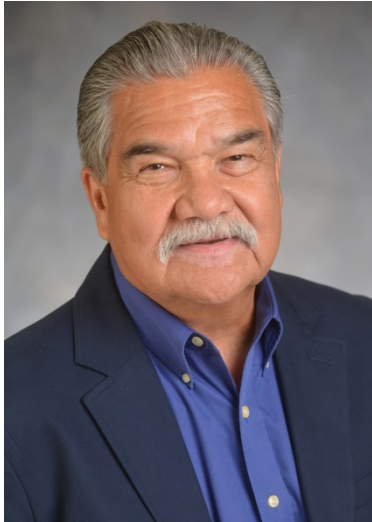


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Daniel Solorzano: Naming the Pain of Microaggressions



By Joanie Harmon

Research on stereotypes leads to awareness for perpetrators and targets of seemingly benign comments on race, gender, and class.

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In 2001, after hearing a presentation given at the University of Michigan by Professors Daniel Solorzano and Walter Allen on racial microaggressions – defined as everyday verbal and non-verbal, layered, and cumulative assaults directed toward People of Color – a high school student in the audience addressed the UCLA professors with a heart-wrenching admission.

“She was crying,” says Professor Solorzano, a professor in the division of Social Sciences and Comparative Education (SSCE) at UCLA Ed & IS. “The first thing she said when she spoke was, ‘You’ve given me a name for my pain.’”

Professor Solorzano says that while most people do not know the word or definition of a microaggression, they easily can recognize one when they experience it.

“If you asked a person on the street about racial microaggressions, they would probably say, ‘What are you talking about?’” he says. “But if you asked them, ‘Has anyone ever said something to you like this...?’, they would say, ‘Yes.’ When you explain the experience and give it a name, it can be a pretty powerful tool.” Solorzano argues that the “micro” in microaggression doesn’t mean “less than,” the “micro” in microaggression means “in the everyday.”

Solorzano, who has spent 23 years examining microaggressions in different contexts, is currently working on a study with Lindsay Pérez Huber, a former UCLA doctoral student and current Assistant Professor at CSU Long Beach, on how the language and imagery of children's books often rely on stereotypes of People of Color, including those of African, Asian, Mexican, and Native American descent.

“We’re bombarded from an early age with these stereotypes,” notes Solorzano. “When people ask me, ‘How do we stop this?’, they first have to understand how we come to experience race and racism in our early socialization – the way parents talk about People of Color; how the media portrays People of Color; how books portray People of Color. Parents and teachers read these books to their children and may not even know they’re reinforcing stereotypes either through the language or the visuals in the book.”

The children's book study was inspired by an incident when Pérez Huber was reading a storybook to her then-six-year-old daughter Layla. In it, a character described merely as a “bandit,” was pictured draped with stereotypic “Mexican” images such as bullet belts and wearing a *sombrero* and *serape*, and had “stolen” her friend's bicycle.

“As Lindsay was reading to her daughter, she saw this image,” says Solorzano. “Her face changed, and her daughter noticed her reaction. We use this as an example of how these everyday forms of racism make their way into our daily lives. In this case, visual forms or visual microaggressions in children's books.”

Solorzano, who has served as the inaugural Associate Dean for Equity and Diversity and Chief Diversity Officer at UCLA Ed & IS, says that although he'd like to say that attitudes toward race and racism are changing, there is conflicting evidence given the erasure of People of Color from American history texts in some states.

“In Texas, one of the largest states in the country, they're basically writing People of Color out of their U.S. history and social studies textbooks,” he says. “At the same time, there are states like California that are moving to implement ethnic studies into the secondary curriculum. Many of the largest school districts in the state, like LAUSD, San Francisco, and Santa Ana, are beginning to implement ethnic studies.”

“What's included in history books is one thing,” observes Solorzano. “But what's not in those textbooks is also important. When People of Color don't see themselves in history, or when they see a majoritarian history – what does that do to their racial socialization or racial identity?”

Solorzano's research focuses on the primary target of the microaggressions – People of Color who have endured everyday assaultive comments, behaviors, or images often based on stereotypes of their race, class, gender, or immigration status.

“There are also secondary targets,” he says. “Say you're in a meeting and you hear someone say something about a Black person, and you cringe. The comment is not directed toward you, but you're a secondary target and it still impacts you. I'm looking at impact – I want to know how

people on the receiving end are affected and how they respond, whether or not they are primary or secondary targets.”

Last fall, in response to articles in *The Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post* that questioned the validity of microaggressions, Solorzano and Pérez Huber wrote a [policy brief](#) that debunked media’s attempts to diminish the impact of what Solorzano refers to as “microaggressions in the form of everyday racism.”

“The word ‘microaggression’ has been misused in many ways,” he says. “The press is looking at the concept of microaggressions and framing it differently... talking about how People of Color are ‘hypersensitive’ about everyday racial discourse and maybe they should be ‘less sensitive.’ A second frame states that we shouldn’t be ‘coddling’ People of Color by constantly protecting them from this perceived ‘uncomfortable’ racial discourse. Finally, the discourse on racial microaggression somehow violates a perpetrators right to free speech. People should be able to say what they like and not be constrained by so-called ‘political correctness.’ Each of these frames focus on the perpetrator and how they are somehow ‘victimized’ when challenged for their verbal, non-verbal, and cumulative assaults on People of Color.”

“In our policy brief, we point out that if you’re the target of the microaggression, these are racial assaults. They are also layered assaults in that they can also be about one’s gender, class, or immigrant status. And they are also cumulative assaults. You don’t look at one in isolation, but how racial incidents are accumulated over time and how the person on the receiving end experiences and responds to them. Again, we shift the discourse back to the target of the microaggression.”

Solorzano has presented his research to numerous academic and professional groups, including students, faculty, and staff of the UCLA Ed & IS, UCLA’s Anderson School of Management, the UCLA Department of Sociology, and the UCLA Geffen School of Medicine. In addition, he and Pérez Huber have spoken on microaggressions to University of California leadership at nine of the ten UC campuses. Solorzano says that his audiences often seek easy solutions to prevent microaggressions from occurring on campus or in the workplace, but there are no silver bullets.

“There is no easy answer,” he says. “The idea that you recognize what you may be doing is offensive to the person on the receiving end of it. Coming to that recognition is an important and difficult first step. The second part is critical reflection. Finally, you take appropriate or corrective action.

“We all have biases,” Solorzano says. “But you have to acknowledge them and confront them. It is very difficult and painful work; it’s not easy to develop your own recognition, reflection, and action skills. Under the leadership of Associate Dean for Equity and Diversity, Tyrone Howard, and the Ed & IS Committee on Equity and Diversity, I’m confident that our faculty, staff, and students are moving forward in doing this transformative work.”

As for the targets of microaggressions, Solorzano says that for years, he has discussed “arsenals of responses” with his students. However, he says that every situation is different and the goal should be “training people on how they might act when someone says something offensive. Most

often, unfortunately, people just freeze and nothing happens. I hope that every place we speak, people will work in finding solutions by disrupting the various types and contexts of racial microaggressions.”

Solorzano, who is also a professor in UCLA’s César Chávez Department of Chicana/o Studies, will present “Visualizing Everyday Racism: Critical Race Theory, Critical Race Theory, Visual Microaggressions, and the Historical Image of Mexican Banditry” with Pérez Huber and Layla at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) in Washington D.C. in April.

To read the policy brief on “Racial Microaggressions: What They Are, What They Are Not, and Why They Matter,” click [here](#).

For a video made by Professor Solorzano’s students, click [here](#).