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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Quassoli, F., & Colombo, M. (2023). Post-Migration Stress: Racial Microaggressions and Everyday Discrimination. *Social Inclusion*, 11(2), 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v11i2.6980>

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Editorial

## Post-Migration Stress: Racial Microaggressions and Everyday Discrimination

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Submitted: 4 April 2023 | Published: 18 April 2023

### Abstract

In 1991, Philomena Essed highlighted the importance of studying contemporary racism, focusing on the interplay between the macro-social dimension and its constant reactivation in everyday interactions. Later, psychologists redefined the pervasive experience of racism in everyday encounters in terms of racial microaggressions. Migrants and asylum seekers today constitute “ideal” candidates for this kind of experience. This is due to the persistent historical processes that harken back to Western colonialism and imperialism, as well as the growing hostility towards people migrating from the Global South. This hostility has been brewing for several decades in Western countries, and it manifests in both everyday informal interactions and institutional contexts, where migrants and asylum seekers constantly face racist attitudes.

### Keywords

discrimination; everyday racism; migrants; racial microaggressions; refugees; social exclusion

### Issue

This editorial is part of the issue “Post-Migration Stress: Racial Microaggressions and Everyday Discrimination” edited by Fabio Quassoli (Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca) and Monica Colombo (Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca).

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### 1. Introduction

It is well known that migrants and asylum seekers are exposed to numerous types of potentially traumatic experiences both in their home countries and during displacement (Steel et al., 2009). Overall, the same can be said of their post-migration experience, which is multi-layered and can be influenced by a complex and multifaceted set of factors (economic, social, cultural, and linguistic) related to departure and destination contexts (Hynie, 2018). Besides, increasingly restrictive immigration and asylum policies have been introduced over the last decades, both in Europe and North America: extended processing times, the implementation of temporary visas for refugees, more extended periods of mandatory detention for those without valid entry or residence permits, and so on (Brouwer, 2020; Tazzioli, 2020). Consequently, newcomers’ experience is often fraught with great uncertainty, requiring individuals to

navigate increasingly complex legal procedures and face numerous barriers to accessing fundamental rights and services (Fassin, 2011; Hasselberg, 2016). From the earliest stages, their journey is fraught with obstacles and characterized by resettlement stress, distrust of authority, and perceived discrimination and stigma: all factors that can feed on otherness (Hatoss, 2012) and a sense of exclusion (Ryan et al., 2008). The emergence of a kind of “belonging boundary” (Morrice, 2013) is also boosted by negative representations of economic migrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees by mainstream media that fuel growing hostility towards them (Krzyżanowski et al., 2018). They are defined not from their own personal/social characteristics, “but simply by the fact that they are ‘not one of us,’ and are, therefore, a threat to ‘our way of life’” (Kundnani, 2001, p. 52). This perception of threat fosters discriminatory attitudes and often results in a myriad of everyday episodes of ethnic and racial micro-aggressions that can strongly influence

migrants/refugees' well-being and feeling of inclusion (El-Bialy & Mulay, 2020).

In the destination countries of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, one can see a complex and pervasive boundary work that originates in the same categories used to draw distinctions between different kinds of human mobilities (De Genova et al., 2015). Defining those who cross national borders as mobile people, cosmopolitan/transnational people, expatriates, lifestyle migrants, mobile gentrifiers, economic migrants, asylum-seekers, *gastarbeiter*, and so on (La Fleur & Stanek, 2017) establishes relationships “by difference”—sometimes by similarity—between those who produce and use these labels and those to whom they refer, and has highly significant implications for the life chances of the latter. As with categorizations related to gender or ethnicity, their use allows distinctions to be drawn between those who have the right (and the power) to impose a specific label and those who come to terms with it, whether they consider it acceptable or a form of violence (Sayad, 1999). This process demarcates a symbolic border around which old and new inequalities can be (re)produced and reconfigure the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

According to Lamont and Mizrachi (2012), the manifestations of racism that dot the daily experience of racialized groups (Essed, 1991) can be described as a kind of relational boundary work through which people claim the right to be part of the in-group, define themselves by similarity or difference from other people, challenge and denounce the stereotypical representations they are subjected to, claim their rights in the face of discriminatory behavior, and denounce the more or less blatant or subtle offenses to their sense of dignity. Such a boundary work has two main characteristics: On the one hand, it constantly reactivates imaginaries which, following critical racial theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), we can define as systemic racism; on the other hand, it frequently manifests itself in ambiguous and unspoken forms and unfolds through seemingly innocuous actions which are based on stigmatizing implicit premises (Solórzano & Pérez Huber, 2020).

For that matter, the importance of studying contemporary racism focusing on the interplay between its macro-social dimension (long-term historical processes that are still present in dominant political discourses and social institutions) and its constant reactivation in everyday interactions has been highlighted since 1991 by Philomena Essed. As far as the micro dimension is concerned, we think that the conceptual grid built around the concept of racial microaggressions (Sue, 2010) seems particularly relevant because of the high level of ambiguity, pervasiveness, and vagueness that can characterize episodes of everyday racism. While it is true that microaggressions are subtle, covert acts that might appear harmless, it is also true that being repeatedly exposed to them can harm both the mental well-being of migrants and asylum seekers and their feeling of exclusion (Wong et al., 2014).

## 2. Overview of Contributions

However, we are also aware that focusing on everyday, ambiguous, implicit, and strictly interactional manifestations of microaggressions may risk obliterating the systemic character of racism and the institutional and structural foundations of white violence. This issue is exemplified by Williams and Embrick (2023), who argue that the term “microaggressions” has become a construct of white supremacy and, therefore, an ideological and discursive anti-black practice; its use as an analytical framework can create the false impression that changes in individual behavior alone can eliminate structural anti-black violence.

Under this premise, this thematic issue aims to present new and original research on how racial microaggressions and everyday racism shape the experience of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. As this topic has so far been little studied in relation to migratory processes (especially in Europe), we aim to offer a deeper understanding of how these processes unfold in various institutional contexts (workplace, detention centers) or daily encounters in various urban settings, how they can be linked to identity negotiations, ontological security and the experience of humiliation, which challenges they pose on the methodological level, and what forms of resistance they activate.

More precisely, three articles explore the experience of microaggressions in everyday life: Kwan Wong (2023) describes varied experiences of racial microaggressions directed at Chinese immigrant women before and during the Covid-19 pandemic; Quassoli et al. (2023) explore young people with migrant parents experience of everyday racism in Italy, reconstructing the overall dynamics of racial microaggressions, highlighting the boundary work and identity negotiation process carried out in everyday encounters and pointing out how an implicit reference to race is at the heart of the forms of banal nationalism (Billig, 1995) through which a race-based conception of citizenship is affirmed; finally, Nicolson (2023) investigates the lived experiences of racial microaggressions faced by young adult migrants in everyday life from an ontological security perspective (see also Kinnvall, 2004). This author unpacks how migrants negotiate traumatic experiences of racism and manage their identities, employing coping mechanisms to minimize the daily trauma of racism and microaggressions experienced in Scotland.

The experience of everyday racism in institutional contexts is addressed in three other articles: Ortega-Jiménez et al. (2023) explore everyday discrimination and microaggressions in the workplace, gathering evidence of daily humiliation in the form of racial slurs, verbal abuse, and unequal treatment that leave Ecuadorian migrants feeling powerless and helpless; Low and Shah (2023) examine how refugee women of diverse backgrounds enact resistance practices through volunteering to challenge everyday microaggressions and social

exclusion; finally, Tural (2023) investigates the ways in which race operates, is experienced, and resisted by actors involved in everyday relations in detention centres, showing the centrality of racializing ideas of migrant “undeservingness” and “deportability” in shaping embodied, affective, and experiential realities of the visiting rooms of detention centres, and the various ways in which actors resist those identifications.

All six research articles cited above share the same methodological approach and are based on the analysis of either semi-structured or narrative interviews with victims of microaggression. The last article of this thematic issue, by Scheibelhofer et al. (2023), explores methodological reflexivity in the research process itself, highlighting a variety of discursive positioning strategies employed by interviewees to avoid anticipated discrimination.

Taken together, these articles show the pervasiveness and persistence of different forms of racism in various national contexts, even in those considered multicultural societies. Moreover, the choice to adopt a qualitative approach allows for a deeper understanding of how the constant experience of often hidden and pervasive racist attitudes not only undermines the possibility of recognition and inclusion but alludes to a very problematic and partial decolonization process and signals the persistence of (neo)colonial relations between countries of the global north and those of the Global South.

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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