Theorizing Micro-aggressions as Racism 3.0: Shifting the Discourse

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Abstract
Awareness is mounting of a new racialized discourse that promises to profoundly challenge how we think and talk about racism. Micro-aggressions consist of those words and interactions perceived as racist by racialized targets that rarely reflect vindictive intent yet inadvertently inflict insult or injury. A theorizing of micro-aggression as racism 3.0 secures a discursive framework that not only situates the definitional locus of racism within the lived-experiences of the micro-aggressed. It also re-positions the debate over who decides what counts as racism, what racisms count by transferring the focus of racism from a set of conditions to a claims-making process. This paper analyzes the distinction between racism 3.0 and racisms 1.0 and 2.0; explores the micro-aggression ‘turn’ that defines racism 3.0; examines micro-aggressions within the linguistic context of everyday racism; re-conceptualizes racism through the interpretive lens of claims-making (“racism-making”); and demonstrates how racism 3.0 offers a distinctive perspective for understanding contemporary racism. Data for this paper are drawn from a synthesis of existing sources.

Résumé
La sensibilisation consiste à ressasser un nouveau discours racialisé qui promet de profondément remettre en question la façon dont nous pensons et parlons à propos du racisme. Les micro-agressions sont faites de ces mots et interactions perçues comme racistes par des cibles racialisées qui reflètent rarement une intention vindicative, mais qui pourtant infligent par inadvertance des insultes ou blessures. Une théorisation de micro-agression comme racisme 3.0 assure un cadre discursif qui, non seulement situe le lieu de définition du racisme au sein des expériences vécues des micro-agressés. Elle repositionne également le débat sur qui décide de ce qui compte comme racisme, quel racisme compte, en transférant le centre du racisme à partir d’un ensemble de conditions vers un processus de revendication. Cet article analyse la distinction entre le racisme 3.0 et les racismes 1.0 et 2.0; il explore la micro-agression « tournant » qui définit le racisme 3.0; examine les micro-agressions dans le contexte linguistique du racisme au quotidien ; re-conceptualise le racisme à travers le regard interprétatif des revendications (« racialisation ») ; et démontre comment le racisme 3.0 offre une approche analytique différente pour comprendre le racisme contemporain. Les données de ce document sont tirées d’une synthèse des sources existantes.
INTRODUCTION: MICRO-AGGRESSIONS AS RACISM-MAKING

[1]f you want to understand racism, do you want to ask people of colour – or white people? – Derald Wing Sue, 2016.

An actual incident from Derald Wing Sue et al. (2007): Two colleagues – one African American, the other Asian American – board a small plane (a ‘hopper’ with a single row of seats on one side, a double row on the other) for a flight from Boston to New York. A white flight attendant tells them they can sit anywhere they want in the uncrowded plane; accordingly, they choose seats near the front and across the aisle from each other so they can freely converse. At the last minute, three white males in suits enter the plane and take the seats in front of the colleagues. Just before take-off, the flight attendant asks the two colleagues if they would mind moving to the back of the plane to better balance its load. Both seethe with resentment at the request to symbolically ‘sit at the back of the bus’. They eventually express their outrage at being mistreated as second-class citizens; after all, they had boarded the plane prior to the entry of the white males. But the attendant reacts indignantly to these charges, claiming it was her responsibility to ensure flight safety by redistributing the plane’s weight. She also claims to have had their best interests in mind by providing them with more space and privacy (deAngelis 2009). Repeated efforts to explain their perceptions and concerns collapsed into yet more defensiveness and dismissals.

The new face of racism or a ‘tempest in the proverbial teapot’ (Mitra 2014; also Ahson 2015)? Were the colleagues overly sensitive to a legitimate request by misinterpreting words that ostensibly lacked racist intent? (One of the colleagues subsequently acknowledged the attendant’s probable belief that she acted in good faith and without racial rancour [Sue et al. 2007])? Or did the attendant act out a hidden and unconscious (“subliminal”) animus towards blacks and Asians behind the pretext of safety concerns and the coded language of a closet racist (Shoshana 2015; Sue 2011)? Was the attendant guilty of racial micro-aggression, namely, those subtle insults and covert innuendos that the racialized minorities interpret as micro-racisms regardless of perpetrator intent or awareness levels? Evidence suggests yes, and reference to racial micro-aggression may represent ‘a new face of racism’ that eschews the overt language of bigotry in exchange for those covert codes perceived by the micro-aggressed to communicate dislike or aversion. Admittedly, the explanatory value of micro-aggression may be compromised by the practical problems it poses in racializing all snubs (from offhand comments to derogatory putdowns); inflating specious charges of racism by playing the ‘race’ card; fostering a hyper-sensitized victimhood culture; pushing political correctness to risible extremes; or politicizing every criticism of racialized minorities (Campbell and Manning 2014;
Desmond Harris 2014; Jacobson 2013; MacDonald 2014; Pettigrew 2014; Slater 2015; Timpf 2015; Vega 2014). Criticism notwithstanding, however, the theorizing of micro-aggression as racism 3.0 offers an innovative lens for exposing those implicit racisms that inform the micro-aggressions of everyday interaction (Huber and Solorzano 2014).

This paper deconstructs the concept of micro-aggressions as racism 3.0 by exposing how it represents a micro-racial bias that operates ‘under the radar’ through thinly veiled compliments, aversive (re)actions, and seemingly neutral language. Particular attention is devoted to the sociology of language not only in constructing and securing hegemonic patterns of social control through subtext and code (Cazenave 2015), but also in offering a tool for making visible how power operates in everyday practices (Pascale 2013). The paper also addresses the dearth of sociological studies on this topic (also Knibb 2013) by distinguishing racism 3.0 from racisms 1.0 and 2.0; capitalizing on a micro-aggression ‘turn’ that informs racism 3.0; situating micro-aggression within the framework of everyday racism (‘words matter’); discussing the disruptive impact of micro-aggressions in unsettling others; proposing the possibility of reframing racism from a type of condition to a claims-making process; and analyzing the explanatory value of racism 3.0 as racism-making that shifts the discourse accordingly.

The paper makes it abundantly clear: The debate over racialized micro-aggressions as racism 3.0 promises to unsettle how sociologists conceptualize racism (also Campbell and Manning 2014). Racism under a micro-aggression platform is no longer framed as intent but about impact; not something inherent in an act but reflective of situational circumstances; not the ‘out there’ but the ‘in between here’; not the formal and the abstract but people’s lived experiences; not a condition but claims-making activity (i.e., ‘racism-making’); not a static and objective reality (racism as ‘noun’) but a dynamic and interactive process (racism as ‘verb’) whose ‘realness’ is applied after the (f)act, depending on the context, criteria, or consequences. The defining feature of micro-aggressions as racism 3.0 goes beyond the subtlety of the slur or the naïveté of the transgressor. Its centrality resides in privileging the inter-subjective realities of the micro-aggressed by prioritizing their interpretation of these covert putdowns, in effect shifting the focus of analysis along post-positivist lines. Its worth may also reflect a growing belief that targets of racism should have the final say in defining what is racism and how it impacts their lives (Beharry and Crozier 2008; Sue 2016). Finally, reference to racism 3.0 is not about uncovering a new strain of racism; after all, racialized micro-aggressions have always existed, albeit dwarfed in importance by more egregious racist expressions (also Best 2001). More accurately, it’s about re-centering the lived-experiences of racialized minorities by re-positioning the discursive politics of who decides what counts as racism, what racisms count.
EVERYDAY RACISM AND LANGUAGE: WORDS DO MATTER

Reference to micro-aggressions as racism 3.0 builds on – yet moves positively beyond – the pioneering work of Philomena Essed and the concept of everyday racism. According to Essed (1991), the everyday experiences of racism and racist practice involve those routine activities perceived by the majority to be normal and neutral, yet these putdowns and demotions are negatively experienced by minority women and men as a violation of their dignity and humanity. Essed (2002) also points out that everyday racism is entrenched within mainstream institutions so that patterns of dominance are largely invisible to those in power and passively tolerated by the majority. Finally, she argues that it’s not the actions per se that determine whether racism is at play; instead it’s about the contexts that define acts as racist. Everyday racism is subsequently defined (Essed 1991, 5)

as a process in which (a) socialized racist notions are integrated into meanings that make practices immediately definable and manageable, (b) practices with racist implications become in themselves familiar and repetitive, and (c) underlying racial and ethnic relations are actualized and reinforced through these routine or familiar practices in everyday situations.

In short, the concept of everyday racism encompasses those subtle but significant forms of normalized bias that are perpetuated against racialized minorities through language and actions, often unconsciously, and stealthily by members of the dominant group without eliciting much attention in the process (Essed 1991; Shin 2015). These expressive acts tend to be unpremeditated instead of being coldly calculating, ostensibly triggered by a perceived insult, a grievance, or a transgression rooted in the incivilities of everyday social life. Acts and words of everyday racism become normalized through incorporation into daily interactions (from name calling to racist jokes to avoidance of close contact) in ways that reinforce the powers of privilege (Barnes 2000). For example, racialized nurses in Canada may experience multiple forms of everyday racism in their working lives, including instances of tokenism, bullying or invisibility, excessive monitoring, lack of recognition, and verbal putdowns because of race and ethnicity (Das Gupta 2009; Estachio and Saidy-Khan 2014). The micro-racism in the nursing workplace also intersects other negative identity markers such as race, gender, class, and ability to amplify the exclusions or invalidations. Clearly, then, a contradiction is in play: Individuals may be equal before the law in terms of equal opportunities, yet still be slighted or excluded if their identities and realities are misrecognized or discredited through the racialized tenor of everyday discourse (see Levey 2013). Formal citizenship rights may be real, but they must be exercised in everyday contexts neither constructed to reflect minority realities nor designed to
advance their interests (Fleras 2016). Not surprisingly, everyday racism constitutes a form of hegemony (‘control through consent’) whose very normalcy and routineness solidify hierarchical structures while perpetuating a systemic whiteness that undergirds a racialized society (Huber and Solorzano 2015).

Both micro-aggressions and everyday racism acknowledge the centrality of language and words – or perhaps more accurately the power of language/words and the language/words of power. Contemporary racism is rarely directly expressed or openly tolerated since bigots in Canada and the United States know better than to spout racist drivel unless, of course, they yearn for some kind of social death wish. More culturally acceptable expressions are preferred that foster the same effect without attracting negative attention or implicating the source (Sirna 1996; Shin 2015; Sue 2010). Closet racists have learned how to avoid the taint of malicious intent by adopting a communicative style informed by coded language that imply a commitment to colour-blindness (Bonilla-Silva 2015). Or, alternatively, they resort to vague, accommodative, or obfuscating terms such as ‘race’, ‘diversity’, or ‘minorities’ to paper over issues of racism, oppression, or injustice (for example, consider the controversy over the slogan “Black Lives Matter” versus the phrase “All Lives Matter” that many perceive as de-politicizing the ongoing crisis in police-Black relations [Atlanta Blackstar 2015; Cazenave 2015]).

The language of words in perpetuating everyday racisms is widely acknowledged (Augoustinos and Every 2007; Blauner 1994; Essed 1991; Hill 2008; Kubota 2015; Shoshana 2015; Wetherell and Potter 1993). Everything we know and signify in a mind-dependent social world is filtered through language, in the process reinforcing Foucault’s reference to the knowledge/power matrix, that is, power as expression of knowledge; knowledge as expression of power (Pascale 2013). Nevertheless the potency of language as power and social control is often undervalued because of its ubiquity and repetitiveness. Many mistakenly equate language to a delivery service equivalent in function to a postal system, namely, a relatively impartial and passive channel of information exchange between sender and receiver for transmitting messages created independently through a process called thinking. But words and language are neither ideologically neutral nor a mechanical transmitter of information divorced from thought. They are “loaded” with values and preferences that draw attention to some aspects of reality as being normal and acceptable yet diminish other dimensions as inferior, irrelevant or threatening, thereby reinforcing a prevailing status quo. In other words, words are not simply connotative; they also are highly political by virtue of denoting mixed or negative messages beyond what is intended and without a speaker’s awareness.

The two-edged nature of language is unmistakable. Yes, language can be used to enlighten and inform; yet it can be employed to control, evade issues, or dictate
agendas that perpetuate patterns of power and privilege. Words in a language reflect and recreate processes that exclude others as legitimate members of a community, in part by highlighting differences and enlarging distance as well as by criminalizing ‘otherness’ while sanctioning normalcy (Sirna 1996). Boundaries between normal and deviant are constructed around words that define and demonize the other as an object yet simultaneously confirm the privileged position of the normal and natural subject (Pickering 2001). Or to phrase it differently, the language of words can be readily manipulated to expose racism yet keep it hidden and unproblematic (Cazenave 2015; Minikel-Lacoque 2013). To be sure, the bias implicit in seemingly innocent words and boorish probes may not be intentional or deliberate. Nor will the occasional use of derogatory words explode into full-blown crisis. But the cumulative effects of ‘linguistic death by a thousand word cuts’ should never be underestimated in perpetuating racial hierarchies (Hill 2008; Derald Wing Sue in Fitzgerald 2015). And while it’s an exaggeration to say that language determines our reality, as an uncritical Sapir-Whorf hypothesis might imply, it certainly establishes a cultural frame of reference for defining who is important and what is valued. As Bourdieu (1991) would likely say in confirming how language transmits a meaning beyond the speaker’s intention since words possess a social context, the power of language is not in the words that hurt, but about those patterns of power perpetuated through word play and language use in everyday discourses and daily practices. This assertion alone makes it doubly important to expose how the language of words exemplified by racial micro-aggressions constitute a discourse in defence of dominant ideology.

RACIAL MICRO-AGGRESSIONS AS LIVED-RACISM

The problematizing of racism in the 21st century reinforces what many suspect: First, racism refuses to go away even though we should know better. Racism has proven notoriously resistant and adaptive – intellectually dead, as many have hoped or predicted, but ready to bolt into action during times of change, danger or anxiety. Second, racism is not what it used to be, with the result our understanding of it evolves as new forms mutate (Lee and Lutz 2005). It’s proving to be a “scavenger” ideology that parasitically pounces on the most unlikely of sources, bobbing and weaving to escape detection, yet losing its precision precisely when analyzed too closely. Third, while racisms exist, ambiguities prevail in unpacking (deconstructing) the “what,” “why,” “who,” “where,” and “when.” Certain actions are unmistakably racist; others are labelled as racist for political or social reasons; yet others still acquire this tainted status as the situation unfolds. Not surprisingly, racism has become so expansive in scope and application that any possibility of a single or commonly understood definition collapses under the weight of contested claims (Fleras
2014). Accordingly, racism can mean whatever people want it to mean depending on definition or context. And while such fluidity and expansiveness may prove helpful at times, it can also confuse and provoke.

Reference to everyday racism consists of those micro-racist words and practices that infiltrate the routines of interaction by normalizing what transpires in society (Essed 1991, 2002). Micro-aggressions also refer to those covert and nuanced expressions of everyday racism that look innocuous enough on the surface, but implicitly communicate an affront identified as racist or offensive by the micro-aggressed. More specifically, micro-aggressions represent those commonplace indignities – from the verbal to the nonverbal, from the visual to the behavioural, from offhand comments to clumsy curiosity – that racialized minorities experience as dismissals or denigrations – even if transgressors are (or prefer to remain) oblivious to their indiscretions (Huber and Solorzano 2014; Sue 2010). These micro-managing banalities are imbued with coded messages that vary in scope, from confirming stereotypes to privileging whiteness as the normative standard, from essentializing all group mem-

**TABLE 1. Examples of Racialized Micro-Aggressions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression by transgressor</th>
<th>Interpretation by the micro-aggressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Where are you really from?</td>
<td>You are a perpetual alien because of appearances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those people….</td>
<td>‘Outing’ the other as remote or removed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You speak good English</td>
<td>Who would have thought you could be so articulate, especially since eloquence is beyond the intellectual reach of your kind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You are a credit to your race</td>
<td>Your group is usually not this smart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I look at you, I don’t see race</td>
<td>Denying identity and people’s lived-experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is only one race, the human race</td>
<td>Denying the person as a racial/cultural being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clutching a purse more tightly</td>
<td>Criminal alert!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following a customer of colour in a store</td>
<td>Acting on stereotypes (‘criminalized while shopping’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being ignored at a counter</td>
<td>You are less valued/whites get preferential treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxi passes a racialized person for a white fare</td>
<td>You are dangerous, you are a 2nd class citizen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m not racist, I have black friends</td>
<td>Friendships do not exclude micro-aggressions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
bers as undifferentiated to normalizing the exceptions while invalidating the exceptional (Das Gupta 2009; Young, Anderson, and Stewart 2014). The list below provides examples of micro-aggressions that permeate the daily routines of social interactions:

Herein lies the distinction between everyday racism and micro-aggression. While micro-aggressions may be defined as a kind of everyday racism, the two differ in how they source and process racism. For Essed, everyday racism is framed as a series of racialized conditions experienced by minorities. More specifically, it consists of how Blacks recognize and experience *majority racism* and racist practices directed at them in everyday life – from body language to institutional entrenchment. By contrast, the micro-aggression turn under a racism 3.0 emphasizes the process of claims-making by focusing on how minorities themselves perceive and define as racism those seemingly banal and unintentional practices of the dominant group members. The concept of micro-aggressions as racism-making capitalizes on this distinction – namely, minorities experiencing a racist act (“everyday racism”) versus minorities defining an act as racist (“micro-aggression”) – by isolating those casual expressions of everyday racism (from slurs to slights to offhand comments and clumsy curiosity) that superficially look innocuous enough yet are perceived and processed as racist by members of marginalized groups.

Micro-aggressions encapsulate two dimensions: the tone-deaf but not entirely innocent sender (micro-transgressor) and the aggrieved receiver (micro-aggressed). Those who perpetuate micro-aggressions may intend no malice since they are inattentive to their complicity in communicating putdowns (McWhorter 2014; Sue et al. 2007). They go about their lives without much attention to how their whiteness privileges and secures advantages at the expense of the disadvantaged (Ikuenobé 2010). Or they downplay the repercussion of their careless words or thoughtless actions by dismissing the import of seemingly banal interactions since those who have never

**TABLE 1. Examples of Racialized Micro-Aggressions (cont’d)**

| As a women, I know what you are experiencing | I can’t be a racist because I’m like you |
| Everyone can succeed if they work hard enough | Minorities are lazy or incompetent |
| It’s post racial society | Race is irrelevant to success; accept blame |
| Asking minority person to settle down, be quiet | Pathologizing communication styles |
| Mistaking a racialized minority for service worker | Minorities occupy menial jobs |

(adapted from Sue et al. 2007; see also http://www.microaggressions.com for additional examples)
experienced racism invariably underestimate it (Wesley and Shiels 2007). This passage is instructive of the blindness that underpins micro-aggressions:

It can be difficult for white folks to appreciate the magnitude, impact, and burden of the accumulated daily prejudices over a person’s lifetime. How much extra energy do you have in your life to deal with the sales clerk that follows you around the store as you shop for clothes, the taxi that passes you by for someone with lighter skin, the professor that assumes you came from a bad high-school? Or the folks that use a description of you as an insult to others, or the people that can’t be bothered to remember how to pronounce your name, or the colleagues that deny that your own experiences were the products of racism? (By Their Strange Fruit, 6 February 2011).

Yet these seemingly harmless slurs or unintended slights – once ignored or sloughed off as harmless jokes or questionable etiquette – can carry a burden of emotional weight or mental distress. This “everyday suffering” (Huber and Solorzano 2014, 8) is particularly acute when neither victim nor perpetrator fully grasp the inferences of the innuendo (Joshi, McCutcheon, and Sweet 2015; Mitra 2014). A sense of bewilderment invariably arises because of the ambiguities of coded subtexts that complicate any assessment or response (Estachio and Saidy-Khan 2015; Sue et al. 2007). Victims often struggle to determine if bigotry is at play or whether to dismiss the micro-bullying by blaming themselves for reading too much into the situation or by taking offence when perhaps none was intended (Sue 2010). Is the question “No, where are you really from?” a case of polite curiosity or a thinly veiled putdown that “otherizes” the micro-aggressed as the “alien” within? Caplan and Ford (2014, 54) capture the confusion and uncertainties endured by racialized students at the receiving end of micro-aggressions:

Much of the mistreatment comes in the form of microaggressions, so that people who are its targets spend a great deal of time in internal dialogue, asking themselves whether they imagined or misinterpreted what the other person said or did and, given the less than blatant form of the mistreatment, feeling apprehension and anguish about whether, if they try to name and object to what was done to them, they will only be told that they are overly sensitive or even that they are imagining it. They worry that speaking up to protest such treatment carries the risk of creating still more problems for themselves and other members of their respective group.

In short, the seeming triteness of everyday language and the ostensibly petty gestures of micro-aggression may conjure up an informality or a superficiality that diminishes peoples’ perceptions of its importance. The micro-aggressed are labelled as hyper-sensitive by those who rarely consider the toxicity of their carelessness. Conversely, mainstream members see themselves as decent and tolerant human beings who bristle at the prospect they might harbour biases or act in discrimina-
tory ways – in the misguided belief that deliberate intent is the definitive attribute that renders an act malicious or defines someone as racist (Estrada 2015; Hill 2008; Wong et al. 2013). Of course, a single slur is unlikely to make a difference or cause offence. But the cumulative weight of these cascading slights (akin to ‘a ton of feathers’) establishes a context (or chilly climate) that leaves minorities uncomfortable, marginalized, or fearful (Derald Wing Sue in Fitzgerald 2015). Micro-aggressions imply cultural differences and social inferiorities that put the recipient’s non-conformity and non-belonging into sharp relief – to the point of calling into question her presence within society while magnifying differences in alienating ways (Runyowa 2015). They also expose those implicit biases that not only lurk beneath the surface of our carefully calibrated public selves, but also have consequences beyond hurt feelings – from discriminatory hiring to fatal police encounters (also Choudhury 2015). In other word, references to the ‘micro’ in micro-aggression allude to its brevity and nuance (‘micro in name only’) rather than a denial of its potency and consequences as a symptom of deeper structural issues related to systemic racism and racialized injustice (Caplan and Ford 2014; Runyowa 2015).

CONCEPTUALIZING MICRO-AGGRESSION AS RACISM 3.0

To date, the concept of micro-aggression has proven relatively ‘easy’ to describe, thanks to the abundance of literature that taps into the psychology of the American psyche (Wong et al. 2013). The theorizing of micro-aggression along more sociological lines – by situating lived-racisms within a theoretical framework – will prove a more formidable challenge. For example, consider the questions that require answers: Is micro-aggression simply an extension of polite racism, or, does it portend the making of a distinct racism narrative that entails a new moral code of victimhood (Campbell and Manning 2014; Friedersdorf 2015)? Do micro-aggressions fit into a racism 2.0 framework, or, are we witnessing the genesis of a new racism-in-the-making based on whose voice prevails in playing ‘ontological politics’ (Hier and Walby 2006, 86)? Does reference to micro-aggression point to the possibility of reframing racism as a process or a verb (“racism-making”) – at least for heuristic purposes – rather than a condition or a thing (“noun”)? This paper contends that reference to micro-aggressions as racism 3.0 secures a new explanatory framework by putting the perspective of the micro-aggressed at the forefront of analysis and debate. The outer-directedness of direct racism 1.0 and the systemic patterns of indirect racism 2.0 are thus displaced by the claims-making dynamics of micro-aggression when transposing the narrative focus from sender (“micro-aggressor”) to the receiver (“micro-aggressed”).

The sociological study of racism can be divided into two discursive camps (Fleras 2014; also Hier and Walby 2006 for a different classification). Racism 1.0 at
both individual and institutional levels could be described as overt, blunt, direct, and deliberate. It drew its inspiration from those definitions of racism that capitalized on the centrality of the race concept in determining peoples’ lives and life-chances. Acknowledging racism 1.0 as an ‘objective’ condition reflected a specific set of beliefs and actions, with clearly marked victims and victimizers, in addition to traceable causal linkages and proposed interventions. Racism 2.0 differs from its 1.0 counterpart in the degree of bluntness, directness, and awareness. Unlike the overt and highly aggressive forms of open dislike or institutional discrimination, neither of which is acceptable in today’s much ballyhooed post-raciality, racism 2.0 is conveyed systemically at institutional levels or, alternatively, subliminally through the rationalized expression of dormant prejudices. Explicit racist expressions have yielded ground to racially coded subtexts that operate in purportedly race neutral ways through ‘inaction, silence, neglect and indifference’ (Hill 2008; Mitra 2014), although they are no less controlling or exclusionary in their consequences. People speak in code by employing proxies to deflect their bigotry from others (the polite racism of closet racists [Atlanta Blackstar 2015]) or to disguise it from themselves (subliminal racism), especially in those ambiguous contexts where racism-speak remains largely inaudible to those ‘outside the loop’ but resonates with meaning for those ‘in the know’ (‘dog-whistle racism’) (Dovidio et al. 2010; Titley and Lentin 2012; Freshley 2014).

Despite dissimilarities, racisms 1.0 and 2.0 share ontological commonalities. Both models define racism as a series of conditions involving a set of beliefs and practices that promulgate the inherent superiority of one group (‘race’) over others with a corresponding right to dominate, oppress, and exploit (Solorzano and Yosso 2002). They also endorse a positivist position in claiming that racism exists out there (sometimes open, often covert); certain actions are inherently racist regardless of context; and racists can be isolated and racism eradicated with the right methods and measurements. Even the concept of everyday racism tends to accentuate an a priori existence – however subtle or unintentional the expressions may be – by focusing on how racialized women and men process incidents of racism 1.0 and 2.0. Questions asked of racism 1.0 and 2.0 dictate a preoccupation with classification and typologies (for example, polite, systemic, ideological, infrastructural); uncovering the causes behind institutional discrimination; specifying the conditions that yield individual prejudice; and analyzing how and why individuals and institutions continue to tacitly endorse racism, especially when it’s illegal or socially unacceptable (Fleras 2016).

The onset of a so-called post-raciality creates a supportive context for facilitating the expression of micro-racisms at odds with conventional theorizing of racism as virulent and invidious (Ikuenobe 2010). Micro-aggressions as racism 3.0 chal-
lenge this positivist narrative of white racial framing by privileging the *lived-subjectivities* of racialized minorities.¹ In contrast to direct racism 1.0 and indirect racism 2.0 that capitalized on the contours of a colour-conscious Canada, references to micro-aggression as racism 3.0 shift the burden of proof in defining how racialized information is perceived, processed, and communicated – namely, from a type of condition that is experienced to a claims-making process in defining the problem. Prioritizing the inter-subjectivities of racialized minorities demonstrates how the defining feature of racism 3.0 is neither the subtlety of the slur nor the clumsiness of the transgressor. Its definitive aspect resides in assigning ontological priority to people’s lived-experience with respect to how they see, experience, and assess those acts that they define as micro-aggressions.² The table below provides an ideal-typical comparison of racisms 1.0, 2.0, 3.0 along select criteria as per left-hand column:

Reference to the inter-subjectivity of micro-aggression cannot exclude the obvious: Any theorizing of the micro in micro-aggressions is inextricably linked to the broader structures of power, injustice and inequality (Essed 1991). Reference to micro-aggression as micro-management is reflective of and mediated by institutional racism and systemic barriers. It also perpetuates and is perpetuated by those

### TABLE 2. Comparing Racism Discourses: 1.0, 2.0, 3.0

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Racism 1.0</th>
<th>Racism 2.0</th>
<th>Racism 3.0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Magnitude of Racism</strong></td>
<td>Macro</td>
<td>Mezzo</td>
<td>Micro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accounting for Racism</strong></td>
<td>Ideological/Supremacist</td>
<td>Systemic/Subliminal</td>
<td>Lived - experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of Expression</strong></td>
<td>Overt/Egregious</td>
<td>Subtle/Systemic</td>
<td>Covert/Banal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Directional Flow</strong></td>
<td>Top down</td>
<td>Top down</td>
<td>Bottom up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Source of Racism</strong></td>
<td>Sender oriented</td>
<td>Unintended effects</td>
<td>Receiver dependent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Impact</strong></td>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>Indirect/ consequences</td>
<td>Situational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Source of Definition</strong></td>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>Racialized women and men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ontological Status</strong></td>
<td>Objective – a condition out-there (etic)</td>
<td>Objective - a condition out-there (etic)</td>
<td>Inter-Subjectivities: claims-making (emic)</td>
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foundational ideologies that bolster the dominant power structures of a systemic white society (Huber and Solorzano 2015). Or as Howard Winant (2004) would conclude, micro-aggression racisms are part of a macro-level system of racialized hegemony whose invisibilities solidify hierarchical structures and consolidate white privilege. The implications are far-reaching: In that the micro matters because the macro exists, a racialized framework raises the bar by politicizing the concept of micro-aggression around what some might say is “…a set of beliefs and/or ideologies that justify actual or potential social arrangements that legitimate the interests and/or positions of a dominant group over non-dominant groups, that in turn lead to related structures and acts of subordination” (Huber and Solorzano 2014, 7).

The politics of power underpin the theorizing of micro-aggressions as racism 3.0. In looking to unsettle those words and acts that inadvertently inflict harm or discomfort in a world of everyday social transactions, the micro-aggressed struggle to leverage some degree of power, if only to amplify their voices in contexts when their concerns are often silenced or ignored (Runyowa 2015). But not necessarily power as conceptualized in the Weberian sense of ‘a’ making ‘b’ do what the latter normally wouldn’t, that is, a focus on individuals (agency) or institutions (structure) that secure people’s compliance by overcoming their opposition (Essed 1991). More accurately, micro-racisms 3.0 embody a pattern of power around a set of capacities, discourses of truths, expert knowledge, or networks of relationships that are imbricated throughout the social fabric of society (Hayward 1998; also Foucault 1991). Power is from everywhere yet nowhere inasmuch as it is diffuse (rather than concentrated), fragmented and contradictory (rather than monolithic), discursive (rather than coercive), dialectical (rather than linear) since individuals are both subjected to rules (objects) yet actively enforce them (subjects), and implicated (rather than possessed) in symbols, representations, arrangements and allocations (Gaventa 2003). People discipline themselves (and others) without explicit coercion or sanctions because of internalized yet shared values, beliefs, and norms that judge, compare, criticize and comply. In that power is expressed through the process of normalization since the ‘normal’ is, as Bourdieu asserts, a form of social regulation and cultural obligation that quietly infuses everyday practices at institutional and individual levels, few will mistake the centrality of systemic power that suffuses the dynamics of micro-aggressions (also Smith 2015).

MOVING THE DISCURSIVE YARDSTICKS: POWER AND PRIVILEGE IN LIVED-LIFE

It’s been said that the problem with problematizing contemporary racism is not that minorities see racism in everything. More to the point, it’s a case of whites seeing racism in nothing except swastika graffiti or the unfurling of confederate flags – a
point forcefully driven home by President Obama in a podcast interview when he exposed ongoing racism and the racialized divide that polarizes a so-called postracial America (Nittle 2015):

Racism, we are not cured of it. And it’s not just a matter of it not being polite to say nigger in public. That’s not the measure of whether racism still exists or not. It’s not just a matter of overt discrimination.

The politics of micro-aggression also embody a kind of ‘racial rashomon effect’ for assessing ‘whose racism’, ‘how much racism’, and ‘what kind’. Put bluntly, social location matters in racializing the divide: Those dominant group members who rarely experience racism are unlikely to understand its nature, scale, and effects. They live in a closeted and privileged world at odds with the perceptions, experiences, and opportunities of racialized minorities (Hiranandani 2012). The routine-ness of everyday racism and its embeddedness in dynamics of exclusion invisibilizes the practice of dominance to those privileged by power (Barnes 2000; Essed 1991). Not surprisingly, dominant group members may endorse the onset of a post-racial Canada where (a) discrimination is thought to be on the decline, (b) racism no longer determines the lives and life chances of racialized minorities, and, (c) its manifestation is downgraded to the isolated, the random, and the declassé. But racialized minorities disagree with this blinkered assessment. They draw on the strength of their lived-experiences to emphasize the persistence and potency of both structural barriers and subliminal biases that infiltrate and inform their daily lives through the micro-aggression of everyday racism.

Framing micro-aggression as racism 3.0 does not claim to have invented a new species of racism. Chester M. Pierce, a professor of education and psychiatry at Harvard’s medical school coined the term in the late 1960s to describe the subtle denigrations that blacks endured by those who did not see themselves as racist (Pierce 1974; Schmidt 2015). Nor does its distinctiveness lie in deconstructing the coded language of micro-management by closet racists (Atlanta Blackstar 2015; Barnes 2000). To the contrary, the linking of micro-aggression to a racism 3.0 is discursively transformative by virtue of realigning how sociologists think and talk about racism. Too much of what passes for race relations analysis endorses a positivist orientation that focuses on racism as a naturally occurring thing ‘out there’ whose condition can be measured by uncovering those variables or factors that create or inhibit its existence. Racism is objectified as a deviant and/or irrational act by the deficient or the defiant, with an intent to hurt, exploit, or deny. It is perpetuated by individuals and within institutions, regardless of intent or awareness, including those systemic biases implicit in a ‘business as usual’ mindset or in the motto, “we treat everyone the same around here”.


By contrast, the social constructionism implicit in the post-positivist position prefers to dislodge racism from its lofty perch as an objective condition amenable to analysis through official definition, formal measurement, and causal explanations (Alvesson and Skoldberg 2010; Durrheim and Dixon 2005). Racism is de-reified instead as a set of inter-subjective and socially constructed experiences by individuals who make assertions (‘claims-making’) about perceived condition (Spector and Kitsuse 1977). For social constructionists as well as symbolic interactionists, nothing is inherently racist since neither conditions nor objects possess meaning per se (Hall 1997). A putative condition becomes defined as racist and worked into existence as a lived reality through meaningful interaction and interpretive practices (‘racism-making’).

A reframing of racism 3.0 along the racism-making lines of micro-aggression is consequential. It disrupts those frameworks that reify racism as objective phenomenon ‘out there’ (see also Henry 2006). Rethinking racism by shifting the frame of reference from a set of conditions to a claims-making process re-aligns the discourse by privileging a racialized voice in defining ‘whose racism’ (Sue 2016). Explanatory priority is assigned to peoples’ lived-experiences of racism-making (“racism as verb”) when applied to the inter-subjectivity of their interactions, perceptions and narratives in daily life (also Hier and Walby 2006; Kelly 1998). Alluding to micro-aggression as the new face of racism also captures the adaptability of 21st century racisms (Fleras 2014). Racism is increasingly framed as banal – even boring – rather than egregious, routine rather than exceptional, mundane rather than extraordinary, insidious rather than invidious, implicit rather than explicit, consequential rather than intentional, constructed rather than inherent, and fundamental rather than accidental (also Gopalkrishan and Babacan 2007). The re-positioning of micro-aggressions as racism 3.0 from one of a condition to that of a process also provides a sharp reminder that neither racism nor the war on racism are hardly over. They just keep reinventing themselves.

NOTES

1. Both linguists and anthropologists make a similar distinction between the ‘in-here’ and the ‘out-there’. An emic approach focuses on how people see, think, interpret (make sense), organize, and react to the reality around them by invoking a set of rules, meanings, and explanations to justify actions (Boccagni 2015; Kottak 2006). Rather than assigning priority to the researcher’s frame of reference in defining racism, peoples’ lived-experiences of racism and racialized relations are accorded primacy (Durrheim and Dixon 2005). An etic approach shifts the frame of reference to the primacy of the investigator or authority in making sense of details, constructing connections, drawing inferences, and generating generalizations. This distinction reflects a much older divide in the social sciences over the contested status of objectivity and subjectivity (Henry 2006).

2. Differences-within-differences are salient factors as well (Clark et al. 2014; Houshmand et al. 2014). Just as subjectivity of the micro-aggressed is prioritized under a racism 3.0, so too must attention focus on the diverse ways micro-aggressions are differently defined and processed by diverse-diversities. Racialized women and men, Indigenous peoples, and immigrants and refugees will differently experience patterns of micro-aggressions because their lived-social location leads to specific vulnerabilities and exclusions (Fleras 2015).


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