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## Challenging the Utility of a Racial Microaggressions Framework Through A Systematic Review of Racially Biased Incidents on Campus

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## Challenging the Utility of a Racial Microaggressions Framework Through A Systematic Review of Racially Biased Incidents on Campus

### Cover Page Footnote

The authors would like to thank Dr. Nolan Cabrera and Dr. Miguel Ceja for their feedback on early versions of this article

# Challenging the Utility of a Racial Microaggressions Framework Through a Systematic Review of Racially Biased Incidents on Campus

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## Abstract

Despite claims of being in a “postracial” era, racially biased incidents pervade college and university campuses across the U.S., as evidenced in the continual media coverage of such incidents. In recognizing the complexities of these incidents, we sought to offer a contemporary review of racially biased incidents on college and university campuses and to explore the extent to which they represent covert forms of racial microaggressions versus more overt forms of racism. We conducted a content analysis of all news-making racially biased incidents that occurred on college and university campuses between August 1, 2005 and May 1, 2010, identifying 205 incidents. We classified these incidents by mode of delivery, racial content/symbolism, and type of racial (micro)aggression. While a number of these incidents can be best understood through a microaggressions framework, many are blatantly racist and do not fit the theory. Higher education and student affairs researchers and practitioners must understand these incidents for their complexities, recognizing that both overt and covert forms of racism are prevalent on campus.

## Keywords

racially biased incidents, microaggressions, higher education

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Racially biased incidents pervade college and university campuses across the United States as evidenced in the continuous media coverage of these incidents. For instance, in late August of 2014, Oklahoma State University students displayed a banner that read “Send ‘Em Home #trail\_of\_tears #gopokes” in hopes of intimidating their football opponent, the Florida State University Seminoles (Cooper, 2014). The reference to the Trail of Tears created an uproar because it is one example of the history and legacy of American Indian genocide and resistance in the United States. The reactions and concerns of Native American communities and their allies highlight the negative impact created by these incidents. Incidents like this one suggest that the United States is not in a “postracial” era, or one in which race no longer matters in determining one’s future. In contrast, racially biased incidents continue to occur on college and university campuses, indicating that race is still significant. Although scholars have used examples of racially biased incidents to frame their studies (e.g., Chesler, Lewis, & Crowfoot, 2005; Harper & Hurtado, 2007), less attention has been paid to naming these incidents as racist.

Perhaps scholars have not named biased incidents as racist because racism in the United States has changed. Across multiple disciplines, research has shown that the nature of racism has shifted from overt, blatant, and intentional acts of racism, often referred to as “old-fashioned racism,” to more subtle, everyday covert manifestations (Dovidio, Gaetner, Kawkami, & Hodson, 2002; Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue et al., 2007). One term to describe this type of racism is “racial microaggressions,” or “subtle insults (verbal, non-verbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of Color<sup>1</sup>, often automatically or unconsciously” (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 60). Burgeoning literature on microaggressions suggests that the concept has become a favorable analyti-

cal tool for examining current racial issues. For instance, Wong, Derthick, David, Saw, and Okazaki (2013) found and reviewed 73 studies on racial microaggressions in psychology since 2007. Others have argued that “microaggressions” is a new buzzword, including conservative critics who claim it is the latest term of choice for “race baiters” (e.g., Groseclose, 2014) or representative of a new form of “political correctness” (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015).

As the concept of microaggressions becomes more prevalent in higher education and student affairs scholarship, we wondered how the framework could be used to understand racially biased incidents, particularly considering our own visceral response to these events as former college students of Color and now faculty of Color. The purpose of this study was to review racially biased incidents on college and university campuses and to explore the extent to which they represent covert forms of racial microaggressions versus more overt forms of racism. In doing this, we argue that exposing the racial nature of these biased incidents will help scholars and practitioners label them for what they are, “racist,” as opposed to shying away from the use of this term, which Harper (2012) suggests is the status quo in higher education scholarship.

## Literature Review

In reviewing the literature, we first sought to understand what has been written about racially biased incidents on college and university campuses and found two previous content analysis studies. Farrell and Jones (1988) explored the scope of racially biased incidents at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) by reviewing those reported in one national outlet (The New York Times), one local paper (The Milwaukee Journal), and three “Black-oriented newspapers” (The Carolinian, The Milwaukee Community Journal, and The

<sup>1</sup>“Students of Color” is intentionally capitalized to empower historically oppressed racialized groups and will be used throughout the article in various forms (e.g., “Faculty of Color” and “Scholars of Color”). For further explanation, see Pérez Huber, Johnson, & Kohli (2006).

Los Angeles Sentinel). They documented 37 racially biased incidents ranging from cross burnings and physical attacks to racist literature and racist remarks, and classified them under three categories: White insensitivity, environmental racism, and minority and majority student characteristics. Furthermore, the authors critiqued campus administrators for failing to adequately address these incidents when they occurred and for lacking a genuine concern for the students of Color who were targeted by these incidents.

Aguirre and Messineo (1997) conducted a similar content analysis using the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* to identify the frequency of different types of racially motivated incidents occurring on U.S. campuses between 1987 and 1993. They found that 106 racially motivated incidents occurred during that period, which they grouped into three different categories: person focused (incidents targeting students), cultural bias (incidents involving symbolic bigotry), and structural bias (incidents of overt/blatant White supremacy). They argued that the organizational culture within institutions of higher education “is rooted in a belief system that protects White interests and facilitates the expression of racial bigotry,” suggesting that colleges and universities are not prepared to serve an increasingly racially diverse population (Aguirre & Messineo, 1997, p. 29).

Other scholars have focused more specifically on particular events on campus. Garcia, Johnston, Garibay, Herrera, and Giraldo (2011) documented the prevalence of racially themed parties on college campuses, arguing that they are structurally racist, insidious, and ultimately affect students of Color in a negative way. Using data from the Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) survey conducted at one public research university (Hurtado & Guillermo-Wann, 2013), Yeung and Johnston (2014) demonstrated how a single, high-profile racially biased incident, which occurred in the online environment, negatively influenced perceptions of the campus climate for both

targeted and nontargeted students of Color. In both articles, the authors agreed with Farrell and Jones (1988) and Aguirre and Messineo (1997), stating that biased incidents are harmful, racist, and have the potential to negatively alter the experiences of students of Color on campus.

With the regular occurrence of racially biased incidents on college and university campuses, we felt it was important to conduct an updated review of racially biased incidents. This was especially important considering the racial landscape in the United States has changed in light of “postracial” claims that race no longer matters. With this study, we offer a contemporary review of racially biased incidents on college and university campuses that questions the extent to which these incidents represent covert versus overt forms of racism.

### Identifying Racism on College Campuses

We next sought to understand the nature of racism, with the goal of better understanding how to label incidents as racially biased. Racism has been defined succinctly as “a system of advantage based on race and supported by institutional structures, policies, and practices that create and sustain benefits for the dominant White group, and structure discrimination, oppression, and disadvantage for people from targeted racial groups” (Bell, 2007, p. 117). Here racism is operationalized at a systemic/structural level (see also Feagin, 2006); yet this does not help us identify when an individual interaction or incident may be racist. In reviewing the lack of attention to the role of racism in higher education research, Harper (2012) provided a definition of racism that encompassed multiple levels, including “individual actions (both intentional and unconscious) that engender marginalization and inflict varying degrees of harm on minoritized persons” as well as inequity perpetuating structures and White-privilege sustaining institutional norms (p. 10). When incidents occur on campus that harm or marginalize

racially minoritized students, these incidents can be described as racially biased.

Racism, in general, and racist incidents, in particular, can take on overt or covert forms; though scholars suggest racism has become more covert and subtle in contemporary contexts. Although contemporary racism has been labeled in several ways (e.g., color-blind racism, Bonilla-Silva, 2014; laissez-faire racism, Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997; symbolic racism, Sears & Henry, 2003; aversive racism, Dovidio & Gaertner, 2008), we chose to use racial microaggressions as a conceptual lens for this study for several reasons. First, scholars are increasingly using microaggressions as a tool for doing critical race research across the education pipeline (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015). Second, this article builds on our previous work on racially themed parties, in which we suggested that these parties could be understood by using the racial microaggressions framework (Garcia et al., 2011). Third, as scholars of Color participating in and studying higher education, we are affected by these incidents when they occur, even at a distance when reading about them, and have personally named them microaggressions.

### Microaggressions in Higher Education and Student Affairs Research

With the growing use of racial microaggressions as a theoretical lens in higher education and student affairs research, we next reviewed what has been written and provide key highlights here. For more exhaustive reviews, see Pérez Huber and Solórzano (2015) and Wong et al. (2013). The literature on microaggressions in higher education and student affairs has proliferated from two central scholars: Daniel Solórzano from UCLA and Derald Wing Sue from Columbia University. Solórzano and his colleagues' work has specifically and purposefully focused on educational contexts, utilizing microaggressions as one tool of critical race theory (CRT) to analyze the larger campus experience and climate for

students of Color. For example, Solórzano and colleagues (2002) used the lens of microaggressions to study campus racial climate and the impact of microaggressions on students of Color. The researchers extended Chester Pierce's work on racial microaggressions to the experiences of both African American (Solórzano et al., 2000) and Latina/o college students (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). The other camp of scholars, centered on Sue and his colleagues (often former students), have also examined microaggressions on college campuses or among college students (e.g., Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009), although their work has largely been within the realm of counseling psychology. In this study, we utilized the framework of microaggressions offered by Sue and colleagues (2007) because they have focused specifically on describing and defining the concept of microaggressions, which is what we needed for this study.

Beyond these studies, numerous scholars have used the concept of microaggressions to examine phenomena on college campuses (e.g., Garcia, 2015; Harper et al., 2011; McCabe, 2009; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Nadal et al., 2014; Solórzano, Allen, & Carroll, 2002). For instance, Harwood, Huntt, Mendenhall, and Lewis (2012) investigated the occurrence of racial microaggressions within the residence halls, and Harper et al. (2011) explored the role of racial microaggressions in the experiences of Black male resident assistants. Anthony, Spanierman, Reed, Soble, and Cabana (2011) explored the concept in online settings related to higher education mascots, including the pervasiveness of microaggressions targeting American Indians, while Garcia (2015) extended the use of the framework to a study focused on the experiences of student affairs professionals. Minikel-Lacocque (2013) also used the microaggressions framework to explore the racism Latina/o students experience, both online and in person, as they transition to higher education. Given the existing literature, the framework on microaggressions

seems to be a compelling way to view racially biased incidents on college and university campuses in order to classify different types of incidents and to understand their racist nature. Yet, it is not and should not be the only framework to use to view contemporary forms of racism on college campuses. We discuss some of the nuances and critiques next.

### Conceptual Framework

Sue et al. (2007) defined racial microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (p. 273). Along with this definition, Sue and colleagues proposed a taxonomy of racial microaggressions consisting of several types of microaggressions: microassaults (explicit verbal, behavioral, or environmental attacks), microinsults (unintentional demeaning actions or remarks about one’s racial heritage), and microinvalidations (actions that invalidate a person’s racial reality). Various categories fall within each type of microaggression, which relates to the message being sent from the perpetrator of the microaggression to the target. For instance, a Black student who after meeting with a professor during office hours is told with a surprised look that she is “very articulate” is an example of a microinsult within the ascription of intelligence theme (Sue et al., 2007, p. 276). An example of a microinvalidation includes an Asian American student being assumed to be an international student and asked, “Where are you from?” The message sent is that he is an alien in [his] own land (Sue et al., 2007, p. 276). Other general microaggression themes include assumptions of criminal status, treatment as a second-class citizen, the denial of individual racism, the myth of meritocracy, and pathologizing of cultural values/communication styles (Sue et al., 2007).

Intentionality is a key component to understanding the concept of microaggressions be-

cause the assumption of much of the work on “old-fashioned” forms of racist actions would be that the perpetrator of a racist act intended it to be offensive (Sue et al., 2007). Acts of intimidation (e.g., cross burning), applying racial slurs, and physical violence across racial lines seem more apt for determining intentions than the subtle, everyday forms of racism that are experienced as racial microaggressions. Therefore, the microaggressions literature consistently places the power to define one’s racial reality in the hands of the target of the microaggression, making the intentions of the enactor of the microaggression less important (Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, & Torino, 2008). It is the impact of the microaggression, whether intentional or unintentional, that makes it offensive. Indeed, microaggressions tend to have a contested nature (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013), meaning that in labeling something as a microaggression, targets are often met with contestation leading to experiencing even more microaggressions. This is likely because the perpetrator did not intend the action to be a microaggression. These unintentional, yet still offensive actions take the form of insults/invalidations and are often performed at an unconscious level (Sue et al., 2007), making the ability to claim that something or someone is racist even more difficult.

One critique within the literature on microaggressions is the conceptualization of microassaults. Sue et al. (2007) described microassaults as

an explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended target through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions. Microassaults are most similar to what has been called “old fashioned” racism conducted on an individual level. They are most likely to be conscious and deliberate. (p. 274)

Several scholars have questioned the inclusion of microassaults under the umbrella of microaggressions, particularly because they

align more with the overt racist manifestations of the past. Minikel-Lacocque (2013) critiqued the placement of microassaults under the umbrella of microaggressions, arguing that “using the prefix micro, which means ‘small,’ to identify this type of racism could be confusing at best and harmful at worst” (p. 454). Her central argument is that the term microassault might mislead both perpetrators and targets to believe that such overt manifestations of racism (e.g., swastikas and racial epithets) are not as harmful or offensive because they are classified as “micro.” Her critique was helpful as we developed this study. Instead of completely dismissing the “micro” in microassaults, we used the original taxonomy developed by Sue et al. (2007) to classify racially biased incidents while allowing some flexibility and adapting the original classification to meet the needs of this study. Overall, we found some difficulty in making a clear-cut distinction between covert and overt forms of racism, which we discuss in the findings and discussion.

### Positionality

Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2014) suggest that authors include their epistemological perspective, conceptual framework, methodological approach, and methods employed in the study. Furthermore, they argue that these elements are intertwined yet distinct. Although our conceptual framework emerged from a review of the literature, we also chose to use a microaggressions framework based on our own positionality and epistemological perspectives. Knowing the authors’ epistemology is an important consideration in any study because it conveys their “philosophical assumptions about what constitutes knowledge” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 70). As constructivists, we believe that there are multiple realities that are socially constructed through the process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Mertens, 2015). We also believe that qualitative researchers are inherently intertwined in the process of making meaning of these multiple realities. As such, our own

positionality is an important consideration in this study, particularly in thinking about the connection of our conceptual framework and our interpretation of the data.

#### Gina A. Garcia

I identify as a third-generation Latina brought up in a Chicana household where we regularly celebrated our Mexican heritage, yet valued our American lifestyle. My parents taught me early on about racial discrimination, providing thick descriptive accounts of their upbringing in racist, “desegregated” schools in Texas border cities. Within our household, I was protected from the realities of racism and discrimination but was well aware of their effects, particularly around the way our skin color, language, and culture were devalued. As a scholar studying issues of race and racism in institutions of higher education, I bring this lens, recognizing that racism is rampant within our institutions both in overt and covert forms.

#### Marc P. Johnston-Guerrero

I identify as a mixed-race Filipino American man raised in the U.S. Midwest mostly among my White family members. After learning about microaggressions from a mentor, I realized how the framework spoke to many of my experiences being multiracial, including the subtle ways my racial identity was invalidated due to my mixed heritage. Such experiences could not readily be named racist, yet I knew they had a negative impact on my well-being (see Johnston & Nadal, 2010). Being able to name such microaggressive experiences seemed imperative for understanding the multiple ways racism manifests across college campuses, including in more overt and blatant forms.

Together, our experiences, perspectives, and epistemologies informed our individual and combined lenses for approaching this study and interpreting the data. We recognize that there is subjectivity to naming something as



a microaggression, especially given that the framework centers and privileges the perspectives of those targeted. Yet, we also acknowledge that many people can identify something as blatantly racist or microaggressive whether or not they were the direct targets. By sharing more about who we are, we hope readers gain insights about how and why we interpreted certain incidents in the ways we outline in the next section.

## Methods

As this study sought to review racially biased incidents on college and university campuses and to explore the extent to which they represent covert forms of racial microaggressions versus more blatant and overt forms of racism, we conducted a content analysis of news-making incidents that were documented from August 1, 2005, through May 1, 2010 (given the timeframe of our larger project discussed below). Krippendorff (2012) described content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (p. 24). In this study, we used news articles as the text to be analyzed and inferred from the articles the nature of the racist incidents covered. When conducting a content analysis, Weber (1990) outlined the importance of documenting (a) the selection of content, and (b) the coding procedures in order to achieve reproducibility. We discuss these two components below.

### Selection of Content

The primary source of data came from a media search of all news-making racially biased incidents that occurred on college and university campuses over a period of five academic years. This study was developed in conjunction with a larger project looking at how racially biased incidents influence college students’ racial attitudes. In that study (see Johnston, Garcia, Herrera, & Garibay, 2014), we utilized data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) in order

to understand how college students’ racial attitudes changed over a four-year period (August 1, 2005, through May 1, 2009). Since CIRP data are designed to examine college impact on a variety of outcomes, a four-year time frame is typical of studies utilizing these data. In developing that study, we created several variables to be merged with the existing CIRP data that would account for racially biased incidents that occurred on college campuses during the designated time frame. We focus here on how we created the variables for that study.

First, we used Lexis-Nexis Academic search to identify news-making racially biased incidents that occurred on campuses within the dataset. Using the advanced search option, we identified incidents that occurred between August 1, 2005, and May 1, 2009, by specifically searching each individual CIRP institution and the following terms: “racial incident,” “racist incident,” “racist event,” “racially-themed party,” “racially biased,” “hate crime,” “racist speech,” “racist graffiti,” “racial graffiti,” “noose,” “blackface,” “affirmative action bake sale,” and “lynching.” We used these search parameters for each of the 124 institutions in the CIRP dataset and created multiple variables, including the total number of racially biased incidents at each institution, the type of incident, the target group, and the level of media coverage of each incident. In creating these variables, we realized the complexity of racially biased incidents and decided to extend our research to the current study in hopes of informing research and practice.

For this extended portion of the study, we expanded the media search to include an additional year and all postsecondary institutions in the United States. We followed the same process, using Lexis-Nexis Academic search, with the addition of Aug 1, 2009, through May 1, 2010, to better capture incidents occurring after the increase in “postracial” claims following President Obama’s 2008 election. Rather than indicating the specific institutions, we searched using the terms

“college” and “university,” which yielded over 1000 matches. Since Lexis-Nexis will only display 1000 matches per search, we modified our approach by looking at each term individually from August 1, 2005, through May 1, 2010, and by using the terms “college” and “university” just to make sure we captured all incidents. Based on the incidents we found in the first search, we also added the terms “racial slur” and “illegal immigrant game.”

### Inclusion criteria

Using these procedures, we developed a dataset that included the state, the institution, a description of the incident, the date of the incident, and the group targeted. We included Black, Latina/o, American Indian, and Asian American and Pacific Islander groups. Additionally, we included Jewish and Muslim groups because of the ways in which they have been uniquely racialized in the United States generally and in higher education particularly. For example, Harper and Hurtado's (2007) review of campus racial climate studies introduced the chapter with an example of Hillel, a Jewish student organization, demanding an investigation into the racism experienced by one of its members. In discussing racist incidents on campus, Chesler et al. (2005) included a discussion of the increase in attacks on Muslim students. Although some of our search results included incidents targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students (especially when including the search term “hate crime”), we excluded these incidents from our analyses because these groups face a different type of discrimination that is related to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, not necessarily their racial identity, which is beyond the scope of this study. At the same time, we recognize that queer students of Color could likely be the target of both types of incidents, yet we tried our best to remain focused solely on racially biased incidents.

We only included incidents that occurred on two- and four-year college and university

campuses in the United States. More specifically, we excluded events that occurred in Canadian institutions, at primary and secondary schools connected to colleges and university (e.g., university lab schools), and off campus (e.g., at a house located within close vicinity to the campus). Furthermore, we only included one-time incidents (or a series of related single incidents) while excluding issues and concerns related to long-term campus climate issues (e.g., ongoing issues with the Michigamua secret society at the University of Michigan) or decisions made to combat sociohistorical racism on campus (e.g., Pomona College banning their school's song at commencement after finding connections to a blackface minstrel show). Although these news-making incidents are important, they are beyond the scope of this paper. These criteria yielded 205 news-making incidents within 129 diverse institutions (including two- and four-year, public and private, large and small, PWIs and Minority Serving Institutions; MSIs) and 38 states. The final sample includes the news-making incidents found within the original CIRP institutions as well as those identified in the expanded search.

### Coding Procedures

Once we developed a dataset that classified the news-making racially biased incidents, we used the information gathered to develop several descriptive tables. We coded each incident in multiple ways, including the mode of delivery through which the incident occurred (e.g., party, verbal remarks, physical media), the content/symbol that makes the incident racial (e.g., cultural (mis)appropriation, racial slurs/comments, sociohistoric symbols), and the type of microaggression as identified by Sue et al. (2007), with the addition of a fourth category (microintimidation). Some incidents were double or triple coded; therefore, the table used to display the results reveal totals larger than 205. For example, an incident at Macalester College where students hosted a “politically incorrect party” in which one stu-

dent dressed in a KKK costume and another in blackface with a noose around his neck was coded as “party,” “noose hanging,” “blackface,” “lynching,” and “sociohistorical symbol.”

### Trustworthiness

To ensure intercoder reliability and agreement across incidents, both authors coded a subset (20%) of the incidents and then determined the level of agreement in our application of the codes. In the first round, we agreed to code the incidents by primary and secondary type, type of microaggression, and level of incident. We had as low as 26.9% agreement in the secondary type category and as high as 85.1% agreement on the level of the incident. As a result of the low agreement in the secondary type category, we discussed each incident and decided that rather than coding for the primary and secondary type, a more informative way of categorizing the incidents was to distinguish between the mode of delivery through which the incident occurred and the content/symbol that made the incident racialized. Since these incidents can be highly controversial, with people debating the level of racism that has occurred, it was pertinent to distinguish between the mode of delivery and the racialized content/symbol. After adjusting the codes, we completed a second round of coding on the same 20% of incidents and had agreement of between 73.3% and 86.6%. Again, we discussed each incident and made minor adjustments to the codes. Once we were confident in our reliability and consistency in coding, we divided the remaining 80% of the sample and coded them individually.

### Limitations

There are a few limitations worth noting. First, it is highly likely that there were more than 205 racially biased incidents that occurred on college and university campuses between August 1, 2005, and May 1, 2010. In developing this study, however, we chose to focus on news-making incidents. We

acknowledge that news-making does not always equal newsworthy, meaning that other incidents may have occurred that did not get covered by the news or that some incidents may have received more attention than was necessarily worthy. In returning to the larger CIRP study from which this project evolved, the purpose was to develop a list of racially biased incidents that had the potential to affect college students’ racial attitudes. By only including news-making incidents, the likelihood that a student would be aware of the incident and potentially have a change in their racial views seemed much higher than if the incident was only reported to the police and/or a campus bias response team. Many of the incidents included in this study made both local and national news, meaning that there was a high awareness of these events, and this heightened coverage likely increased exposure to the events and their influence on college students’ attitudes. Furthermore, some incidents included a response on behalf of the institution or student body, again bringing heightened awareness to the incident. Although the sample size limits the generalizability of the findings, the 205 incidents are diverse and multifaceted in nature, providing us with the ability to better understand these incidents and to classify them along multiple dimensions.

We also recognize that solely including incidents that occurred on campus may be limiting because these events do not happen in silos. There were several incidents that occurred off campus that affected students, faculty, and administration and included some type of response from various constituents on campus. For example, we excluded the highly publicized 2009 racial profiling and arrest of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a prominent scholar and professor at Harvard, because it occurred off campus, despite the fact that it was blatantly racialized and had large implications on campus and beyond. By excluding these off-campus incidents, we minimized the potential to further nuance the categories that we developed; however, we also recognize

that institutions are limited in their ability to control and respond to racially biased incidents off campus. By keeping the context bounded within the institution, the policy implications are much stronger for institutions as they consider this research.

## Findings

Between September 1, 2005, and May 1, 2010, we found articles referencing 205 news-making incidents across college campuses. Unlike Farrell and Jones's (1988) study that only examined incidents at PWIs, these incidents occurred across 129 diverse institutions, including MSIs, and 38 states. Below we describe incidents by their mode of delivery, racialized content/symbol, and type of (micro)aggression.

### Common Mode of Delivery

As shown in Table 1, the most common mode of delivery included graffiti/vandalism (61), physical media (29), noose hangings (27), parties (24), verbal remarks (23), and assault/fighting (22). Examples include an offensive word used against Jewish people written on the wall of a Jewish fraternity house at the University of California, Berkeley (graffiti/vandalism), a flyer mocking Black people and Black History Month at Colorado State University (physical media), and a likeness of Senator (presidential candidate) Obama hanging from a tree at the University of Kentucky (noose). Although the use of these modes of delivery seems egregious and intentionally harmful, the use of a party as a mode is unique because the motivation is less direct in that perpetrators may use this mode as a form of entertainment. Examples include a "South of the Border" themed party at Santa Clara University (party) in which attendees were encouraged to dress like stereotypical Latinas/os, with pictures on social media sites revealing attendees dressed like "janitors" or "pregnant teenagers." Despite intent, the use of these modes to deliver racial content has long-term harmful effects.

### Common Racial Content/Symbol

Findings outlined in Table 1 also reveal the most common racial content/symbol delivered through these incidents as classified by the mode of delivery. The racial content/symbol is the element that makes the mode of delivery racist. For example, graffiti becomes a racially biased incident when it includes racial content or a symbol of racism. The most common racial content/symbol included racial slurs or comments (91), a depiction of lynching (33), swastikas (27), and cultural (mis)appropriation (23). Examples of these incidents include racial slurs targeting American Indian students being posted on Facebook at the University of Illinois (racial slurs), a noose found hanging outside the Black Cultural Center at the University of Maryland (lynching), dozens of swastikas found written on walls and in the bathrooms across campus at St. Cloud State University (swastikas), and students painting themselves black and dressing as "African tribesmen" for Halloween at Hamline College (cultural [mis]appropriation).

The relationship of the mode of delivery with the racial content/symbol is also worth noting. Table 1 shows that graffiti/vandalism is most likely to become racialized when people write racial slurs/comments or swastikas. Physical media or materials, verbal remarks, and assault/fighting are also likely to become racialized through racial slurs/comments more often than other racial content. The noose is most strongly connected to historical depictions of lynching, while parties are most likely to become racialized when party attendees are encouraged to dress as a culture or race in connection to a theme for the party (Garcia et al., 2011).

### Type of (Micro)aggression

In addition to classifying the mode of delivery by racial content/symbol, we categorized incidents by the type of (micro)aggression being committed. In doing this, we sought to

Table 1  
 Characteristics of Mode of Delivery and Racial Content/Symbol

	Assault or Fighting	Harassment	Police Interaction	Verbal Remarks	Physical Media/ Material	Electronic Media	Noose	Graffiti or Vandalism	Party	Clothing or Costume	Political Activity	Total
Racial Slurs/ Comments	10	4	--	19	16	9	--	33	1	--	--	91
Racial Profiling	4	1	10	--	--	--	--	1	--	--	--	16
Racial Power Dynamics	7	3	1	3	1	1	--	--	--	--	--	16
Cultural (Mis) Appropriation	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	17	6	--	23
Racialized Political Message	--	1	--	--	--	--	--	1	--	--	16	18
Swastikas	1	1	--	--	2	--	--	23	--	--	--	27
Lynching	--	--	--	1	4	--	26	--	1	1	--	33
Blackface	--	--	--	--	1	--	--	--	3	5	--	9
Socio- Historical Symbols	--	1	--	--	5	1	1	3	2	--	--	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>247</b>

understand the complexities of racism within these incidents by looking specifically for ways in which these incidents are covertly racist. In classifying the incidents using Sue et al.'s (2007) definitions of various types of microaggressions, we found that a majority of the incidents were microassaults (122), while fewer were microinsults (40), and even less were microinvalidations (10). Microassaults include the numerous reports of anti-Semitic graffiti (including swastikas) and noose hangings on campus, which send strong messages to the target groups. Specific examples include a series of spray-painted swastikas and other anti-Semitic graffiti found at the University of California, Santa Cruz. These incidents fit Sue et al.'s (2007) theme of aliens in [their] own land, and the message is that Jews do not belong on campus. Another example is when a news editor hung a noose in the newsroom to warn writers to turn their stories in on time at Minneapolis Community and Technical College. This incident fits the theme of criminality or assumption of criminal status (Sue et al., 2007), with a message that one will be lynched and hung from a tree for this criminal status. As a sociohistorical symbol, the noose is commonly connected to informal groups lynching and killing Black people in the United States for "crimes" they were neither tried nor convicted of. The noose, therefore, sends a strongly racialized message,

no matter the intention of the perpetrator.

Although not nearly as pervasive as microassaults, several incidents rose to the level of microinsults, conveying messages of rudeness and demeaning people of Color. One example includes two students reenacting the "I Got a Crush on Obama" video at an event hosted by a sorority on campus at North Dakota State University. In the skit, one student gave a lap dance to another student painted in blackface and wearing an Afro wig. The theme in this incident is at an environmental or macro-level in which a sociohistorical symbol, like blackface, is not even recognized as being harmful and inappropriate, while the message is that Black people are primarily concerned with sex and lap dances. Furthermore, this type of incident reinforces the minstrel show mentality that Black people are nothing more than happy-go-lucky, dancing buffoons who cannot be taken seriously. Another example is when the College Republican student group at Kutztown University hosted an "Affirmative Action Bake Sale" in which baked goods were sold to White students at higher prices than students of Color. The theme, according to Sue et al. (2007), is the myth of meritocracy, while the message is that people of Color are given unfair preferences and receive extra benefits because of their race. We also classified events such as the College Republicans

at Boise State University hosting a “Catch an Illegal Immigrant” game as microinsults. The theme is not only that immigrants are aliens in [their] own land (Sue et al., 2007), but also that they are criminals (Pérez Huber, 2009), while the message is that they are not welcomed on campus.

Fewer incidents were coded as microinvalidations, which are those events that negate, exclude, or nullify the realities of people of Color. One example is when White students called the police to investigate a situation in which Black students at Harvard University (mostly all wearing Harvard t-shirts and caps) were playing games in the quad area. Although the police did not harass the students upon arrival, the incident sent a message to those students that they did not belong at Harvard, while the themes included both criminality/assumption of criminal status and aliens in [their] own land (Sue et al., 2007). Another example is when the police profiled a professor of Color at San Francisco State University while in the building he works in. Similar to the Harvard incident, the themes included both criminality/assumption of criminal status and aliens in [their] own land. Although there were fewer incidents in the data that we coded as microinvalidations, we assume that many incidents, such as these examples of racial profiling, go unreported and probably never make the news. The relatively small number of incidents does not imply that this type of microaggression is less common on college and university campuses, but rather that the targets probably spend more time asking themselves, “Did that just happen?” which is a common response to microaggressions.

In addition to these three types, we added the category microintimidation, which we define as behavioral or verbal actions that specifically frighten, terrorize, and/or threaten the target(s). This type of racist action is often conscious and deliberate and may include explicit verbal threats or implicit messages. Through our analysis, this category arose

as an important way to further nuance the microassaults category. They are similar to microassaults in that they manifest themselves in more aggressive ways and have lasting implications for the targets. If microassaults were meant to harm or hurt someone, microintimidations were more focused on threatening or scaring the target. As such, the incidents that we coded as microintimidations were often directed at a person or group of people. Using this definition, we classified 33 incidents as microintimidations. One example is an incident at the University of Colorado-Boulder where a Latino member of the track team received a racist hate email from two White student-athletes, including a threat to drag him behind a car. Another occurred at St. Cloud State University when a group of White men harassed a female student of Color and another gave her the “Nazi salute.” The theme is harassment, while the message is clear discontent. As the category of microintimidation is an addition to the Sue et al. taxonomy, the theme and message are also extensions.

## Discussion

### Microaggressions or Aggressions?

Although Sue et al. (2007) argue that a majority of racist incidents now occur at the psychological level in the form of racial microaggressions, the findings in this study suggest that a majority of the news-making racially biased incidents on college and university campuses between August 1, 2005, and May 1, 2010, were more blatantly racist, or what Sue and colleagues call old fashioned racism. In our original pursuit to better understand these incidents and to develop a way to classify the extent to which they are racist, using the framework of racial microaggressions made theoretical sense, especially considering the numerous studies that have empirically documented the pervasive nature of racial microaggressions on college and university campuses (e.g., Garcia, 2015; Harper et al., 2011; McCabe, 2009; Minikel-Lacocque,



2013; Nadal et al., 2014; Solórzano et al., 2002; Sue et al., 2009). In classifying these incidents, however, we found that a large percentage of incidents are best understood as microassaults, or the type of aggressions that Sue et al. consider more blatantly racist. By adding a category to Sue et al.'s original taxonomy, microintimidation, we further categorized several incidents as blatant forms of racism.

From anti-Semitic graffiti and swastikas to noose hangings, racial epithets being shouted at students of Color, and racist hate emails being sent from one student to another, these incidents appear to be purposefully discriminatory and racially motivated. We agree with others' critiques (e.g., Minikel-Lacocque, 2013) that using the term "micro" minimizes the effects of racist incidents and downplays the severity of these incidents. Although we recognize that it was our decision as researchers to classify racially biased incidents as racial microaggressions, we did so because these incidents are highly contested and often controversial, as evidenced by the numerous comments about students of Color being "too sensitive" when it comes to these common occurrences on college and university campuses. For example, reading the comments section of one article about the Compton Cookout at UC San Diego, we found remarks like, "It was a tasteless party that got media attention, nothing more. The party itself was not that big of deal." Opinions like this suggest that although these contentious incidents can easily be classified as blatantly racist, especially to the students and sometimes professors, staff, and administrators who are targeted and suffer the short- and long-term effects of these experiences, others do not see these events as harmful or deleterious. Without diminishing the validity of that argument, we relied on our theoretical framework to guide the classification of these racially biased incidents. This allowed us to view these incidents as both complex and multifaceted while highlighting the largely covert and often overt levels at which racism manifests itself on college and university campuses in the 21st century.

### Microaggressive Entertainment and Political Statements

Beyond the blatantly racist nature of the majority of the news-making events we classified, there were also a number that more accurately fit the description of racial microaggressions. Several of these incidents can be contested as racist because students consider them forms of entertainment, including parties and skits. As we previously argued (see Garcia et al., 2011), racially themed parties can be viewed through the microaggressions framework, and more specifically microinsults, because they are careless, rude, and demeaning to people of Color. Although Sue (2003) argues that White people often commit microaggressions that are outside of their consciousness, we suggest that students who host racially themed parties lack the critical consciousness to recognize their actions as racist. In no way does this dismiss the consequences of their actions, but it does place some level of responsibility on the colleges and universities in which these events occur. Although institutions of higher education cannot eliminate the racism prevalent in the United States, they must find ways to increase their responsibility for educating their students in ways that increase critical consciousness and civic responsibility. For college students to be passively ignorant on issues of racism in the United States is no longer acceptable.

We also classified blackface as microinsults, arguing that to many, this is an outright form of racism. But what about the college students who find it amusing and comical to dress in blackface? Although the use of blackface is certainly reckless because it completely invalidates the historical significance of minstrel shows, Mueller, Dirks, and Picca (2007) contend that costuming along racial lines allows people to participate in a "ritual of rebellion" in which there is a reversal of social roles "wherein subjugated groups temporarily assume positions of power" (p. 316). In participating in these "rituals," White students

can temporarily rebel against post-civil rights codes for expressing racism (Mueller et al., 2007).

There were also several incidents that we coded as racialized political activities, including “Affirmative Action Bake Sales” and “Catch an Illegal Immigrant” games. Similar to costuming, these activities allow White students to express their discontent for post-civil rights policies such as race-conscious programs and benefits (Mueller et al., 2007). It has become commonplace for White students to express their resentment with programs such as affirmative action (Cabrera, 2014; Feagin, 2006; Wellman, 1997) while completely diminishing the academic abilities of students of Color. By classifying these incidents as microinsults, we are acknowledging their harmful effects, while recognizing that naming something as racist is complex, particularly when students use their political ideologies to support their claims and justify their actions.

### Proposing a New Taxonomy

Rather than assuming that all racially biased incidents are either blatantly racist or subtler forms of microaggressions, we argue that it really depends on the incident. As Minikel-Lacocque (2013) recommended, there should be more of a distinction between racial microaggressions and racialized aggressions when documenting experiences with racism. Based on the findings in this study, we propose a new taxonomy that further distinguishes various forms of racism (see Figure 1). The data suggest that microinsults and microinvalidations fit within the label of microaggressions, while microassaults and microintimidations are more accurately labeled as “assaults” and “intimidations” under the category of racialized aggressions. We argue that the key distinction is how debatably racist or contested the incident is. For racialized aggressions, whether in the form of assaults or intimidations, the harm and/or threat is so blatant that the incident is not questioned for its racist nature, relative to mi-

croaggressions. In a more recent example, the administration at the University of Oklahoma quickly concluded that the SAE fraternity’s racist chant was an aggression, which led it to sever its ties with the fraternity and to expel two of its members. Yet, for microinsults and microinvalidations, the incidents, and particularly their impact on the targets, appear to be more debatable.

### Aggression or Microaggression? The Impact is the Same

Whether the racial incident is a racialized aggression or microaggression, and whether the action is intentional or unintentional, the consequences of these racist incidents are deep and pervasive, and should not be ignored. The direct and indirect targets of these incidents receive a message that they are unwanted and unwelcomed in postsecondary institutions, which can ultimately affect their sense of belonging and success in higher education (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Strayhorn, 2012). Despite the perpetrators’ intent, the people of Color who are targeted by these incidents hear the message loud and clear: “You have not historically belonged here, nor do you currently belong here.”

Furthermore, racial microaggressions have long-term psychological effects on those who are targeted. For example, we documented incidents where students of Color and professors of Color were assumed to be participating in criminal activities. These interactions between police and people of Color not only diminish their intelligence but also negate their ability to be well-educated and successful in this country, with the assumption that they will never be more than criminals, cheaters, and predators, even within academic spaces. Scholars have documented the effects of racial profiling, suggesting that the targets experience both physiological (i.e., headaches, fatigue, loss of appetite) and psychological (emotional withdrawal, anger, resentment) effects known as racial battle fatigue (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). Despite intent, the



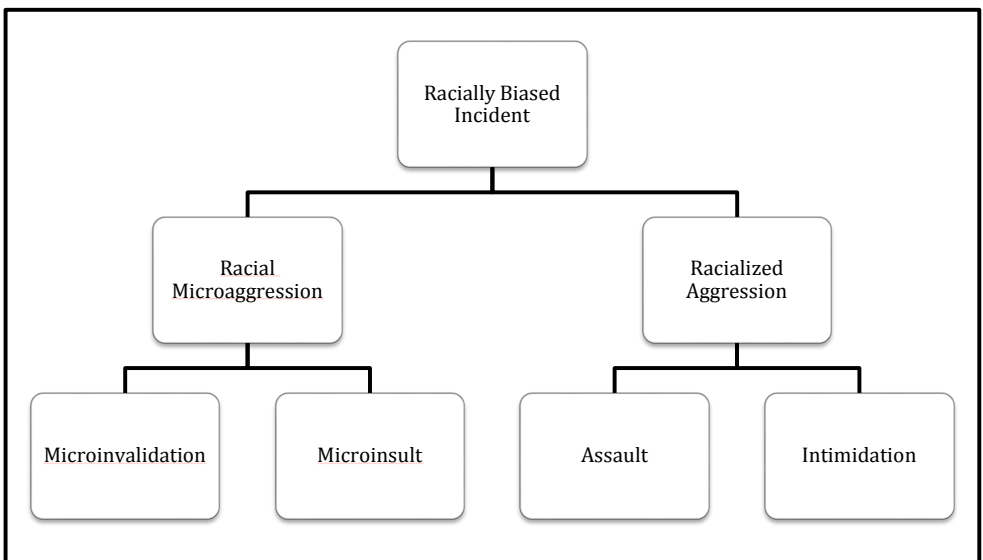
effects are the same in that the targets are likely to experience physiological and psychological responses such as anxiety, nausea, fear, and anger (to name a few) that can hinder their ability to thrive within their educational environment.

Overall, the students, faculty, and staff who are targets of these racially biased incidents feel invisible, othered, and criminalized on the campuses that should be protecting them from the realities of racism. If one purpose of higher education is to create a more democratic and socially just society (Guttmann, 1997; Hurtado, 2007), then these racially biased incidents are counterproductive and outright unacceptable in our 21st-century institutions. White people within institutions of higher education must take responsibility for actively educating themselves on historical issues of race, while institutions must proactively create environments where issues of race and racism can be discussed, debated, and learned about.

## Implications

The findings offer several implications for practice and research. In terms of practice, a better understanding of the contemporary landscape of racially biased incidents on campus can help to improve racial climates. But first, practitioners must acknowledge that these incidents take on a range of forms through different modes of delivery. While understanding that racial microaggressions are rampant on college and university campuses is important, this study highlights that they are not the only form of everyday racism in the 21st century. Lukianoff and Haidt (2015) recently critiqued the framework of microaggressions, arguing that it is a new type of political correctness on college campuses that contributes to the negative mental health of students by having them “focus on small or accidental slights.” Debating the pros and cons of a microaggressions framework in practice, however, may actually be a distraction from the real racial violence afflicting students of Color. Practitioners can use the

Figure 1: Visual Representation of Racially Biased Incidents as (Micro)Aggressions



evidence from our study to show how racism occurs on campuses, not just in small or subtle ways but also in blatant and aggressive forms. In doing so, practitioners must be ready to address the overt and blatant forms of racism we found to be widespread.

First, practitioners can enhance their bias reporting and tracking systems, which are becoming more common on campuses, and/or utilize this research to justify the creation of a bias response team. Campuses can develop reporting systems that categorize events by different modes of delivery and incidents by their racial content/symbols. This additional information can be helpful for understanding the different types of racist incidents occurring across campus and for monitoring trends over time. Such data would be helpful for addressing institutional policies and practices that are more systemic. For instance, if an institution finds that the majority of incidents fall under the “party” mode of delivery and the content is “cultural misappropriation,” then programs and trainings targeting these issues would be most useful.

Second, practitioners can use this information to institutionalize proactive educational programs about racially biased incidents and their prevalence. At an individual level, increased awareness can help targets of such racially biased incidents better cope with them. Instead of being caught off guard, a student who finds a swastika, racial slur, or other graffiti in a residence hall might react in ways that are more productive to coping, healing, and educating others rather than just being shocked and dismayed. The goal should be to empower students to act rather than questioning whether these incidents are truly racist as is common with people who experience racial microaggressions. Educational programming can occur at various stages throughout a student’s career, starting with first-year and transfer orientations, which can familiarize students with bias reporting systems in place. On-going programming can occur in other spaces, including large-scale events, such

as campus-wide symposia and presidential addresses. Developing educated citizens is an important first step in eliminating these incidents because students may decide against going to a Halloween party in blackface if they attended a training that educated them on the sociohistorical implications of such actions.

At the group/organizational level, trainings should be implemented that move from simply educating students about the nature of racially biased incidents to actually having them work towards eliminating them altogether. For example, residential life training might encourage staff members to develop programmatic efforts that address the nature of racially biased incidents. A resident assistant might develop a bulletin board at Halloween that shows the negative implications of dressing as a “sexy Indian maiden.” Trainings should also be developed for Greek organizations specifically addressing the ways in which themed parties are racialized because these parties are common in the Greek system (Garcia et al., 2011). There are numerous ideas for educational programming, yet the most important thing for campuses to do is to be proactive rather than waiting to react to these incidents when they occur.

In terms of research, our findings have opened the door for future studies focused directly on racially biased incidents in contemporary contexts. This study could only interpret a certain amount from newspaper articles, with limited attention to how students make sense of such incidents. Future research should explore why perpetrators and other students believe such incidents are acceptable. Moreover, more research should be done on how students react to different types of incidents and whether they believe they are racist. How do White people reason through their racist actions? What are the psychological effects of these incidents on people of Color? And, how do these incidents affect the campus racial climate? Future research should also examine institutional responses to incidents, further highlighting the importance of the institutions

taking action and responsibility in eliminating racism on campus.

In arguing that (micro)assaults should more accurately be considered blatantly racist and by reorganizing Sue et al.'s (2007) original taxonomy with the addition of (micro)intimidation, we also suggest that future research on racism in postsecondary institutions should be more intentional in classifying racist incidents along multiple dimensions. Before selecting microaggressions as a framework, researchers should consider whether more comprehensive frameworks for understanding multiple manifestations of racism would be more appropriate. Moreover, future research should further explore these categories in order to validate their utility in studying various phenomena. While using the concept of racial microaggressions allows us to label the all too common occurrences of covert forms of racism, this study reminds us that “old-fashioned” racism is far from dead and should continue to be studied.

## Conclusion

Overall, racially biased incidents – whether in the form of microaggressions or blatant racism – should continue to be explored. If not, students might believe in false claims of living in a “postracial” era and that “old-fashioned” racism is a thing of the past. Or, they may proceed through college unaware of how they become aggressors, targets, or bystanders of such racist incidents, further perpetuating the harm placed upon racially minoritized students. By increasing awareness of the racial nature of these incidents, students may think twice before engaging in racist activities, such as the case with the Oklahoma State University #trail\_of\_tears incident discussed at the beginning of this article. As critical higher education and student affairs scholars and practitioners educating students about the nature of racism in the 21st century, we must consider that racially biased incidents can be both blatantly racist and subtly microaggressive, with each being harmful and impactful.

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