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The Pseudo-Science of Microaggressions

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A tsunami of microaggressions has swamped the country from east to west, with students posting their tales on social media and university websites. There are so many, many cruel statements, wrong words, routine insensitivities, and degrading silences—those "brief and everyday slights, insults, indignities and denigrating messages" sent by well-intentioned members of the dominant culture. Whites are "unaware of the hidden messages being communicated," while overtly denying that they are racists.[1]

The microaggressions spectacle differs from that of a previous politically correct era, where well-known conservatives were widely picketed and speaker invitations revoked. Hostile actions toward conservative public figures continue, but today the microaggression targets include liberal and progressive faculty and administrators who have fostered their growth and capitulated to them.[2] "Microaggressions" now cover race, gender, disability, LGBTQ, religion, class, and every other category of "social justice." But in this essay, I focus on "racial microaggressions" (where the concept and theory originated) and the quality of the research behind it.

[1]Derald Wing Sue, "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Is Subtle Bias Harmless?" *Psychology Today*, October 5, 2010, https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201010/racial-microaggressions-in-everyday-life.

[2]See Heather MacDonald, "The Microaggression Farce: The Latest Campus Fad, Which Sees Racism Everywhere, Will Create a New Generation of Victims," *City Journal* (Autumn 2014), http://www.city-journal.org/html/microaggression-farce-13679.html; Catherine Rampell, "Liberal Intolerance Is on the Rise on America's College Campuses," Opinion, *Washington Post*, February 11, 2016, http://wpo.st/AbNI2; Ruth Marcus, "College Is Not for Coddling," Opinion, *Washington Post*, November 10, 2015, http://wpo.st/RbNI2.

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Decline of (Overt) Racism

Ironically, public attitudes show a substantial drop in overt racial prejudice over the past sixty years, shifting significantly toward the ideal of racial equality. The overwhelming majority of whites reject the idea of separate schools, segregated housing, and job discrimination. A significant majority favors interracial marriage, and a majority of American voters chose Barack Obama for president in 2008.[3]

Despite the decline of overt racism, some academics, media commentators, social activists, and government officials argue that racism is still out there. Racial bias is no longer overt: *it is widespread, but unconscious*. Unconscious bias explains the gaps in education, housing, income, employment, health, and social mobility generally. Moreover, it is the microaggressions of daily life, committed by even the most well-intentioned, that is the source of the inequality. There is even a microaggressions blog site—where people post their "received microaggressions"—with thousands of storytellers and followers.[4]

Microaggressions

The concept of microaggressions was put forth by academics, so it is no surprise that the primary search for microaggressions takes place on the college campus. The concept is not new. Harvard professor of education and psychiatry Chester M. Pierce created the term in 1970 to describe the countless slights, denigrations, and dismissive behaviors inflicted upon black Americans by others every day.[5]

Only in the 2000s, however, has the concept spread rapidly across higher education.[6] So this development followed naturally on the heels of higher education's public commitment to institutional diversity, as seen, for example, in the amici briefs supporting affirmative action in higher education (*Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Grutter v. Bollinger* in support of the University of Michigan in

[3]In their review of survey questions on race over the past decades, University of Michigan sociologists Maria Krysan and Nakesha Faison conclude that survey responses moved from showing significant white opposition in the 1950s to one of universal acceptance. "Racial Attitudes in America: A Brief Summary of the Updated Data," *African American Voice*, December 2012, http://www.africanamericanvoice.net/archives/AAVhowardrequestOCT2013/African%20American%20Voice%20December%202012_webview.pdf.

[4]"Microaggressions: Power, Privilege, and Everyday Life," The Microaggressions Project, http://www.microaggressions.com/.

[5]Sue, "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life," xvi.

[6]Ibid.

2003, and in 2013/2016 in *Fisher v. Texas* in support of the University of Texas).[7] With the public commitment to diversity came the desire to create supportive environments.

The most famous microaggressions scholar is Derald Wing Sue, professor of education and psychology at Columbia University's Teachers College. "With over 150 publications under his belt he is the most cited Multicultural Scholar today," according to the American Psychological Association (APA).[8]

Throughout the years, Sue and his colleagues have developed a list of racial microaggressions,[9] for example:

- when whites say they are color-blind
- when whites support meritocracy
- when whites say that America should be a melting pot
- when an employer says that the most qualified person should get the job
- when a white teacher does not call on non-white students
- when a white supervisor turns away mid-conversation from a non-white employee
- when the workplace or classroom excludes decorations or literature from an employee's or student's racial group[10]
- when Asian Americans are asked where they were born
- when whites say, "I don't see race" or "We are all human beings"[11]
- when whites claim, "I have black friends," and so on

But this list is hardly exhaustive.

[7]Gratz v. Bollinger, 539 U.S. 244 (2003); Grutter v. Bollinger, 539 U.S. 306 (2003); Fisher v. University of Texas, 570 U.S. (2013); Fisher v. University of Texas, 579 U.S. (2016).

[8]"Featured Psychologist: Derald Wing Sue, PhD," American Psychological Association, n.d., www.apa.org/pi/oema/resources/ethnicity-health/psychologists/derald-wing-sue.aspx. Sue's books and articles include "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice," with Christina M. Capodilupo et al., *American Psychologist* 62, no. 4 (2007): 271–86, http://www.cpedv.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/how_to_be_an_effective_ally-lessons_learned_microaggressions.pdf; "Microaggression, Marginality, and Oppression: An Introduction," in *Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics, and Impact*, ed. Derald Wing Sue (New York: Wiley, 2010), 3–24; and *Microaggressions and Everyday Life* (New York: Wiley, 2010). See also his videos on everyday microaggressions: "Derald Wing Sue," Teachers College, Columbia University, YouTube video, 2:38, May 12, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_lQNI9T6vs; "Implicit Bias and Microaggressions: The Macro Impact of Small Acts," talk by Professor Derald Wing Sue, Teachers College, Columbia University, at Stanford University, YouTube video, 50:48, January 20, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nrw6Bf5weTM; and Derald Wing Sue, "How Unintentional but Insidious Bias Can Be the Most Harmful," interview by Charlayne Hunter-Gault, *PBS News Hour*, November 13, 2015, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/how-unintentional-but-insidious-bias-can-be-the-most-harmful/.

[9]Sue et al., "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications," 276–77.

[10]Ibid., 274.

[11]Hence the objection to "All lives matter."

What is significant is the notion that unconscious microaggressions are "potentially more harmful because of their invisibility." They are more damaging than the overt acts of wearing a swastika or the hood and robes of the KKK.[12]

Microaggression theory has, of course, expanded beyond race to include women, LGBT individuals, the disabled, and multiple-identity groups (e.g., Asian American gay male).[13]

Microaggressions and Critical Theory

There are many problems with studies of microaggressions, technical and conceptual. To start, its advocates are informed by the academic tradition of critical theory. Critical theory as applied to race (i.e., critical race theory) is based on the notion that racism is embedded in the American system—social, cultural, political, and economic. Pervasive in the dominant (white) culture, racism is ubiquitous and explains social phenomena in terms of white privilege and white power, and oppression of people who are not white:

> [C]ritical race theory has provided a means for challenging Eurocentric epistemologies and dominant ideologies such as beliefs in objectivity and meritocracy that has [*sic*] masked the operation of racism.[14]

Another prominent microaggressions researcher, Daniel Solórzano, a UCLA professor of social science and comparative education in the Graduate School of Education and Information and professor of Chicana and Chicano studies and women's studies, writes of how the principles of critical race theory explicitly inform his work. He and his students make race the central role of study along with its "intersectionality with other forms of subordination."[15]

[12]Sue, "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life."

[13]Derald Wing Sue, "Microaggressions: More than Just Race," *Psychology Today*, November 17, 2010, https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201011/microaggressions-more-just-race.

[14]Derald Wing Sue et al., "Racial Microaggressions and the Asian American Experience," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 13, no. 1 (2007): 73. See also Daniel Solórzano, Miguel Ceja, and Tara Yosso, "Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experience of African American College Students," *Journal of Negro Education* 69 (Winter-Spring 2000): 60–73; Daniel G. Solórzano, "Critical Race Theory, Race and Gender Microaggressions, and the Experience of Chicana and Chicano Scholars," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 11, no. 1 (1998): 121–36; Tara Yosso, William Smith, Miguel Ceja, and Daniel Solórzano, "Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate for Latina/o Undergraduates," *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 4 (December 2009): 659–91; Lindsay Pérez Huber and Daniel Solórzano, "Racial Microaggressions as a Tool for Critical Race Research," *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* 18, no. 3 (2015): 297–320.

[15]Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso, "Critical Race Theory," 63.

Critical race theory has several radical features: a direct challenge to the conventional socio-political-legal culture (or what the theorists call "the dominant ideology"), the central place of a "social justice" commitment in research, "the centrality of experiential knowledge," and "the transdisciplinary perspective."[16]

The problem is, when Sue, Solórzano, and other critical race researchers reject "Eurocentric epistemologies" and "objectivity" *they reject the methodology and standards of modern science* (e.g., use of a comparison group, sufficient sample size, unbiased questions, replicability of results, use of modern statistical analysis). Instead, critical race theorists value "experiential knowledge" (e.g., the narrative). Such storytelling enables the implementation of a highly politicized agenda and places a social change agenda above objective social science research. It also makes it significantly easier to "prove" the prevalence of microaggressions on campus.

Most important, the critical race paradigm logically and unreflectively results in a one-way analysis pervasive in these studies, which all start with this premise: that microaggressions can only be perceived by non-whites but are only committed by whites. In other words, whites' perceptions are invalid.

This one-way racial framework accounts for the serious technical shortcomings in critical race theory studies—biased interview questions, reliance on narrative and small numbers of respondents, problems of reliability, issues of replicability, and ignoring alternative explanations. I discuss each of these issues below.

Technical Issues

Biased interview questions. Conventional protocol is for the researcher to be unbiased in conducting the interview by properly phrasing questions. These race researchers have no problem making it perfectly clear what they intend to show.

In their interview protocol, for example, Sue et al. ask their focus group members to respond to the following:

- What are some subtle ways that people treat you differently because of your race?
- Describe a situation in which you felt uncomfortable, insulted, or disrespected by a comment that had racial overtones.
- Think of some of the stereotypes that exist about your racial group. How have others subtly expressed their stereotypical beliefs about you?

[16] Ibid., 61.

- In what ways have others made you feel "put down" because of your cultural values or communication style?
- In what ways have people subtly expressed that "the White way is the right way"?[17]

After such prompting by the interviewer, respondents would be more likely to find what the researcher is looking for, i.e., stories of whites committing microaggressions against minority respondents.

Very small number of study respondents. In general, microaggressions studies are based on very small qualitative focus groups or one-on-one interviews. For example, in 2008, Derald Wing Sue and colleagues used a focus group of thirteen respondents in one study, on black Americans, and ten in another, on Asian Americans, to demonstrate the importance of Sue's taxonomy of racial microaggressions.[18] In 2011, Sue et al. interviewed eight faculty members for a study showing that racial microaggressions directed against the professor or student who was non-white instigated difficult dialogue, and that all eight faculty felt an internal struggle between their own feelings and professional conduct teaching the class.[19] Daniel Solórzano and his colleagues interviewed twelve Chicana/o academics in a 1998 study and thirty-four blacks in a 2000 study on their experiences with racial microaggressions and how critical race theory frames the studies of racial microaggressions, while his study of Chicana/o academics showed how the concept of racial microaggression should expand beyond blacks.[20] University of Michigan professor of education Tara Yosso et al. led focus groups of thirty-seven Latina/o students for a 2009 study on types of racial microaggressions experienced most frequently by Latina/o college students.[21] In 2011, Lindsay Pérez Huber, assistant professor in the Social and Cultural Analysis master's program in the College of Education at California State University, Long Beach, interviewed twenty female students, originally from Mexico, who were enrolled in a California university. Informed by what she terms a "Chicana feminist epistemology," Huber had them recall their primary

[17]Sue et al., "Racial Microaggressions and Asian American Experience," 80–81.

[18]Derald Wing Sue, Christina M. Capodilupo, and Aisha M.B. Holder, "Racial Microaggressions in the Life Experience of Black Americans," *Professional Psychology: Research & Practice* 39 (2008): 329–336; Sue et al., "Racial Microaggressions and Asian American Experience," 72–81.

[19]Derald Wing Sue et al. "Racial Dialogues: Challenges Faculty of Color Face in the Classroom," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 17, no. 3 (2011): 331–40.

[20]Solórzano, "Critical Race Theory, Race and Gender Microaggressions"; Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso, "Critical Race Theory."

[21]Yosso et al., "Critical Race Theory and Climate for Latina/o Undergraduates." The students said racial microaggressions were experienced most often in the form of racist jokes.

and secondary school experiences in terms of what she labels "racist-nativist microaggressions," that is, the primacy of the English language and the limitations placed upon these students who could not communicate fully or could not defend themselves to English-speaking teachers as a result.[22]

While such small studies using focus groups or interviews are often necessary when developing a new theory in the social sciences, they are not typically viewed as sufficient evidence for accepted science, much less for policy. In the study of microaggressions, there are only a few recent studies using samples of 200 or more and relying on current quantitative methods (discussed later in this article).

Bias and opinion conformity when using only focus groups. Focus group research also runs the risk of introducing bias through peer and authority pressure and conformity of response. All focus groups are researcher-created artificial gatherings, subjected to small-group dynamics of peer pressure, the need to please the authority figure (usually the interviewer), and the conscious and unconscious biases of the researcher. One or two participants may end up controlling the whole group.

In these race-based focus groups, bias contamination would pose even more of a problem, since the groups deal openly with the difficult topic of race and the guiding hypothesis that whites routinely inflict microaggressions on non-whites. The focus group structure, given the controversial topic of race, would *inherently* stifle dissent.

Administration policy as constraint to speak freely. Microaggression focus group studies are conducted overwhelmingly on campus. Of roughly thirty-five focus group/interview-based studies from 2007 to 2013 reviewed for this paper, twenty-seven were conducted on university campuses. As such, the stories and comments are further contaminated by administration policy. At minimum, any student, faculty member, or employee could be turned in and face administrative inquiry, or worse, should they give an "unapproved" answer. What are the consequences if a focus group member challenges others? Can a respondent publicly reject the notion, for example, that the phrase, "America is a melting pot," is a case of microaggressions? What about a respondent saying that those who get upset over the words and slights should "just get over it"?[23] There is implicit coercion to give the "correct" response.

Problem of reliability of findings. "Reliability" in the scientific realm refers to the consistency of a measure—that is, the extent to which repeated conditions result

[22]Lindsay Pérez Huber, "Discourses of Racist Nativism in California Public Education: English Dominance as Racist Nativist Microaggressions," *Educational Studies* 47, no. 4 (2011): 379–401.

[23]These responses are cited by Sue as microaggressions. See Sue et al., "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications," and "Derald Wing Sue," Teachers College, YouTube video.

in roughly the same outcomes. No measure can guarantee identical results time after time, but the APA, the American Educational Research Association, and the National Council on Measurement in Education have established a reliability standard as a test-retest correlation of 0.70 if a test is said to be scientifically reliable.

Microaggression research until recently has been a qualitative endeavor. As such, the APA standards of reliability cannot be met. Only a handful of researchers in the last few years have produced quantitative studies of racial microaggressions, with larger samples and tests for reliability. For example, in 2012, Roosevelt University associate professor of psychology Susan R. Torres-Harding and others developed a racial microaggression scale to measure the phenomenon. University of British Columbia associate professor of psychology and special education Sterett H. Mercer and colleagues developed a similar scale in 2011, as did Kevin Nadal, associate professor of psychology at John Jay College of Criminal Justice.[24]

All three studies had large samples (Torres-Harding had 406, Mercer 385, and Nadal 443) and all created racial-ethnic microaggression scales that were found to be reliable. Despite the large samples and statistical tests, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, psychologist Gloria Wong and associates observed that the studies were based on self-reporting and recall of past instances, not contemporaneous diary-keeping, making it impossible to separate out the immediate versus long-term versus delayed effects of microaggressions. Moreover, they note, a respondent's current psychological state affects recall of past events.[25]

Critical race theorists reject such technical concerns. But this lack of evidence of reliability means that Sue's list of racial microaggressions has not been proven. There is no proof that *any* of these findings is reliable.

Problem of replicability of findings. Closely related to reliability is the issue of replication. Would a different researcher with the same design and procedures arrive at identical findings? Replication studies, even in mainstream social science, are, for the most part, not conducted.

And when replication studies are done, half the published studies cannot be replicated. Columnist Daniel Engber wrote in *Slate* on the trouble with replication in cancer research: "After reviewing the estimated prevalence of each of these flaws and

[24]Susan R. Torres-Harding, Alejandro L. Andrade Jr., and Crist E. Romero Diaz, "The Racial Microaggressions Scale (RMAS): A New Scale to Measure Experiences of Racial Microaggressions in People of Color," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 18, no. 2 (April 2012): 153–64; Sterett H. Mercer, Virgil Zeigler-Hill, Marion Wallace, and DeMarquis M. Hayes, "Development and Initial Validation of the Inventory of Microaggressions against Black Individuals," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 58, no. 4 (October 2011): 457–469; Kevin Nadal, "The Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS): Construction, Reliability, and Validity," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 58, no. 4 (2011): 470–80.

[25]Gloria Wong et al., "The What, the Why, and the How: A Review of Racial Microaggressions Research in Psychology," *Race and Social Problems* 6, no. 2 (June 2014): 188–200; 192–93.

fault-lines in biomedical literature, Freedman and his co-authors guessed that fully half of all results rest on shaky ground, and might not be replicable in other labs."[26]

In psychology, the replication failure rates are even higher. In 2015, a study hit the social sciences with all the destructive force of a tsunami. University of Virginia psychology professor Brian Nosek and 270 of his colleagues across the nation replicated over one hundred published psychology studies. Only thirty-six out of the one hundred replications got the same results as the originals. Moreover, replication effects were half the size of the originals. That is, the magnitude of the difference between control and experimental groups was cut in half when the studies were redone.[27]

Is there any reason to expect that replication studies of racial microaggressions would yield better results?

Alternative explanations: Intensity of racial identification. Anthony D. Ong, associate professor of human development at Cornell and associate professor of gerontology in medicine at Weill Cornell Medical College, and his colleagues had 152 Asian American undergraduate respondents complete daily inventories regarding instances of racial microaggressions, positive and negative feelings, and their physical symptoms (e.g., headache). Statistical analysis showed that both greater instances of daily microaggressions and more microaggressions on average predicted increases in somatic symptoms and negative feelings (e.g., depression).[28]

Ong et al.'s study of Asian American students also raised some interesting paradoxes. The researchers actually introduced a control variable (ethnic identification) and found that a major mitigating factor was how strongly the respondent identified as Asian American. *The more salient the ethnic identification, the more likely a student would report microaggressions*, and report with greater frequency negative somatic and psychological conditions.

Other research also found that ethnic identity exacerbates perceptions of racial discrimination and negative affect. In a quantitative study conducted in 2010 by Ong and Anthony L. Burrow, assistant professor of human development and director of the Purpose and Identity Processes Laboratory at Cornell, "[T]he daily

[26]Daniel Engber, "Cancer Research Is Broken: There Is a Replication Crisis in Biomedicine and No One Knows How Deep It Runs," *Slate*, April 19, 2016, http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/future_tense/2016/04/biomedicine_facing_a_worse_replication_crisis_than_the_one_plaguing_psychology.html.

[27]The causes include publication bias, where only confirmatory findings would be published, researchers collect data only when preliminary findings indicate significant results, and researchers report only those findings that reach statistical significance. See Open Science Collaboration, "Estimating the Reproducibility of Psychological Science," *Science* 349, no. 6251 (August 28, 2015), http://science.sciencemag.org/content/349/6251/aac4716.full?ijkey=1xgFoCnpLswpk&keytype=ref&siteid=sci.

[28]Anthony D. Ong et al., "Racial Microaggressions and Daily Well-Being Among Asian Americans," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 60, no. 2 (2013): 188–99.

association between racial discrimination and psychological distress was stronger for individuals high in racial centrality. Specifically, racial centrality exacerbated the effects of daily racial discrimination on negative affect and depression."[29]

In another 2010 study, Torres and Ong found an opposite phenomenon: Latino/a ethnic identity exploration was found to increase the effect of microaggressions on next-day depression, but Latino/a ethnic identity commitment mitigated the impact of microaggressions.[30] Torres and Ong hypothesize that ethnic identity commitment for Latinos may reflect the subject's being embedded in a strong family and extensive social network, which acts as a cultural and social buffer, reducing the intensity and direction of negative psychological effects when encountering microaggressions.

"Findings" Versus Forcing: A Vicious Cycle

All of these "findings" were embraced by colleges and universities, even before any of Sue and his microaggressions colleagues' claims could be subjected to serious social scientific investigation and critique.

But given the commitment to diversity within academe, this was to be expected. Universities, except where legally forbidden, have policies of racial preferences in admission. In order to provide an inclusive and diverse environment, college administrators have taken the microaggressions agenda to heart—racial/ethnic safe spaces are the institutional response to claims of rampant or covert racism on campus. It is a way for colleges to help black, Hispanic, and Asian students find a place where they can be free from whites' infliction of racial microaggressions. Many colleges and universities have race-based, social justice activist groups on campus, along with race-based dorms and dining groups, administrative offices of diversity, and faculty-student-run race-based centers for social activism. In some cases, "diversity consultants" are brought in to work with psychological counselors, campus administrators, general academic advisors, and dorm heads.[31]

[29]Anthony L. Burrow and Anthony D. Ong, "Racial Identity as a Moderator of Daily Exposure and Reactivity to Racial Discrimination," *Self and Identity* 9, no. 4 (2010): 383. The study consisted of 174 black doctoral and graduate students.

[30]Lucas Torres and Anthony D. Ong, "A Daily Diary Investigation of Latino Ethnic Identity, Discrimination, and Depression," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 16, no. 4 (October 2010): 561–68. This is a sample of ninety-one Latinos/as, 79 percent female, drawn from student and professional organizations, with a mean age of twenty-nine.

[31]In a well-publicized microaggressions case, a prominent scholar of multiculturalism and education patted the arm of a doctoral student during a heated graduate thesis class, sparking complaints and protests. The students in the class, led by the complaining doctoral candidate, had a list of microaggression grievances (including the professor correcting their grammar and forcing them to use the *Chicago Manual of Style*). Protest rallies occurred, a committee was formed, and the professor resigned. *The complainant later became a national diversity consultant.* See MacDonald, "Microaggression Farce."

But there is nothing in the current research to show that such programs work. I suspect most fail to create greater feelings of inclusion. Research suggests they create more alienation and sense of apartness. The recent large-scale quantitative studies suggest that increased focus on ethnic/racial identity exacerbates the problems they are supposed to address. In other words, "social justice" and diversity programs may actually backfire, creating less inclusion, more polarization, and more findings of unconscious racism.[32] But this in turn leads to another round of more funding, more research, more diversity staff, more racial safe spaces, more training, more diversity consultants—and on and on and on.

[32]"After recent protests, universities are scrambling to rapidly expand their diversity programs that will only heighten racial tensions. There are better paths to racial justice in higher education," say two social psychologists from major universities. Jonathan Haidt and Lee Jussim, "Hard Truths about Race on Campus," *Wall Street Journal*, May 6, 2016, http://www.wsj.com/articles/hard-truths-about-race-on-campus-1462544543.