of everyday racism, 2) the importance of detailing the range and consequences of responses to racial microaggressions, and 3) the justice possibilities for deepening our understanding and interruption of racial microaggressions when we consider current movements, such as the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), Dream Defenders, Critical Resistance, and many other collectives working at present to steer the conversation away from reform and insist another transformative path is needed.

First, it’s key we address recent challenges to the term “microaggression,” not for its underlying meaning, but for the use of “micro” to qualify the “aggression.” With the rise of the Trump presidency, the frequency and boldness of racist attacks have arguably become much more prominent, when compared to recent history. Though critical race scholars have long argued about the insidiousness of white supremacy across time and space, it was hard to dismiss the shock most of us felt seeing image after image and hearing remark after remark of brutal violence being inflicted on Communities of Color and then brushed aside as acts of patriotism. Calls by grassroots organizations, youth, and even other Scholars of Color to cancel the term “microaggression” for its purported insufficiency to capture the gravity of the moment were resounding. Yet, while these calls were well-intended in their desire for counter-discourses powerful enough to “speak truth to power” at present, they fail for two reasons. The first is that these calls misunderstand what the “micro” in “microaggression” means. Solórzano and Pérez Huber make clear that the “micro” was never intended to mean “slight” or “small,” rather it was intended to stress the sinister nature of white supremacy in everyday life. In fact, Chester Pierce explains that racial microaggressions cannot be disarticulated from police brutality, economic exploitation, and mortality rates, none of which are “minor” impacts. Second, by insisting that we abandon the term, these efforts erase the history of primarily Black scholars who brought the concept to our attention. In alignment with CRT tenets, Solórzano and Pérez Huber insist on grounding their understandings through a historical analysis, making sure to foreground the work of Scholars of Color who have been instrumental in theorizing racial microaggressions. Their insistence on this history is key, as it recognizes the intergenerational labor that has allowed us the generative space to theorize about these topics today. Thus, calls to erase and replace “racial microaggression” with a better term threatens an ahistorical analysis that severs the link to the contributions of Black scholars. And such ahistoricism can only contribute to a co-opting of this work, which I have personally witnessed participating in the exponential rise of “implicit bias” trainings in higher education.

Second, I’m compelled by the range of responses Solórzano and Pérez Huber provide to underscore the agency of Communities of Color in responding to everyday racism. In particular, I’m moved by the power of microaffirmations, as both acts of validation but also for their potential to heal. For too long, educational policy has tried to figure out how to capture what makes Students of Color resilient in an effort to package it as a reform strategy to make future students more “gritty.” While resistance to white supremacy is undoubtedly important to recognize, study, harness, and support, it’s also clear that these lifetime battles debilitate People of Color. Solórzano and Pérez Huber acknowledge these consequences, noting research on racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2006). Though they mention that research on racial microaffirmations is only just emerging, the examples provided give me tremendous hope that despite the permanence of racism, we can find antidotes to heal and thrive as Communities of Color. Rather than center our relationship to the harm, racial microaffirmations assist us in centering our ways of being and knowing, our relationships to our families and communities, and commitments to futures in which our whole selves are recognized and celebrated.

Third, Solórzano and Pérez Huber have inspired me to think about the relationship between research on racial microaggressions and current abolitionist demands that argue that which needs to be abolished is not simply the prison, but all that it stands in for. These demands consider the intimate dimensions of the prison regime, which structures our social relations and imprints our very subjectivities. Getting rid of police and prisons means nothing if we do not abolish the ideologies, practices, and affective economies of policing in our interpersonal relationships and communities. We must, in short, transform the “intimate investments” within the prison-industrial-complex that come to saturate our very desires, relationships, and modes of relation to one another and ourselves (Rodriguez, 2006). Similarly, Solórzano and Pérez Huber make clear that any effort toward racial justice must consider everyday racial injustice, as a structural phenomenon with consequential “imprints” on our psyches and modes of relating to one another and ourselves. The justice possibilities of what Solórzano and Pérez Huber offer for current movements is clear. It isn’t enough to tackle the visible forms of racial harm, we must also uproot and abolish the ideologies of white supremacy that cause them.

In closing, I would be remiss not to acknowledge that we are living in an unprecedented moment. As Karissa Lewis (2020) of Movement For Black Lives (M4BL) argues, we find ourselves in “a culmination of multiple storms converging . . . COVID-19, police violence, racial capitalism in crisis, [and] intensified white supremacy,” resulting in mass uprisings across the country and the world. This path demands an end to all systems of violence and a redirected focus away from reforming what has been and toward imagining the not yet. I’m deeply grateful for the powerful words and call to action by Solórzano and Pérez Huber in *Racial Microaggressions: Using Critical Race Theory to Respond to Everyday Racism*. Their work connects to a long lineage emerging directly out of collective freedom struggles. They enter humbly, but fiercely, to underscore how their theorizing, commitments, study, and interruption of racial microaggressions is part of an ongoing intergenerational quest for justice. As an aspiring critical race scholar myself, I’ve been deeply impacted by their work here and elsewhere, to push the radical edges of an anti-racist politic to its furthest logical conclusion toward the world we all need and deserve.

REFERENCES

- Bell, D. (1992). Racial realism. *Connecticut Law Review*, 24(2), 363–379.
- Davis, P. (1989). Law as microaggression. *Yale Law Journal*, 98, 1559-1577.
- Guzmán, B. (2012). Cultivating a guerrera spirit in Latinas: The praxis of mothering. *Journal of the Association of Mexican American Educators*, 6(1), 45–51.
- Rodriguez, D. (2006). *Forced passages: Imprisoned radical intellectuals and the U.S. prison regime*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Rowe, M. (2008). Micro-affirmations and micro-inequities. *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association*, 1(1), 45–48.
- Lewis, K. “Sunday School: Unlock us, abolition in our lifetime.” (June 14, 2020). *Dream Defenders*, 1:45:00-1:47:00. [Video file]. Youtube .
- Sherman, D.K. & Cohen, G.L. (2006). The psychology of self-defense: Self-affirmation theory. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 38, 183–242.

- Smith, W.A. (2004). Black faculty coping with racial battle fatigue: The campus racial climate in a post-civil rights era. In D. Cleveland (Ed.), *A long way to go: Conversations about race by African American faculty and graduate students* (pp. 171–190). Peter Lang.
- Smith, W.A., Yosso, T.J., & Solorzano, D.G. (2006). Challenging racial battle fatigue on historically white campuses: A critical race examination of race-related stress. In C. Stanley (Ed.), *Faculty of color teaching in predominantly white colleges and universities* (pp. 299–327). Anker Publishing.
- Steele, C.M. (1988). The psychology of self-affirmation: Sustaining the integrity of the self. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 21, 261–302.
- Ward, J.V. (1996). Raising resisters: The role of truth-telling in the psychological development of African American girls. In B. J. Leadbeater & N. Way (Eds.), *Urban girls: Resisting stereotypes, creating identities* (pp. 85–99). New York University Press.