

Levels of Engagement: Situating Discourse

An excerpt from Association for Women in Psychology presentation, 2007

Sandra M. Pacheco, Ph.D.

It is not uncommon for two people to engage in a conversation on race, class, gender or sexuality that are actually two separate conversations. For example, though we *understand* that our lived experiences inform our knowledge of racism and other social inequalities, we do not necessarily notice *how* these “lived experiences” (positionality) inform “what we know” (epistemologies) about race. Consequently, we enter into our conversations on race from different *levels of engagement*. Our experiences, even when seemingly similar, can unexpectedly lead to difficult and/or contentious conversations. One of the most common examples of this in the classroom is when a white person becomes defensive about discussions related to white privilege. Discussions about white privilege are informed by the **macro-level**, but the person’s verbally reaction is coming from the **micro-level**.

As an example please see Dr. Pacheco’s experience below:

*As a Mexicana who had lived most of my life in East L.A. until graduate school, I had minimal experience with racism, especially institutional racism. Most of my experiences with racism were “isolated” incidences from what I imagined were just “ignorant” people. Consequently, my experiences that informed my understanding and conversations about racism were predominately situated in the **meso-level**. A conversation at that time may have included, “I really don’t experience racism.” How did the **meso-level** inform my experiences of racism? First, growing up in a predominately (almost exclusively) Latino community I was exposed to very little racism. Second, I could count on seeing people that looked like me in various places of business and positions of authority.*

*However, as I began to participate in the broader society and moved out of my community, my experiences of institutionalized racism became more pronounced. Living in Santa Cruz, California in the late 80s- early 90s while in graduate school, was now marked by cultural isolation. I would rarely see anyone that looked like me. In this new context, what had once been isolated experiences of racism were now systemic patterns of behavior that **repeated** in **multiple** scenarios. It often included assumptions about my academic status such as, “oh you are so lucky... you were affirmative action so you didn’t have to worry about your GREs or grades” or “you’re really working on a doctorate; do you mean a Masters?” Because of these new and re-occurring experiences, my conversations about racism were now predominately situated on the **macro-level**.*

*What if these were two separate persons having a conversation with one another about their experiences with racism? Imagine how the person coming from the **meso** level might unintentionally minimize or simplify the experience of the person coming from the **macro-level** with, “oh they are just ignorant people.” Instant clash of*

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*epistemologies informed by different positionalities! Same topic-two different conversations! One is having a **macro-level** informed conversation while the other is having a **meso-level** informed conversation. How might the **meso-level** statement, “oh they’re just ignorant people” impact the person speaking from the **macro-level**?*

Consider the following statements related to race and racism. How is each conversation or statement situated? Which level is informing their discourse?

A working class White male regarding white privilege: “No one ever did anything for me. I had to bust my ass to get where I am. Money is the issue. Look at Oprah!”

Affluent Asian American woman responding: “it doesn’t matter how much money I make; I’m still the bad driver first or some other stereotype.”

African American male to African American female: “You get to be the strong Black woman; I’m always the scary criminal!”

White male regarding marginalization: “You are all talking about racism; try coming from an abusive home. I’ll tell you about oppression and marginalization!”

Latino male from Greenfield, CA to classroom: “I don’t know what all this racism is about; get over it.”

White female: “I agree. I don’t see people as some race. I just see us all as humans, part of a greater divine.”

To Ponder:

What “level” is each person speaking from? How are experiences of privilege and marginalization relative? How can we work to validate these experiences but still reach common ground? What can you do to be aware of these dynamics in the midst of a difficult conversation? How can we learn to hold multiple “truths?” How can we learn to hold out life experiences with compassion?

Strategies for Communicating

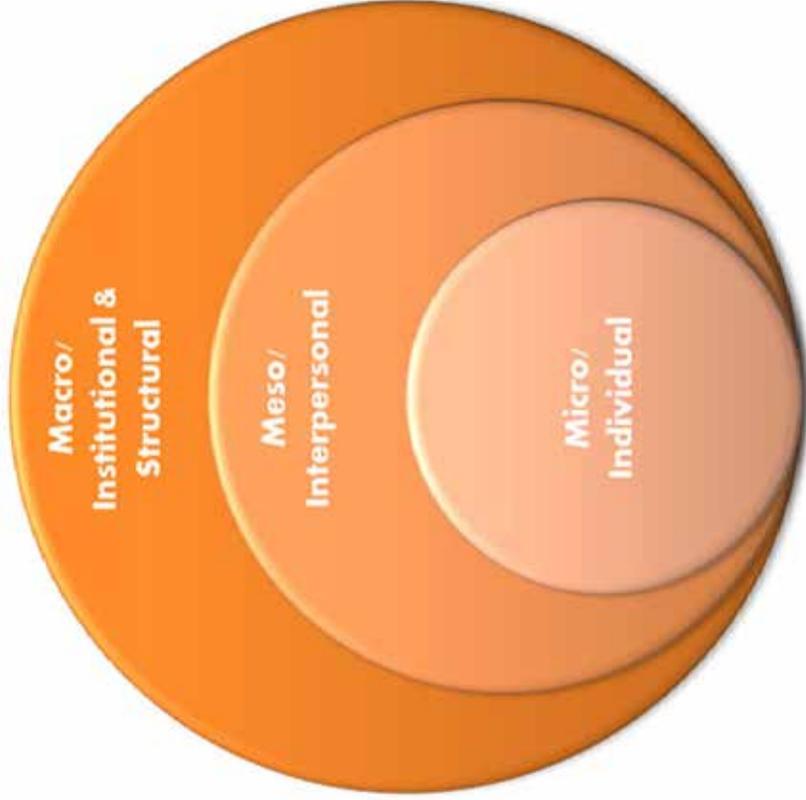
- Notice how you have situated your discourse related to diversity issues. Keeping the macro (institutional, systemic, social, political, historical and colonial impact) level present is important.
- Recognize that similar social locations do not result in similar experiences (race intersects with other aspects of our identities).
- Create space for each other’s journey when dialoguing within your cultural group or across groups.
- Work toward understanding and sharing “positioned” experiences in the context of social inequality.

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Levels of Racism



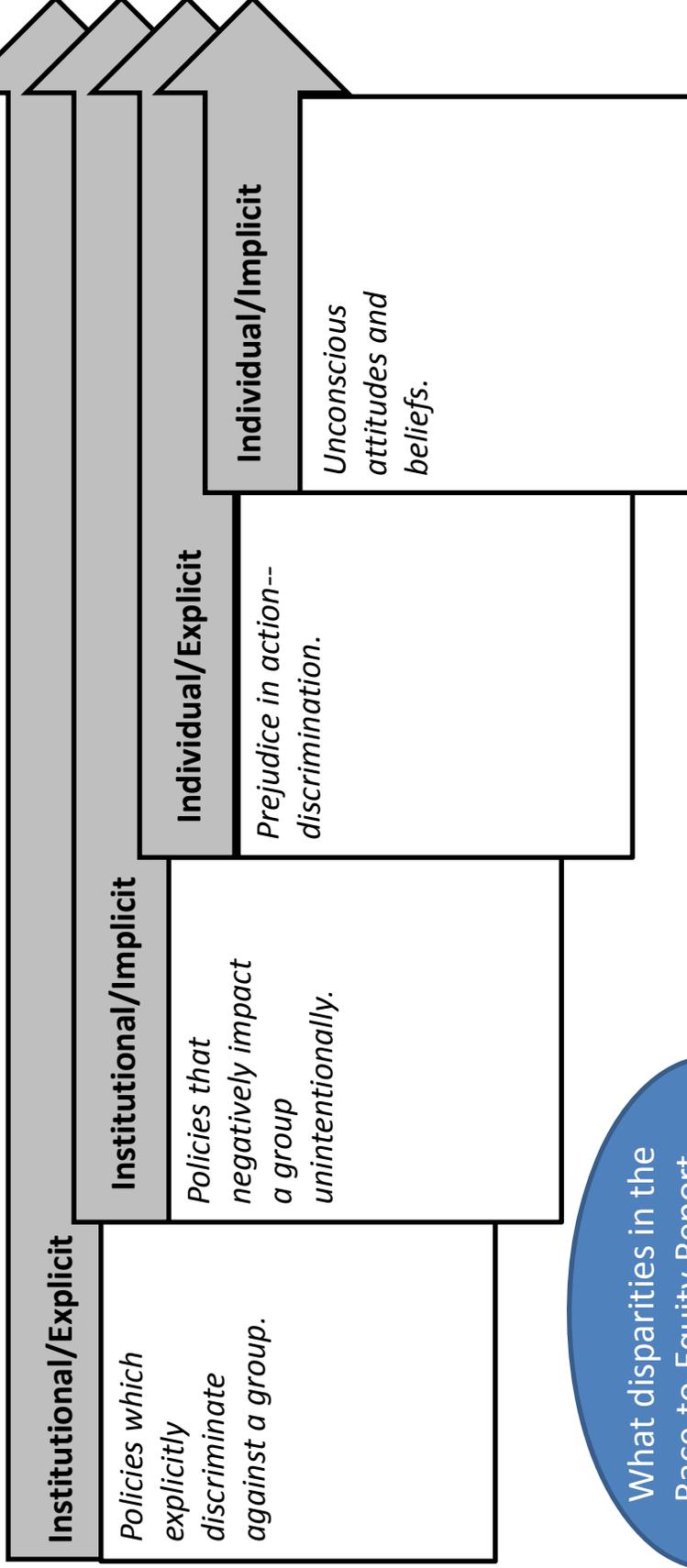
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	Definition	Appropriate Interventions
MICRO	Individual/Internalized Racism —personal and private attitudes and beliefs about race influenced by the dominant culture. Manifestations include: race-based xenophobia (based on fear and ignorance of people unlike yourself), internalized oppression (acceptance of negative stereotypes and deflated images about yourself and those in your racial group), and internalized white privilege (a well-developed sense of entitlement; or acceptance of inflated/superior images of yourself and those in your racial group).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attitude change, personal development. Overcoming internalized oppression, counseling, mental health support.
MESO	Interpersonal Racism —Public expressions of racial prejudice, hate, bias and bigotry between individuals. Once private beliefs come into interaction with others, the racism is now in the interpersonal realm.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diversity & racial justice trainings. Cultural awareness/Intercultural activities
MACRO	Institutional Racism —Unequal impacts and outcomes based on race, produced by key societal institutions such as the health care, housing, education and employment systems. These institutions are racist when the impact of their policies, practices and power is to advantage and disadvantage whole groups of people along racial lines. When and individual acts within the contact of an institution, and help to perpetuate these racial inequalities, these actions are no longer just interpersonal actions, but rather institutional actions (thus, when an a police officer treats a member of the public with racial bias—such as giving white people the benefit of the doubt while assuming people of color are guilty—this action is institutional racism since the police officer is acting as a representative of a law enforcement institution). Unequal impacts based on race are the measure of institutional racism, regardless of whether of not the disproportionate and discriminatory affects are intentional. Institutional racism is not just carried out by white people, but also people of color while acting in in certain capacities just “just doing their jobs” and implementing decisions that have negative effects on people of color.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Power Analysis Advocacy & direct action campaigns. Focus on equity and reducing racial disparities. Equity Impact Assessments for policy change and development.
MACRO	Structural Racism in the US is the normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics—historical, cultural, institutional, and interpersonal—that routinely advantage whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color. Structural racism is more difficult to locate in particular institutions because it involves the reinforcing effects of multiple institutional and cultural norms (past and present) continually reproducing old and new forms of racism. Structural Racism is the most profound and pervasive for of racism — and other forms of racism emerge from structural racism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on systems change Use an intersectional issue analysis Multi-racial movement building and organizing.

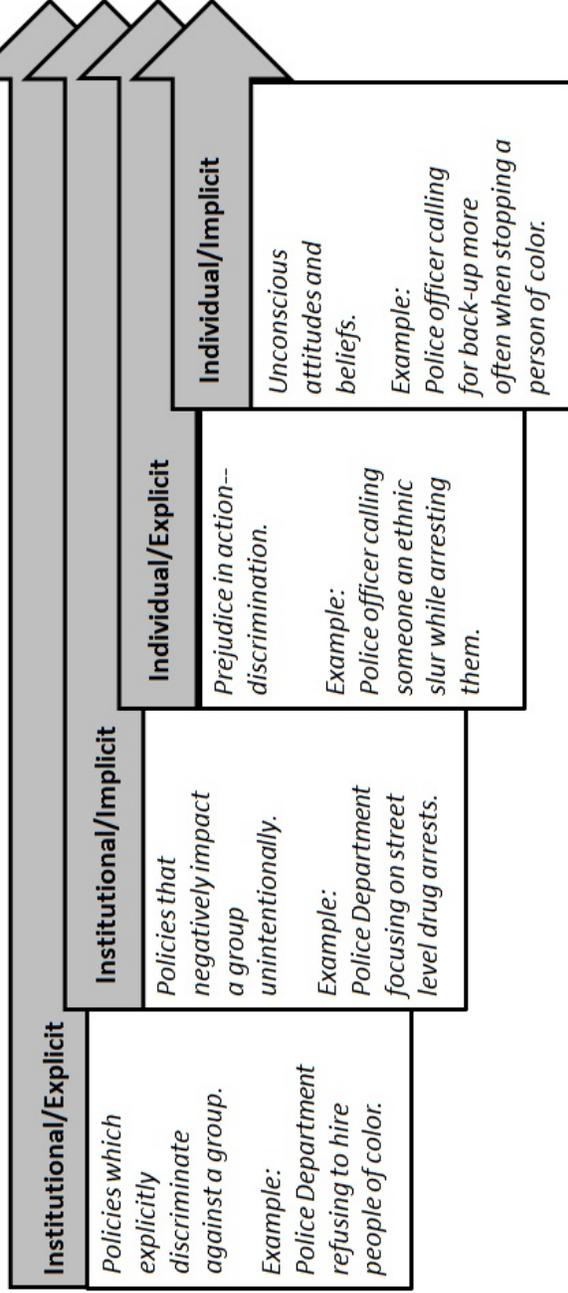
Explicit and Implicit Bias



What disparities in the Race-to-Equity Report might be a result of the examples listed above?

Much contemporary racism occurs without intention or malice. Implicit bias explains how subtle racism can have significant impact. In institutions, the bias of individuals is replicated through collective decisions & actions. It becomes compounded unless it is consciously counteracted.

Explicit and Implicit Bias



Other examples of implicit bias:



Resulting Disparities

As a result of these different levels of implicit & explicit bias, we see disparities in the Dane County Criminal Justice System, such as:

Dane County African American youth were 25 times more likely to be admitted to the state's secure correctional facility than a white youth. *

Dane County arrest rates for Black adults was 8.1 times higher than for White adults.*

Dane County incarceration rates are 22.5 times as high for Black adults as for White adults.*

**as reported by Race to Equity*

Dropped Out or Pushed Out?

Narrator: A recent report informed the community that in 2011, only half of Black students graduated from Madison Public Schools, as compared to 84% of White students. Gayl, who is African American, and her boyfriend Diego, are raising their child, who they had when they were fifteen. She lives with her parents at Wexford Ridge, a subsidized housing project, and attends Memorial High School. Due to occupancy standards, Diego cannot live with them. Diego, who is Mexican, recently dropped out of Memorial. He works evenings at a gas station near her school, which allows him to care for their daughter during the day while Gayl continues with school. He meets them at school for lunch each day so that they can have family time.

Recently, Diego was arrested for selling Marijuana, which he justified as a way to provide necessary income for his family since his job only pays minimum wage. Gayl is struggling to both maintain her grades and keep her attendance up due to childcare needs. Gayl is in a meeting with a school support staff person, Jessica, who is white, and her favorite teacher Carlos, who is Bolivian. Carlos is one of the few teachers of color at her school.

Jessica: I wanted to start by saying what a strength it is that you have stayed in school, most girls in your position would have dropped out sooner. Unfortunately, we are here today to talk about your violations of the District's attendance policy. Once again, you have had more than seven unexcused absences this past month. We may have to refer you to juvenile court for a truancy petition. This will require that you go to truancy court.

Carlos: Gayl, I would like for you to stay in school, but your absences are affecting our classrooms and your grades. It seems like you need to either get your act together or consider dropping out of school. Have you ever thought about getting a GED instead?

Gayl: I know I need a real high school diploma. How can I attend truancy court; I barely have time to make it to school? Diego and I are working hard to make sure that I graduate. I just have one more year. Don't you believe that I am smart enough to do it?

Carlos: From the recent thing I heard about Diego, I fear that he may be more part of your problem than a solution for you.

Narrator: Gayl leaves the meeting feeling defeated. She runs into Brandon, a white student who is a leader in student government.

Brandon: Wow, I was bummed to hear about Diego! Without him none of us would have access to all that great stuff we get from him. How is he doing?

Gayl: His court date is this afternoon so he will finally get out of Juvenile Detention. Hopefully he will still have his job. It looks like I may have to drop out now, seems I just don't have what it takes to graduate high school.

Brandon: I am sure you can, it just takes more self-discipline and determination. Try harder, Gayl, it is definitely a lot of work. If I can support you in tutoring, let me know.

Gayl: Thanks, but I am already part of the youth tutoring program with Schools of Hope. It is great when I can get there; I just need more childcare so I can go.

Narrator: After school Gayl hurries downtown to meet her parents and Diego at his court hearing. Afterwards, she and Diego are deciding how to move forward.

Diego: This is impossible! It is my first offense so they say they let me off easy. But they gave me a SODA- it means "stay out of drug area"- and I can't go to a three block area where I was arrested or I will violate my parole. The three blocks include where the school and my job are.