

Article

Moving Beyond Obfuscating Racial Microaggression Discourse

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Abstract

In this article, we argue that the concept of racial microaggression is a white supremacy construct that is an ideological and discursive anti-Black practice. We discuss how microaggressions' reduction of historical and hegemonic white supremacy to everyday relations that are merely performative, not integral to sustaining such larger forces, is an analytical shortcoming. We contend that without the adequate heft of historical white supremacy as a part of capitalist and colonial expansion, genocide, and Indigenous erasure, microaggression scholars will remain enthralled with the idea that individual behavior changes can eradicate anti-Black violence.

Keywords

microaggression; racism; systemic racism; white supremacy

Issue

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1. Introduction

Although the concept of racial microaggressions, which contends that racialized interactions among Blacks and "whites" are characterized by subtle forms of violence, is *en vogue* in the social sciences, its sociological soundness has yet to be critically evaluated. Such an assessment requires understanding whether the term racial microaggression is an appropriate concept for gauging how social relations grounded in white supremacy structure everyday life. Sociology's central concern is with explaining how large and small-scale social groups construct individuals; therefore, sociologists view micro/interpersonal actions as outcomes of social and historical forces rather than individual dynamics alone. As a concept, microaggression's emergence from psychiatry indicates its primary analysis involves studying the individual rather than society. Psychiatry studies the psychological and psychosocial characteristics of one person at a time to construct general principles for understanding mental health trends, human behaviors, or societal problems. By contrast, sociology looks beyond individuals

to study societal dynamics through specific social relations and social systems. Our analysis raises a variety of concerns about how the microaggression concept has been used to understand the everyday workings of white supremacy/systemic racism. Specifically, how do microaggression analyses under-theorize the structural sources of anti-Black violence? Does it serve our present and future efforts to eradicate anti-Black violence and racism?

In this article, we encase "white" in quotes because it is a biological fiction that people who believe themselves to be "white" use to reinforce a racially ordered society. As Nell Painter's 2010 *History of White People* reminds us, "white" is an idea, not a fact; it is a hegemonic idea. Europeans and their descendants worldwide accept it as a self-evidently suitable identifier and category. Further, it is a type of status in which "white" racial identity provides the basis for allocating societal benefits both private and public in character (Harris, 1993). We define systemic racism as a complex array of structured anti-Black practices and unjustly gained rights and political-economic power that are legitimated and naturalized by

the ideologies of “race” and whiteness (Feagin, 2006; Harris, 1993; see also Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Systemic racism hinges on the concepts of “race” and whiteness—ideologies enforced by power and violence (Kivel, 2011). This power dynamic sustains white racism practices, policies, ideas, images, and stereotypes pervading every societal institution (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967). Police power and its civilian proxy, white vigilante violence, constitute anti-Black violence and anti-Black racism that strips blackened people of their value through dehumanization and systematic oppression. We are also fully cognizant of the distinct differences between racism and anti-Black racism as articulated by scholars such as F. Fanon (1967), C. Mills (1997), and S. Wynter (2002). For these scholars and others, anti-blackness is centered on the historical and egregious markings of what constitutes humanity and human beings. Blackness constitutes a positionality and fixed point from which all other positionalities are deemed legitimate (and human). Anti-blackness is a logic that not only dehumanizes people identified as Black, but anything associated with blackness (Hesse & Thompson, 2022). Thus, whereas eradicating racism requires deep transformations in social practices and structures, eradicating anti-blackness and anti-Black racism requires a radical reimagining of the world altogether (Jung & Costa Vargas, 2021).

In what follows, we provide a brief overview of the racial microaggression concept to think with and through its conceptualization of anti-Black violence. Anti-Black violence includes both epistemic and discursive racial violence as well as physical violence. Epistemic violence is akin to Foucault’s (1970) idea of *épistémè* which posits that in any given culture the historical, non-temporal, a priori knowledge grounding truth and discourse define the conditions for the possibility for all knowledge, whether expressed ideologically or in practice. This intellectual and praxis typology is central to white supremacy (Mbembe, 2019; Mills, 1997). Because white supremacy pervades social life, social life is almost exclusively composed of common white beliefs, frames, and practices that are religiously adhered to by most people (Feagin, 2013). People’s devotion to anti-Black violence is an outcome of these daily engagements in the practice of racial terror; societal members come to recognize the power of white collective violence in creating a sense of superiority, and a mental and material advantage in exchange for their devoutness to white supremacy. Anti-Black violence then is an enactment of shared racist beliefs; it is through the everyday practice of anti-Black violence that the system of white supremacy affirms itself.

We argue that the concept of racial microaggression itself is a white supremacy construct that is an ideological and discursive anti-Black practice. In line with this proposition, we discuss how microaggressions’ reduction of historical and hegemonic white supremacy to everyday relations that are merely performative, not integral to sustaining such larger forces, is an analytical shortcoming. Contrary to racial microaggressions atom-

izing frames, we argue that anti-Black violence does not dissipate with a change in individual behavior. Rather it leads to a misdiagnosis of the cause of anti-Black violence. For anti-Black violence—in all its forms—is not an isolated individual action; it is a governing and ordering technique working to protect whiteness and white supremacy. Hence, we suggest that without the adequate heft of historical white supremacy as a part of capitalist and colonial expansion, genocide, and Indigenous erasure, microaggression scholars will remain enthralled with the idea that individual behavior changes can eradicate anti-Black violence. This is ironic, considering that, despite their claim(s) that individual behaviors are emblematic of structural forces, microaggression proponents’ failure to grasp this leads them to reduce eliminating anti-Black violence to making changes in individual behavior (Lilienfeld, 2017).

2. What Are Microaggressions?

Psychiatrist Chester Pierce developed the microaggression concept to explain how internalized feelings of racial superiority expressed by “whites” in countless intentional or unintentional, verbal and nonverbal, slights, snubs, or insults inflicted daily degrade the mental and physical health of “socially defined” Black people (a phrase used to indicate groups are blackened and whitened in the field of white supremacy) over time (Pierce, 1970; see also Domínguez & Embrick, 2020; Embrick, et al., 2017). Black people usually do not respond to every provocation. However, a response is forthcoming when the cumulative effect of racial microaggressions becomes too great to bear, usually in the form of cathartic release rather than a confrontation. Pierce (1970, p. 268) asserts that these affronts, or what he terms micro-offenses, are a collective effort by “whites” to keep Black people stigmatized and oppressed. Hence, these daily hostilities are networked through conscious and imperceptible “white” identity constructions created and sustained in institutions such as the educational system, which conditions “whites” into the default superiority of whiteness and ordinariness of anti-Black violence. Contrary to contemporary proponents’ interpretation of racial microaggressions, we argue these acts are not unconscious per se, given “whites” are obtusely conscious that their actions are enabling their whiteness. That is, many whites (and racialized others) are aware they can direct violence at Black folks because no one with power in a white supremacy context will doubt their narrative of events (Embrick, 2015). They know that institutions are designed to side with “white” people so they can escape punishment for their micro-violent assaults.

3. Under-Theorizing Structure

To best understand how the concept of microaggression is used in the context of a white supremacy society, it is necessary to make visible the power relations it obscures

through its processes of decontextualization and dehistoricization. Instead of operating at a deeper conceptual level, many current microaggression analyses impede the use of context and history in unpacking anti-Black violence as a construction of white supremacy power relations. To recognize this conceptual bait and switch, social scientists should be reflexive and wary about white supremacy rhetorical discourse deployed to divert attention from systemic racism. Normative white supremacy involves at least some degree of below-conscious complicity on the part of the subjugated that is made possible by the process of “misrecognition” (James, 2015). Misrecognition in this context refers to racially oppressed people’s pre-conscious acceptance of racial hierarchies as normal (Mueller, 2017). Consequently, it is important to consider how racialized scholars’ use of the prevailing conceptions of racial microaggressions as subtle, everyday forms of racism incline them to neglect exploring the systemic character of racism undergirding bigoted individual action. This aversion to viewing racial microaggressions as systemic contributes to its persistence thus contributing to the problem, not the solution.

Though Pierce (1974, 1995) recognized the importance of power and macro-structures in sustaining anti-Black violence, this part of his formulation of microaggressions is often ignored by many social scientists like Sue et al. (2007, p. 273) who individualize the microaggression concept by defining it as brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral insults towards racialized “Others.” Their interpretation directs attention to the internalized racial ideas and assumptions driving bigoted insults to illuminate their role in assaulting the consciousness of racialized Others. Since this approach ignores how micro- and macro-structural processes interact to facilitate daily white violence, many scholars writing on the subject formulate racial microaggressions as devoid of a systemic essence to focus on individual acts of white terror. This interpretation, which is dominant in the social sciences, merely catalogs “white” people’s violence towards Black people in ways that lead to prescribed solutions and treatments to counteract the mental and physical degradation resulting from anti-Black violence—medicalizing rather than politicizing anti-Black violence. This shifts attention from the structural foundations of racial microaggressions to their symptomatic embodiment in the mind and body.

Pierce defines offensive microaggressions as “subtle, innocuous, preconscious or unconscious degradations and putdowns” “whites” use to ensure racialized Others “are ignored, tyrannized, terrorized, and minimized” (Pierce, 1970, pp. 267, 271, 1995, p. 281). According to him, these actions have a structural basis because:

[They are] the summation of *collective* micro-offenses [by “whites”] that permit police department after police department to tyrannize racially oppressed communities...which applies economic terror to [any racially oppressed person or group]

who have the temerity to demand what the law provides...and minimize the social importance of any [racially oppressed person, and their] achievements so they will [view] themselves as useless, unlovable, and unable. (Pierce, 1970, p. 268)

Pierce’s structural conception of microaggressions undercut current interpretation of racial microaggressions as unintentional. Further, Pierce’s microaggressions exegesis contextualizes anti-Black violence, unlike most current researchers whose overwhelming concern is with the psychic harm of microaggressions without accounting for the structural processes generating the injury. Neither anti-Black violence nor systemic racism is a consequence of the other; they have a shared duality.

Social systems of oppression are total phenomena whose logic extends beyond the level of social situations and interactive social order in which microaggressions exist. Systems of oppression structure social life and involve individual, interactional, and institutional levels of society. The assumptive logic emerging from these social and institutional processes is embodied by both oppressors and the oppressed as common sense which informs their ways of knowing, being, and interacting with people. As such, the logic of oppression engenders a sense of inferiority and fear among the oppressed that must be cleansed from their thoughts to ensure the emergence of new identities and meanings to confront systemic oppression (Cabral, 1973). This initial step in the struggle against white supremacy then is in the realm of ideas. Systems of racial domination produce beliefs, discourses, mental images, and contradictions fashioned within institutions to maintain a shared understanding of whiteness that people express to maintain racial oppression (Cabral, 1973). In doing so these institutions encourage people experiencing anti-Black violence to see it as both normal and acceptable, and amenable to individual redress. Individualistic explanations stall progress towards ending anti-Black violence by misdirecting people to tame racial microaggressions rather than eradicate their systemic source—white supremacy. By reducing systemic racism to individual acts of anti-Black violence, the prevailing conception of racial microaggressions is fatally compromised in charting a way forward. White aggression does not just materialize out of nowhere. It is not simply a plot on the part of isolated individuals to engage in anti-Black violence, but a material manifestation of an intense political and economic hostility, philosophically speaking, towards racialized Others; a hostility that manifests itself in a particular epistemic violent way (Mills, 1997).

4. Everyday Racism

Theorizing everyday anti-Black violence requires social scientists to clearly articulate the structural forces driving everyday bigoted behavior. Sociologist Philomena Essed’s concept of “everyday racism” generally seeks to

connect “ideological dimensions of racism with daily attitudes and interprets the reproduction of systemic racism in terms of the experience of everyday life” (Essed, 1991, p. 2). Like racial microaggressions, everyday racism is concerned with revealing the daily actions of anti-Black racism practitioners. However, everyday racism is not exclusively about individuals given it defines anti-Black violence as complex relations of acts (and attributed attitudes) in a social system. These primarily mundane white discourses and practices are experienced as amorphous and ambiguous rather than as extreme anti-Black violence (Essed, 1991).

Since human beings communicate mostly through symbols (e.g., language and images), the primary expression mode of everyday racism and anti-Black violence is visual and discursive. Nonverbal bigoted communication is conveyed via paralanguage or voice tone, body movement, gestures, facial expressions, and avoidance of eye contact (Essed, 1991). Such bigoted behavior is made ordinary through structures of white power, underscoring the importance of understanding how these structures constitute social scientists’ atomistic conceptions of anti-Black violence. Like racial microaggressions, everyday racism analysis starts with the individual but, unlike microaggressions, it aims to go beyond this point by explicating the link between micro and macro white violence. Everyday racism proposes microaggressions such as racial jokes, ridicule, patronizing behavior, and other attempts to humiliate and intimidate as actions in support of systemic racism (Essed, 1991). Everyday racism as coded discourse and action is tied to institutional practices (e.g., appointing friends of friends for a position, resulting in a workplace that remains “white”) as a part of the expected, the unquestionable, and what “white” people view as normal (Essed, 1991, p. 50).

Contrary to racial microaggressions, the everyday racism concept delineates a more dynamic interactive frame for deducing how everyday acts of anti-Black violence both construct and are structured by white supremacy. That is, anti-Black violence and white supremacy are productions of people in institutions and cultures, nurturing white predispositions and practicing whiteness. Though the concept of everyday racism assumes that anti-Black violence is a collaborative creation of structure and agency, it does not adequately demonstrate how white-controlled institutions (e.g., economic, social, political, or cultural) construct and perpetuate white power and racism. Everyday racism’s exploration of individual racist practices leads to an unevolved assessment of how the structures of white supremacy nurture racist beliefs and actions. All truly sociological perspectives of structures, interactions, and individuals are hand-in-glove, not glove without a hand.

5. Unconscious Individual Anti-Blackness? No.

Though recent scholarship on racism examines the experiences of racially oppressed people with everyday

racism (Coates, 2011; Dovidio et al., 2002; Sue et al., 2008), most do so through a micro-level/individualizing lens. For instance, Sue and colleagues build on Pierce’s (1970, 1995) individualizing the racial microaggression concept by defining it as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards [racialized Others]” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). Like Pierce, Sue and colleagues direct most of their attention to the internalized racial ideas and assumptions behind bigoted insults to illuminate their role in assaulting the consciousness of racialized Others. Such analyses aim to help racially oppressed people “regain command or control over space, time, energy and freedom of movement” so that they can lessen their oppression (Pierce, 1995, p. 291). Rather than identifying and analyzing the structural facilitators of daily white violence, Sue et al. (2007) follow Pierce’s lead in using the racial microaggression concept as a therapeutic treatment to mitigate racially oppressed people’s encounters with white violence. Recognizing their structural theorizing shortcomings, the authors attempt to address it by asserting, without empirically demonstrating, that racial microaggressions are part of a racialized system of domination. They vaguely construe a lack of “inclusion” and representation within institutions as racial microaggressions without illuminating the policy regimes and components that lead to exclusion (Domínguez & Embrick, 2020). To further buttress his structural reclamation effort, Sue (2010, p. 25) coins the term “environmental microaggressions” to refer to “demeaning, threatening social, educational, political, or economic indications that are transferred individually, institutionally or societally to marginalized groups.” Although the term provides more elaboration about the workings of daily anti-Black violence, its omission of the link between violence and systemic white racism continues to reduce anti-Black violence to individuals, allowing scholars to discuss the politics of “race” without examining its systematic basis (Embrick et al., 2017).

Most social scientists ignore racial microaggression’s structural and material limitations since they are content to use it only to investigate how interpersonal interactions between the racially oppressed and “white” oppressors—characterized by “white” putdowns—are enacted in an individualistic programmed fashion. There are a few exceptions, such as sociologist Solórzano’s (1998) use of critical race theory to examine how societal institutional practices work to inferiorize racially oppressed people. Because Solórzano is a social scientist who specializes in education, he construes the racial microaggression concept as a critical race theory tool to investigate how white educational theory, policy, and practice activate everyday anti-Black violence to subordinate racialized Others. For Solórzano, racial microaggressions are intrinsically connected to institutional racism (i.e., structures and processes) and its

various ideological variants (race, whiteness, diversity, etc.; see also Huber & Solórzano, 2015). Although he conceptualizes racial microaggression and systemic white racism as interlaced phenomena, Solórzano does so in a way that does not fully reveal the workings of the white supremacy regime's onto-epistemic structure, fundamental for understanding the dynamics of routine anti-Black violence.

Solórzano's (1998) uncritical incorporation of racial microaggression as a component of critical race theory is also problematic because he does not consider how the concept's claim that subtle racial bigotry is unintentional, and unconscious underwrites anti-Black violence. No one in a white supremacy society is free of racism's influence given it is a social system of oppression that predates us, and one into which we are consciously socialized and knowingly practice every day. This oversight is related to the fact that the prevailing iteration of critical race theory proposed remedies or correctives for anti-Black violence—inclusion, legal and legislative protection, and greater access to opportunity—do not profoundly challenge structures of white supremacy or its constitutive normativity but seek to secure equality, liberation, and recompense for racially oppressed people within white supremacist regimes (Anderson, 2021; Mocombe, 2017).

This type of racial microaggression iteration provides “white” with cover by theorizing it is possible to scrub clean anti-Black violence by removing or exposing the error of it all to its perpetrators—a pretension that reveals it as a bourgeois white supremacy construct. “White” people are collectively vested in the fallacy that they are individuals first, and only members of a group secondarily and accidentally, circumventing any recognition of the advantaged dominance their group exhibits (Woods, 2018, p. 642). Racial microaggressions then uphold the individualistic unintentional character of routine anti-Black violence as the only understandable way out for “white” positioned as members of the “white” violent collective. The violent outcome of systemic racism is not unconscious, but a collective anti-Black endeavor structured as anti-blackness. Indeed, there is no simple distinction between the conscious and unconscious act (Bourdieu, 2002). As Slors's (2019) research reveals, conscious and unconscious processes connect and work in partnership to produce action. People's behavioral dispositions are constructs of a conscious societal effort to direct their unconscious actions (Slors, 2019). The point is that societal institutions are purveyors of habitual modes of interaction wherein human subjectivity has concrete implications, and in turn is shaped by tangible societal events.

Many social scientists using the racial microaggressions interpretative narrative know on some level that the term is of little value in understanding the structural sources of anti-Black violence. This is not to say their *obscured awareness* surfaces in calculated decisions to draw upon the concept, but it translates into

a misrecognition shrouding the systemic everyday workings of white supremacy. This misrecognition is a “functional” part of the racial microaggression concept rather than an anomaly given its failure to empirically connect racism as a regime of control to “race-related” stress (Domínguez & Embrick, 2020). Neglect of racial microaggressions' structural dimension leads to the misrecognition of the objective structural fact of anti-Black violence. Consequently, the way the microaggression concept is currently used ensures the structural roots of anti-Black violence disappear, so it remains unaddressed.

6. Academic and Political Antecedents of the Microaggression Concept

The truth claims of racial microaggressions and everyday racism are not new but part of a familiar global intellectual tradition theorizing how Black lives are shaped by systemic racism. This scholarship, which remains largely ignored by contemporary scholars, micro and macro social scientists alike, offers a deeper historical and political analytical way of understanding the dialectical relationship between structure and agency driving anti-Black violence (Itzigsohn & Brown, 2020). Sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois sought to understand both the socio-historic conditions facing Black people in the twentieth century and the impacts of those conditions on the consciousness and “inner world” of Black people subjected to them (Du Bois, 1903/1989). He coined the term “double-consciousness” as a conceptual frame for interpreting how Black people experience psychosocial conflict within oppressive and devaluing white supremacy societies. Double-consciousness specifically refers to how Black people as dehumanized outcasts within white supremacy societies retain a sense of self within this context. Generally, the concept seeks to explain how a person's sense of self is necessarily constructed in a dialogue that is continually subject to implicit raced power relations (Meer, 2019). In this regard, double-consciousness sees the self-other relationship not as benign but one suffused in domination, such as the refusal of “whites” to acknowledge Black people's humanity (Meer, 2019, p. 52). This denial of their humanity creates an internalized echo of white racist judgments among blackened people. Du Bois did not conceive the Black self as a reflection of an atomistic self, it is conceptualized as a culturally embedded and socially mediated construction. As such, Du Bois argued that self-recognition is a form of cultural recognition where one's identity is linked with the cultural identities of other members of one's community (Meer, 2019, p. 52). In short, Du Bois's double-consciousness concept alerts us to the fact that interpersonal anti-Black violence is a central component of systemic white racism, taking the form of both overt and covert structural hostilities.

Likewise, Fanon (1963, 1967) analyzed how colonialism and white supremacy structural mechanisms work together to construct a Black self that is amenable to

domination and exploitation. Specifically, he asserted colonial white supremacy engenders a superiority complex in “whites” and an inferiority complex in Blacks through language and culture. Similarly, Martinican scholar, Aimé Césaire’s *Discours sur le Colonialisme* (1955/1972) examined French racism’s impact on the daily lives of Black people. He assessed how the everyday racism processes of colonialism condition Black people to sing the virtues of its brutal effort to decivilize (dehumanized) them (Césaire, 1955/1972, p. 13). Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde intellectual, Amílcar Cabral also scrutinized how everyday racism processes secured racial domination through the organized control of Black people’s historical understandings and culture (Cabral, 1973). He argued that colonial states facilitate anti-Black violence in and through civil society (i.e., culture, education, religion). Like Césaire, he established that “white” Europeans’ projection of their history and culture as the norm conditioned Black people into “white” ways of thinking, perceiving, and acting to ensure their complicity in their own oppression. In a word, Cabral argued that the mental rehabilitation of racially subjugated people occurs on the terrain of historical consciousness—understanding the temporality of the connection among past, present, and future experiences. For Cabral, the victims of white supremacy “reenter history” only when they disavow white ways of knowing and being in the world.

These scholars approached white supremacy as a hegemonic force, reproducing raced social relations and concealing contradictions. Herein lies the danger of the prevailing individualized conception of racial microaggressions in that it obfuscates the enactment of historical consciousness. It does not place anti-Black violence in a broader historical and political context before trying to develop solutions to resolve it. As Du Bois, Fanon, Césaire, and Cabral rightly suggest, though white supremacy is experienced through micro-interactions, it is not merely performative of systemic racism processes. These micro forces were part of the development of colonial white supremacy and racial capitalism, expansion, and exploitation (Dolgon, 2018).

The preceding scholarly conceptions evolved further in Carmichael and Hamilton’s (1967) institutional racism concept (i.e., systemic racism). A concept that links the daily reality of anti-Black violence with systemic racism in terms of covert and overt racism. These racism practices interface:

Individual whites acting against individual blacks, and acts by the total white community against the black community....The first consists of overt acts by individuals, which cause death, injury or the violent destruction of property....The second type is less overt, far more subtle, less identifiable in terms of specific individuals committing the acts. But it is no less destructive to human life. The second type originates in the operation of established and respected forces

in society, thus receiving far less public condemnation than the first type. (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967, p. 4)

Furthermore, Carmichael and Hamilton (1967, p. 5) maintain:

Institutional racism relies on the active and pervasive operation of anti-black attitudes and practices. A sense of superior group position prevails: Whites are “better” than blacks; therefore, should be subordinated to whites. This is a racist attitude and it permeates the society, on both the individual and institutional level, covertly and overtly....Thus, the acts of overt, individual racism may not typify the society, but institutional racism does—with the support of covert, individual attitudes of racism.

Institutional racism empirically illuminates the relationship between systemic racism and the daily lives, actions, and attitudes of both Black and “white” people. Although theorists of everyday racism make a distinction between individual and systemic racism, unlike institutional racism researchers, they spent virtually no time explaining how the two synergize to (re)produce white supremacy. Contrary to theorists and researchers of everyday racism and racial microaggressions, institutional racism proponents do not take people’s experiences with racism alone as a basis for analysis. As we discuss later, racial microaggression researchers typically encourage people to look past anti-Black violence efforts to control racially oppressed people and to ignore white collective culpability, institutional processes, and structural realities through their effort to convince “whites” to acknowledge their covert racism without requiring them to act to eliminate the white supremacy regime (Costa Vargas, 2018). The theorizing of institutional racism is not directed at staving off daily “white” brutality and violence but towards empowering Black people to organize and terminate the structural source of their oppression through the development of a historical consciousness. Because racism is centered in the context of colonialism and its “wake,” institutional racism approaches the struggle against systemic racism as a global fight for liberation. Institutional racism is a theory of interpretation and praxis that seeks to empower racially oppressed people to end “white” global control over social and material forces (i.e., cultural, historical, political, and economic factors) responsible for structuring and reproducing racialized relations. This is in stark contrast to prevailing usages of racial microaggressions which enable perpetrators of white violence to deny any knowledge of knowingly engaging in racist behavior, making it acceptable for purveyors of anti-Black violence to glory in racial ignorance. Such ignorance “involves not just ‘knowing’ but also not knowing what one does not know believing that one knows” (Applebaum, 2010, p. 39). This subterfuge allows microaggression proponents to frame

anti-Black violence as individualized events as opposed to a systemic reality.

Institutional racism offers a more useful dynamic conceptual frame for grasping how structure and agency interact to sustain anti-Black violence through its assertion that white violence is more akin to systemic micro-level oppression or micro-level white supremacy. It frees anti-blackness from racial microaggressions' presentation of itself as an isolated rather than systemic practice. Routine anti-Black violence does not precede systemic racism. It comes into being simultaneously with it. The systemic micro-level oppression concept returns us to Pierce's (1970) effort to explain anti-Black violence as "structuration"—a synthesis of structure and agency. This conceptualization, unlike prevailing notions of microaggressions, directs us to account for anti-Black violence as institutionalized (forming a structure as well as a culture) expressions that affect people's lives whether they want it to or not (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, p. 473). Microaggressions enacted through everyday interactions are often the most resistant to analysis and political challenge because they are unremarkable in the sense that they emanate from the taken-for-granted substance of ordinary human life. According to Oliha-Donaldson (2018), people engaging in systemic micro-level oppression typically claim they understand the harmful effects of white supremacy and call for its destruction, yet their discourse and actions mute or silence pushback against anti-Black violence by suggesting the racial microaggression problem is a figment of Black people's imagination because they see white racism where there is none.

A systemic micro-level oppression analysis can expose how micro-oppressive behavior delimits possibilities for structural and social change by allowing those waging everyday anti-Black violence to cloak their behavior with "good intentions" and "goodwill" (Oliha-Donaldson, 2018, pp. 439–140). Because this kind of oppression is ordinary, it is one that a systemic micro-level oppression analysis is uniquely suited to making visible and (thereby) accessible to deconstruct as a component of systemic racism. It helps to reveal how policies and institutional changes in racially oppressive contexts are designed to ensure anti-Black violence continues. For instance, organizations' preoccupation with securing "diversity training" to ameliorate racial microaggressions is popular because they do not seek to structurally eliminate anti-Black violence and white supremacy but to solve their systemic anti-Black problem without confronting it.

7. Implications for the Struggle: False Promise, False Remedy

Prevailing microaggression conceptualizations thus ignore the earlier scholarship of Frantz Fanon centering white supremacy structure as the catalyst for anti-Black violence. Fanon (1963) never assumes "white" animus

alone drives white violence. He contends that white violence is a product of colonial societies that condition "whites" to inscribe Blacks with ideas of backwardness and sub-humanness (Fanon, 1963, p. 61). "Whites" accept such "dehumanization" of Others as common sense, predisposing them to disregard their use of white epistemic and physical violence to discipline and control Black people (Fanon, 1963, p. 42). From a Fanonian perspective, racial microaggressions are not unintentional or atomistic but connected to the displacement of "white" people's recognition of their violent anti-Black actions and attitudes. This displacement is an outcome of a dynamic social process where whiteness (say, a situation, process, or action) is misrecognized for what it is because the white supremacy culture in which people are immersed is characterized by a range of dispositions and propensities confounding their making-sense of it (James, 2015, p. 100; Mueller, 2017). That is, anti-Black violence is attributed to another realm of meaning so that the process, interests, inequities, and other harms of systemic racism are sustained while remaining concealed (Mills, 1997, p. 18).

The racial microaggressions concept stymies political struggle with its contention that daily anti-Black violence is an unintentional individual act. From the perspective of systemic racism, racial microaggression analyses are synonymous with universities empaneling committees—consisting of one or two racially oppressed individuals—to study what we already know about anti-Black violence to avert taking substantive action to eliminate it. Moreover, this calls attention to the fact that Black people's experiences within the structures of white supremacy usually remain opaque until "white" or whiteness-immersed racially oppressed people who possess a modicum of institutional power, validate their understandings. Because researchers in academia accept the racial microaggressions concept as a useful means for understanding anti-Black violent proclivities, most Black and other racially oppressed academics uncritically use it as an analytical tool.

Racial microaggression discourse is a pseudonym for Black suffering that disappears the structures of white supremacy driving anti-Black violence. Racial microaggression as a concept of whiteness routinizes racial terror to obstruct liberation from anti-Black violence (Hartman, 1997). No "remedy" deriving from a racial microaggression interpretation will eradicate the intransigence of anti-Black violence since it re-instantiates racial violence. The concept maintains anti-Black violence as an unintended action and advocates for micro solutions to redress the anti-blackness evident in institutions promoting it. For example, racial microaggressions proponents promote using boycotts, strikes, and protests at racially hostile institutions to encourage them to implement cultural sensitivity training and policy reforms to make anti-Black violence tolerable for racially oppressed people working within them (Sue et al., 2019). Racial microaggressions and the diversity education they

promote as a remedy for anti-Black violence leave historical and contemporary white supremacy structures and their epistemological common sense intact. The efforts of racial microaggression proponents to educate “white” offenders about their anti-Black violent behavior and attitudes are thus not effective at ending anti-Black violence. A more efficacious way of understanding and contesting anti-Black violence is to interrogate the linkage among pervasive white supremacy ideologies and structures constructing and perpetuating it, the routine violence that helps to maintain it, and the anti-white supremacy theorizing and practices necessary to dismantle it.

Calls for educating anti-Black practitioners thus miss the basic point of what anti-Black violence is about. It is a racial and political construct that is not enacted by individual “whites” alone but in concert with societal racialized structures. These structures are the edifice and anti-black violence is the executor of societal anti-blackness. During slavery and Jim Crow, it was common for “white” people to use violence to control Black people. Their policing power, like those of “whites” today, is secondary to that of white-controlled economic, political, and cultural institutions. “White” commoners do not wield power of their own (except situationally); theirs is merely an expression of systemic micro-level oppressions nurtured through white supremacy institutions (Woods, 2018). They are an appendage of white power relations, not power itself. Therefore, we need to move beyond the cul-de-sac of racial microaggressions to delve critically into how the social structures of white supremacy are involved in individual subjectivity.

With this more complete understanding of hegemonic whiteness and historical processes, we can begin laying the groundwork for moving beyond coping with white supremacy towards collectively dismantling it. Because institutional racism seeks not merely to understand but also to counteract entrenched white supremacy ideas and practices structuring everyday life, it allows us to perceive daily anti-Black violence as a micro-oppression tied to white supremacy structures. This concept allows us to understand how almost any anti-Black violence can be explained if we examine real-world conditions and apply the context of history. Systemic micro-level oppression as concomitant of institutional racism directs us to consider how white supremacy as a complex system of power can be successfully overcome by taking control of and transforming the institutions producing and perpetuating white racism: economic, social, political, or cultural. It identifies these institutions; analyzes the way they work to sustain white supremacy and devises strategies to transform them. This is contrary to microaggressions which aim to “reform” white supremacy institutions through training to diminish acts of subtle violence against Black and other racially oppressed people. Such training supposedly empower racially oppressed people to speak up about the transgressions inflicted upon them so that harms are addressed, but this only occurs in ways that

enable white institutions to present themselves as “safe spaces” for racially oppressed people. Consequently, both workers and employers are given the false impression they are executing fundamental structural change through training. People’s awareness of microaggressions is meaningless if we do not change the logic and praxis of systemic racism. “Diversity,” white fragility workshops, and reading lists are not going to create justice and abolish systemic white racism and anti-Black racism. Acknowledging anti-Black violence will not address it. Awareness is certainly an important part of the pre-conditions for change, but on its own is not enough to eradicate anti-Black violence. A different approach is needed.

Systemic micro-level oppression offers a different way even though it too, like all approaches to oppression, is partial. It makes clear that establishment changes happen when macro-scale, root-cause mobilization threatens institutional sources of white power. The large-scale massive social movements of the 1960s linked the struggle against anti-Black violence with anti-colonialism to make its approach to fighting white supremacy more internationalist and racism more understandable as a historical process nourishing global capitalism. To return to such an understanding requires people to break with how white supremacy settler colonialism defines and shapes their condition. This questioning is important, not as a resting place, but for making the connection between *what is* and *what ought to be* (Fanon, 1963; Freire, 1970). By making this break, scholars eschew the atomism of racial microaggression discourse regulating how we make sense of anti-Black violence. We can latch onto the counter-discourse of systemic micro-level oppression to help us begin to grasp how the central institutional mechanisms of white supremacy condition and induce us into replicating it as a living system of oppression. The systemic micro-level oppression conceptualization of anti-Black violence reminds us to discard individualism for collectivism so that racially oppressed groups are enabled to collectively “come to voice,” to challenge and subvert hegemonic systems of white power and domination (Fanon, 1963). Furthermore, the systemic micro-level oppression frame compels us to focus on the interdependence and interrelatedness of “race,” gender, class, sexuality, age, (dis)ability, and other categories that serve as potential areas for oppression. Along with directing our attention to “race” and racialization processes, systemic micro-level oppression’s internationalist approach encourages us to interrogate how everyday systems of power and domination interlock, how oppression is reproduced and maintained, and how the disempowered are violently subjugated and kept under constant control.

8. Conclusion

If we start with the perspective that racial microaggressions and white supremacy co-construct one another,

we can start to address anti-Black racism and anti-Black violence as they work, not as we wish they work. White supremacy is insidious. It is powerful because it is neither hatred nor personal. It is comforting routines and unthinking expectations of a social order that feels like the natural order of things. In this article, we detailed how racial microaggressions' characterization of anti-Black violence as individual actions results in neglecting how it unfolds together with white identities, discourses, and institutions that give practical effect and meaning to anti-blackness. Social science analysis must move towards understanding this dynamic in the way long articulated by scholars in Black studies. The omission of this scholarship is a part of social science's long history of treating blackened scholars and Black studies as marginal rather than central to understanding and eliminating systems of domination (Morris, 2015). We highlighted Du Bosian and colonial/post-colonial theories about everyday anti-Black violence as institutional racism because, unlike dominant notions of microaggressions, everyday white racism, and critical race theory, they clarify the interplay between the white supremacy regime and anti-Black violent discourse and action. Their theorizing illuminates how throughout history, systemic micro-level oppression and state agencies, institutions, and organizations work in tandem to terrorize blackened people. This racial terrorizing dynamic continues to the present.

The assumptions of white priority, domination, and importance underlie the racial microaggression concept. The thought, realities, and attitudes of white supremacist ideologies are deeply embedded in micro-aggression theorizing about anti-Black violence. To appreciate why white supremacy remains such an integral part of social science thought and interpretation of anti-Black violence, we need to recognize and acknowledge its embeddedness in these disciplines at their founding. The social science of "race relations" typically isolates the study of "race" from structural concerns to evade sustained engagement with sociology's colonialist and imperialist past (Magubane, 2016). Because the anti-blackness evident in the racial microaggressions concept is inseparable from white supremacist structures, we must create other means for explaining routine anti-Black violence through interdisciplinary and grassroots work to remake the terms for understanding it as an interactional process. This requires that social science understandings take note of the debates and feedback from racially oppressed communities. In these communal spaces, misleading concepts and ideas about anti-Black violence cannot survive (Andrews, 2020). People in these spaces are inclined to see the academics' individualistic conceptualization of anti-Black violence and its use of white pedagogy and discourse to make sense of Black suffering as obfuscations of liberation. Scholars should practice thinking beyond the constraints of racial microaggressions by building on, not bypassing, the marginalized scholarship of their predecessors. If we

do this, we will acquire a better grasp of how to cleanse society of anti-Black racism structures and frames of reference, identities, aspirations, and scholarship that thwart rather than aid resistance and struggle against systemic racism.

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Conflict of Interests

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