Denial of Subtle and Systemic Racism in America

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**Background:** From the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s to the present, the United States has witnessed a significant reduction in overt racism in the public sphere. Of course, this does not mean that racism has disappeared. Research from different fields suggests that subtle forms of racism have replaced the once common explicit forms of bigotry. This has led to much research focused on how subtler forms of racism manifest themselves in American society; however, less attention has been given to perceptions of the prevalence of racism in America as an institutional issue.

Subjective judgments of the prevalence of racism themselves vary as a function of race and ethnicity. Indeed, as recently as the turn of the 21st century, white Americans perceived greater strides toward racial equality, whereas black Americans viewed progress toward racial equality as a distant goal, with many barriers still left to cross.[1] How is it that perceptions of racial equality in America can be so disparate? One explanation rests in the media. Though media coverage of blatant racist acts is broad and far-reaching, these acts may be perceived as rare, isolated instances that are not representative of American life in general. Furthermore, media coverage of racism may inadvertently define racism in a limited, traditional sense. Though counterintuitive, this may prevent people from recognizing subtler forms of racism that are still rampant in American life and, in turn, lead them to deny that racism is a pervasive, systemic issue.

Often, subtle discrimination takes the form of racial microaggressions, commonplace daily behaviors that belittle or insult people of color, whether intentional or not.[2] For example, someone may tell an Asian or Latino American, “You speak English well,” without realizing that the underlying implication is “You don’t look American enough to speak English.” Similarly, someone claiming to be “color-blind” may negate the ethnic identity and experiences of people of color. Much clinical research has investigated the detrimental effects of racial microaggressions on various minority populations (e.g., black Americans, Asian Americans, Latino Americans). However, no research to date has measured the extent to which Americans—white Americans in particular—are able to recognize racial microaggressions. White Americans’ denial of systemic racism in America, then, may stem from an inability to recognize manifestations of subtle racial prejudice behaviors such as microaggressions.

**Proposed Research:** The goal of my research is to investigate influences on perceptions of racism in American society today. Specifically, I will investigate whether exposure to blatant forms of racism in the media “distract” people from recognizing subtler forms of racial prejudice and racism as an institutional problem. First, I will investigate the extent to which people recognize subtle forms of racial prejudice (e.g., microaggressions) as racist. Second, I will investigate how exposure to instances of blatant racism influences perceptions of subtler forms of racism like microaggressions, as well as racism as a pervasive, systemic issue in America.

**Pilot Study:** As mentioned earlier, the study of racial microaggressions has been limited to mostly counseling and clinical research. Furthermore, this research has only focused on how microaggressions affect minority victims. For this reason, my first step was to pilot-test and develop a measure of perceived racial microaggressions. By adapting items from existing racial microaggressions scales,[1, 2] I measured whites’ (N = 321) and racial minorities’ (N = 218) perceptions of racial microaggressions—specifically, the degree to which various microaggressions are identified as indicative of racial prejudice. Considering the discrepant views of racism between whites and racial minorities in America, the results were not surprising.
Racial minorities indicated most racial microaggressions as indicative of racial prejudice, whereas white Americans viewed only some racial microaggressions as more indicative of racial prejudice. Explanatory factor analysis of the microaggressions items fell into one factor for the racial minority sample. However, for the white sample, three factors emerged: invisibility and avoidance, colorblindness, and stereotypes. This suggests what whites do not view all microaggressions as equivalent. These subscales will be used in all subsequent experiments.

**Experiment 1:** The purpose of this experiment is to investigate how exposure to stories of blatant racism in the print-media influences the degree to which microaggressions are perceived as racist. To test this, I will randomly assign participants to one of three conditions in which they will either read a news story about a blatantly racist act, a narrative containing statistics about racial inequality, or a narrative unrelated to racial issues (control). The purpose of the narrative with statistics is to make the issue of racism salient without exposing participants to blatant racism and provide a reminder of the existence of racism that does not evoke forms of racism that might allow participants to dismiss racist events as atypical. Participants will then fill out the racial microaggressions scale described above. I predict that participants who read the news story about blatantly racist actions will recognize and rate fewer microaggressions as racist compared to participants in the other conditions.

**Experiment 2:** A recent national survey indicates that most Americans still rely heavily on television as their main news source[4]. For this reason, the purpose of the second experiment will be to directly test the effects that viewing stories of blatant racism on television has on peoples’ perceptions of microaggressions as racist acts. First, I will have research assistants help find and code news videos for blatant racism and neutral content news stories. I will then use video editing software to compile two video bundles with three brief news stories each. The first compilation will include one news story on blatant racism embedded between two neutral news stories, whereas the second compilation will include three neutral news stories. After viewing one of the two news story compilations, participants will fill out the racial microaggressions scale. Similar to Experiment 1, I predict that participants who view the news compilation with a news story covering a blatant racist act will recognize and rate fewer microaggressions as racist compared to participants in the neutral news condition.

**Broader Impacts:** The belief that racism is no longer an issue in America hinders the ongoing pursuit of equality. We know from prior research the detrimental effects that racism, even subtler forms like microaggressions, have on people’s daily lives; still, this is only one side of the story. We know little about what leads people—in particular, people from dominant groups—to recognize the presence of racism. My research will address this question and help us better understand whether subtle biases like microaggressions are recognized and how this affects perceptions of the prevalence of systemic racism in America. This will allow me to explore the possibility that sensational media coverage of blatantly racist incidents may distract people from more subtle or systemic aspects of racism, leading them to dismiss racism as the actions of a freakish, fading subset of the population. It is imperative that we understand when and why, even with intentions of promoting an egalitarian society, people do and do not recognize the prevalence of racism in American life.