Racial Trauma, Microaggressions, and Becoming Racially Innocuous: The Role of Acculturation and White Supremacist Ideology

[William Ming Liu](https://psycnet-apa-org.ezproxy.lib.swin.edu.au/search/results?latSearchType=a&term=Liu%2C%20William%20Ming), [Rossina Zamora Liu](https://psycnet-apa-org.ezproxy.lib.swin.edu.au/search/results?latSearchType=a&term=Liu%2C%20Rossina%20Zamora" \t "_blank), [Yunkyoung Loh Garrison](https://psycnet-apa-org.ezproxy.lib.swin.edu.au/search/results?latSearchType=a&term=Garrison%2C%20Yunkyoung%20Loh" \t "_blank), [Ji Youn Cindy Kim](https://psycnet-apa-org.ezproxy.lib.swin.edu.au/search/results?latSearchType=a&term=Kim%2C%20Ji%20Youn%20Cindy), [Laurence Chan](https://psycnet-apa-org.ezproxy.lib.swin.edu.au/search/results?latSearchType=a&term=Chan%2C%20Laurence), [Yu C. S. Ho](https://psycnet-apa-org.ezproxy.lib.swin.edu.au/search/results?latSearchType=a&term=Ho%2C%20Yu%20C.%20S.), [Chi W. Yeung](https://psycnet-apa-org.ezproxy.lib.swin.edu.au/search/results?latSearchType=a&term=Yeung%2C%20Chi%20W.)

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**Abstract**

Acculturation theories often describe how individuals in the United States adopt and incorporate dominant cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors such as individualism and self-reliance. Theorists tend to perceive dominant cultural values as “accessible to everyone,” even though some dominant cultural values, such as preserving White racial status, are reserved for White people. In this article, the authors posit that White supremacist ideology is suffused within dominant cultural values, connecting the array of cultural values into a coherent whole and bearing with it an explicit status for White people and people of color. Consequently, the authors frame acculturation as a continuing process wherein some people of color learn explicitly via racism, microaggressions, and racial trauma about their racial positionality; White racial space; and how they are supposed to accommodate White people’s needs, status, and emotions. The authors suggest that acculturation may mean that the person of color learns to avoid racial discourse to minimize eliciting White fragility and distress. Moreover, acculturation allows the person of color to live in proximity to White people because the person of color has become unthreatening and racially innocuous. The authors provide recommendations for research and clinical practice focused on understanding the connections between ideology, racism, microaggressions and ways to create psychological healing.

**KEYWORDS:**

[acculturation](https://psycnet-apa-org.ezproxy.lib.swin.edu.au/search/results?latSearchType=k&term=acculturation), [White supremacy](https://psycnet-apa-org.ezproxy.lib.swin.edu.au/search/results?latSearchType=k&term=White%20supremacy), [microaggressions](https://psycnet-apa-org.ezproxy.lib.swin.edu.au/search/results?latSearchType=k&term=microaggressions), [racial trauma](https://psycnet-apa-org.ezproxy.lib.swin.edu.au/search/results?latSearchType=k&term=racial%20trauma), [White space](https://psycnet-apa-org.ezproxy.lib.swin.edu.au/search/results?latSearchType=k&term=White%20space)

What is the purpose of acculturation for people of color within the context of White supremacist ideology, a “racial grammar” (Bonilla-Silva, 2012, p. 174) that makes White dominance over people of color almost unnoticed? For many people of color in the United States (e.g., African American, Asian American, Latinx, and Native American), being acculturated within the larger White dominant geographic and historical context often entails laboring with the overwhelming pressure to accommodate White cultural expectations. Scholars of color like W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) described the double-consciousness of living as an African American man in America, and author Carlos Bulosan (1943) spoke similarly of the internalized self-hatred and eventual racial awakening as a brown-skin Filipino immigrant. In everyday engagements, learning to live as a person of color may mean avoiding racial discourse to minimize eliciting White people’s racial fragility (i.e., discomfort with racial discussions even in light of overt instances of terror like Flint and Ferguson and Charlottesville; DiAngelo, 2011), or it may mean participating in seemingly innocuous practices like stepping out of the way on the sidewalk for a White person to pass (Wang, Leu, & Shoda, 2011). Although these behaviors are often deemed as common, accepted social etiquette, Liu (2017) contended that people of color learn explicitly via racism, microaggressions (Kanter et al., 2017; Sue et al., 2007), and racial trauma (Carter & Muchow, 2017) about their positionality and how to accommodate White people’s needs, status, and emotions. One possible outcome of acculturation, thus, requires people of color to perpetually be aware of White cultural norms and expectations and, of importance, to subscribe to them in order to fit in and to “take care of” White people’s feelings around race, ethnicity, and culture—all the while, people of color may be forfeiting their own psychological and emotional welfare (Holoien & Shelton, 2012), internalizing stereotypes and demeaning ideological systems (Cokley, 2002; Yip, 2016), and experiencing poor health (Chae et al., 2015). Liu (2017) argued that people of color learn these cultural and social practices and continue to enact them so they may live and thrive in the United States; what they also may learn as part of this acculturative process is that the status for White people may be different from what it is for people of color.

Thus, although the “melting pot” alludes to cultural and racial inclusivity, and meritocracy promises reward for hard work, both are superordinate myths of America (Kunst, Dovidio, & Dotsch, 2018). Liu (2017) suggested that White supremacist ideology exists for the benefit of all White people but especially for those who are affluent, wealthy, and White. Moreover, the purpose of racism has been to (and continues to) focus on accumulating and/or maintaining geography and territory (e.g., housing and school segregation) and perpetuating economic inequality regarding people of color (Quillian, Pager, Hexel, & Midtbøen, 2017). To this end, a racial stratification still occurs in practically every educational, economic, and public setting (Sue, 2004), which means that for people of color, acculturation may entail learning, knowing, and being taught one’s social, cultural, political, and racial positioning, or “place,” in dominant White space (Settles, Buchanan, & Dotson, 2018). To render it in another way, if one is able to define how White culture, norms, and expectations have remained dominant through individual actions and cultural and institutional structures in the United States, then one can also understand that racial traumas and microaggressions are reasonable expected outcomes of an acculturative process that racializes people of color as “other,” “marginalized,” and “not-American” (Devos & Banaji, 2005).

At present, acculturation is commonly understood as adopting aspects of the dominant culture (e.g., values like self-reliance; Berry, 2006); however, Liu (2017) argued that current acculturation theories and research overlook the ideological underpinnings of White supremacy and the asymmetric power relationships that propel this process for people of color. Our goal in this article, thus, is to call attention to these theoretical oversights and underscore the White supremacist historical and ideological roots within American theories and research on acculturation and the psychological consequences that they have reaped (and continues to reap) on people of color. In this theoretical synthesis, we recognize the acculturative process as a form of racial trauma from living within White supremacist spaces and culture. We contend that acculturation theory is relevant even for people of color who are born in the United States because they, too, must begin accommodating themselves to White culture from the day of their birth. And finally, we extend the American Psychological Association’s current multicultural guidelines (American Psychological Association, 2017), which focus on context and a person’s ecology in relation to identities and intersectionality, to our critical interdisciplinary analyses. To guide our discussion, we ask: How might we reconceptualize acculturation experiences as shaped by racial trauma and microaggressions (e.g., microinvalidation, microinsults, microassaults; Sue et al., 2007) rather than acculturation as individual choices? Of importance, how might American psychologists more effectively address the source of racial trauma with respect to acculturation and work with clients to develop resiliency and to heal from these racism-induced wounds? By critically examining these queries, we hope to move toward a retheorizing of the acculturation process and its role and purposes in relation to microaggressions and overt racial trauma.

Our article is structured as follows. First, we offer a synthesized critique of current acculturation scholarship. Second, we describe the relationship of White cultural values, ideologies, and spaces. Third, we present ways in which researchers of acculturation and racism might acknowledge (and thus unpack) the prevalence of White supremacist ideology in White culture. We conclude with implications for more racially and culturally responsive scholarship and psychological practices. It is important to note that throughout this article, we are attempting to describe the challenges that people of color in the United States experience as part of their acculturation process rather than implying that they are victims without power and agency. To the contrary, we acknowledge that generations of communities of color have resisted and thrived in the United States; however, for the purposes of this article we explore the resulting problems when acculturation is not connected to a clear understanding of White supremacist ideology.

**Limits to Understanding Acculturation**

Ibrahim and Heuer (2016) summarized decades of acculturation research and found that studies primarily focused on immigrant groups in contact with a host culture, like the one in the United States. Much of this acculturation scholarship grew from the work of John W. Berry, a Canadian cross-cultural psychologist (Berry, 2006; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006). The most prominent among Berry’s (2006; Berry et al., 2006) theories was the fourfold acculturation strategies in which he proposed that acculturative groups undergo either (a) a preference of maintaining minority−ethnocultural heritage and identity (M) and/or (b) a preference of seeking connections to the dominant society (D; “+” means preference vs. “−” means no preference). Premised on a multicultural approach (as opposed to a mainstream minority approach), Berry’s bidirectional theory accounted for both the acculturative group’s and dominant group’s roles in enacting acculturation. Where acculturative groups may employ such strategies as *integration* (+D, +M), *assimilation* (+D, −M), *separation* (−D, +M), and *marginalization* (−D, −M) with integration as the most adaptive strategy, for instance, the dominant group may enact *multiculturalism* (+D, +M), *melting pot* (+D, −M), *segregation* (−D, +M), and *exclusion* (−D, −M) with multiculturalism as the most adaptive (Berry, 2006). Berry’s bidimensional and bidirectional conceptual frameworks facilitated researchers’ discussions of relational dynamics between a dominant group and an acculturating group. For instance, Navas and colleagues (2005) developed the relative acculturation extended model (RAEM) and addressed a broader context of acculturation to distinguish between an “ideal” situation and a “real” situation in the acculturation process for both dominant and nondominant groups.

Acculturation researchers have also posited various outcomes for individuals within a dominant cultural context. LaFromboise, Coleman, and Gerton (1993), for instance, hypothesized that people of color intentionally alternate between multiple cultures and that they may develop a bicultural competence to shift “cognitive and perceptual processes” (p. 402). A multidimensional conceptualization of acculturation encompasses values, identity, and behaviors (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010) and could measure the degree to which an individual adopts dominant cultural values as well as retaining one’s indigenous cultural identity, values, and behaviors (Concepcion, Kohatsu, & Yeh, 2013).

Yet, even for all the sophistication in acculturation theories, research connecting racism and acculturation has focused on the interpersonal perceptions of racism and race-related stress (Concepcion et al., 2013; Ibrahim & Heuer, 2016) as aspects and experiences of the acculturation process. Dominant White cultural values are not connected to White supremacy but left as neutral (i.e., nonracial) mainstream value and belief systems (Ibrahim & Heuer, 2016). These models also place a premium on personal choice, inferring that persons of color have the power to choose how they will interact with the environment and the people in it. The implied outcome of acculturation, then, is individuals’ responsibility and actions to succeed or to fail. However, as suggested, acculturation is not independent of racial and structural implications.

What may have inhibited scholars from pinpointing the connection between White cultural values with White supremacy may be due, in part, to the lack of critical wording and syntax (Ngo, 2008) describing the process of acculturation for people of color. That researchers of acculturation tend to use the passive voice in conveying their frameworks, for instance, may create a kind of theoretical ambiguity blurring aspects of racial hierarchy (Ngo, 2008). Similarly, racially innocuous and abstract terms referencing White individuals and White cultural institutions as the “larger society” (Berry, 2009, p. 366), the “receiving culture” (Schwartz et al., 2010, p. 245), the “dominant group” (Berry, 2006, p. 291), or the “native” (Navas et al., 2005, p. 27) can minimize the historic and systemic impact of acculturation on people of color—in the same way that classifications describing people of color as “ethnocultural groups” (Berry, 2006, p. 291), the “heritage culture” (Schwartz et al., 2010, p. 245), or the “immigrant” (Navas et al., 2005, p. 27) can neutralize their experiences with oppression. The “objective” and “neutral” scientific language used in these theoretical discussions may restrict researchers from integrating the sociopolitical, sociohistorical, and sociostructural frameworks needed to better conceptualize the acculturative process for people of color (Banks, 2014; Hall, Yip, & Zárate, 2016).

**White Culture, White Supremacist Ideology, and White Spaces**

But what exactly is *White culture* and *White cultural values,* and how are they connected to *White supremacist ideology* and *White spaces?*

For the purposes of our critical discussion, we define *culture* as the “customs, norms, practices, and social institutions, including psychological processes . . . [and one’s] beliefs, values, and practices” (Cooper & Leong, 2008, p. 133). In the United States, *White culture* is described as a fixed constellation of Western values and beliefs that prioritize “rugged individualism, competition, action-orientation, hierarchical power structures, standard American English, linear and future time orientation, Judeo-Christianity, European history, Protestant work ethic, objective science, owning goods and property, the nuclear family unit, and European aesthetics” (Katz, 1985, p. 618). The cement that holds White cultural values together and gives them coherence and meaning for White people is White supremacy, or the “ideological belief that biological and cultural Whiteness is superior” (Howard & Sommers, 2017), as well as normal and healthy (Varga, 2011). That is, White supremacist ideology provides an ontological purpose for White people (e.g., to work hard; Liu, 2017), as well as an explicit racial hierarchy, and legitimacy for continued inequality (Hindriks, Verkuyten, & Coenders, 2014). Furthermore, implicating White supremacist ideology in White cultural values means that psychologists must name additional values such as elevating and maintaining White status (Mutz, 2018) and protecting and privileging White people. These two values reflect the centrality of White supremacist ideology and add to the ontological purpose for White people (i.e., to surveil and police White space); at the same time, they also complicate for people of color the value system to which they acculturate and how they regard themselves, White people, and other people of color.

One way to maintain the hierarchy and protect White privilege is for White people to acculturate people of color (i.e., from indigenous peoples to new immigrants) to the ideals of White culture (Kunst, Thomsen, Sam, & Berry, 2015) and not toward the cultures or ways of knowing of peoples of color (i.e., epistemic exclusion; Settles et al., 2018). In this process, the more persons of color acculturate, the more likely they will be perceived by White people as phenotypically “White” and thus less targeted for questioning by White people (Kunst et al., 2018). However, White-looking immigrants are already perceived to be more acculturated than are people of color (Kunst et al., 2018), suggesting that becoming “American” by way of acculturation is associated with having White skin, and more to the point, with being of or resembling European ancestry.

Although current research on acculturation (Ibrahim & Heuer, 2016), microaggressions (Wang et al., 2011), race-related stress (Pittman, Cho Kim, Hunter, & Obasi, 2017), and racial trauma (Comas-Díaz, 2016) have expanded our understanding of the ways in which people live in dominant cultural environments, existing acculturation theories have yet to fully explicate the foundational White supremacist ideologies of the dominant culture’s values and beliefs, and specifically, in the context of psychology, the additional psychological distress that acculturation has on people of color (Alamilla, Kim, Walker, & Sisson, 2017). In fact, these significant acculturative historical contexts have become practically unnoticed—even minimized—by some researchers (Rudmin, Wang, & de Castro, 2016). What has potentially become lost in the larger understanding of acculturation, therefore, is the role that White people, culture, and institutions play in this process for people of color. Indeed, White people are active participants in acculturating people of color, but many may not recognize their participation as such, in part, because the discourse on and enactment of racism has largely transformed from overt bigotry into aversive racism (Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002). Moreover, White people tend to prefer “color-blindness” to avoid an awareness of race and racism (Neville, Awad, Brooks, Flores, & Bluemel, 2013) and/or to avoid potentially being labeled as “racist” (Goff, Jackson, Nichols, Allison, & Leone, 2013). Meanwhile, microaggressions (Kanter et al., 2017) and negative and threatening perceptions of people of color (Garcini et al., 2017; Todd, Thiem, & Neel, 2016) continue to dominate racial profiles and racist treatment of people of color. Residential segregation (Massey & Tannen, 2015; Rothstein, 2017), school-to-prison pipelines (Seroczynski & Jobst, 2016), job opportunity restrictions (Quillian et al., 2017), threats against undocumented immigrants (Garcini et al., 2017), increased exposure to pollution (Grineski & Collins, 2018), and police killings and brutality (Davis, 2017) are present-day behaviors and practices that reinforce White dominance. As a recent public poll suggested, many White people may abhor White supremacy, yet they still endorse White supremacist beliefs and worldviews because they believe White culture is under assault (Reuters, Ipsos, & UVA Center for Politics, 2017) and therefore must be preserved (Mutz, 2018).

Although the notion of being American and White was initially reserved for Anglo-Saxon ethnic groups, it eventually evolved through racist practices into *Whiteness,* a racial category that would include nonprivileged European groups (e.g., Irish; Omi & Winant, 2015); Whiteness became a racial descriptor continually adjusted to maintain White racial purity and numerical dominance, as well as cultural and ideological superiority (Omi & Winant, 2015). Whiteness was (and continues to be) a well-guarded, exclusive membership, and within this racial hierarchy, people of color have learned that their skin color and the cultures and worldviews that come with it are less valuable and worthy of advancement (Brown & Segrist, 2016; Choi, Israel, & Maeda, 2017; Garcini et al., 2017). Hence, to survive and live in White spaces— geographic areas perceived by White people to have boundaries and protections for White privilege; White people; and their behaviors, culture, and norms—many people of color have had to learn and adopt White cultural norms and values, regardless of personal choices, and often at significant psychological costs (e.g., anxiety and depression; Garcini et al., 2017).

One way that children of color understand Whiteness, racism, and how to navigate White spaces, for instance, is through acculturation via racial trauma (i.e., persistent exposure to racism or a sudden racist encounter, experienced as painful, followed by symptoms such as intrusive thoughts, avoidance, anger, and depression; Carter & Muchow, 2017) and microaggressions (i.e., commonplace and frequent verbal, behavioral, and environmental slights; Sue et al., 2007). To illustrate, a Mexican American child learns not to speak Spanish outside of the home for fear of being labeled as an undocumented migrant, or a Vietnamese American child quickly realizes through bullying in the cafeteria that a ham and cheese sandwich is preferable to fried fish and rice. Although such microaggressions and racial trauma might be committed by individuals, many children of color begin to recognize that they exist within a larger ecosystem that is microaggressive and racially traumatic (Garcini et al., 2017). In this way, these children’s responses to racism are not a matter of free choice, as acculturation theory would have it, but decisions to avoid further hostility or tension or to minimize their racial presence. As a result, some children may start scanning and evaluating their environment or situation for cultural safety (i.e., can they be themselves and exhibit their preferred cultural styles; LaFromboise et al., 1993).

**Internalized Racialism**

Whereas some people of color may work to maintain their dual, multiple, and intersectional identities, others may resolve to slough off aspects of their native culture. Internalized racialism implies identifying with White stereotypes about the immutability of racial characteristics (both positive and negative; e.g., African Americans innately run faster) and may be related to diminishing one’s identification with one’s race and culture (Cokley, 2002; Yip, 2016). Accordingly, internalized racialism is a contemporary psychological construct that is rooted in a history of negative and demeaning constructions of people of color (Brown & Segrist, 2016; Choi et al., 2017; Cokley, 2002). These harmful portrayals and belief systems were meant to keep people of color subjugated and to provide a White cultural rationale for continued inequality (Hindriks et al., 2014; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015). Native American children, for instance, attending boarding schools learned (and arguably, continue to learn) about White cultural norms, languages, and religious practices rather than the multitude of indigenous cultural values, languages, and spirituality (Johnston-Goodstar & VeLure Roholt, 2017). That their ways of behaving, speaking, and dressing were (and are) regularly monitored and subjected to abuse and ridicule by White people in surrounding communities also necessitated their comportment to White cultural expectations and aesthetics (Oberg, 2018). Making indigenous or native cultural aspects unfavorable, undesirable, or meaningless (Oberg, 2018) is a principle tenet of internalized racialism (Cokley, 2002) and internalized racism (racial self-hatred; Choi et al., 2017; Howard & Sommers, 2017).

**Cultural Appropriation and Acculturation**

Potentially contributing to people’s of color internalized racialism and racism is the way in which they come to view their culture and community. People of color were historically considered property (Harris, 1993), and they were dehumanized (i.e., lacking humanity) or infrahumanized as less than fully human (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). Consequently, much of their culture (e.g., art, music, religion) was also considered property regarded as “free for the taking.” Cultural appropriation also creates a sociohistorical narrative of the United States that favors the White person and White culture (Howard & Sommers, 2017). Cultural appropriation recontextualizes and rehistoricizes, and sometimes erases (Harris, 1993) people of color to fit within a “White mnemonic community” (Mills, 2014, p. 27). By mnemonic community, Mills (2014) is referring to Zerubavel’s (1996) notion of how people within a particular context remember their collective past through socialization and culturally and institutionally sanctioned memories. And this collective “American” past is constantly reinforced by memory devices (mnemonics) such as holidays, movies and TV, storybooks, rhymes, and familiar iconography and images (i.e., White Jesus; Howard & Sommers, 2017) wherein Whiteness and White culture is central in all aspects. In the United States, these mnemonic communities privilege aspects of White and European history and culture such that there is a collective amnesia for non-White histories; that is, one may come to some agreement that before the presence of Europeans, “no history has taken place” (Mills, 2014, p. 31). For persons of color, the absence of and the demeaning portrayal of their culture, race, and ethnicity may be experienced as forms of racial trauma and microaggressions (Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015).

**(In)visibility**

For White people who may never have met people of color, for example, African Americans, cultural appropriation helps familiarize White people with African Americans within White history as well as their role (as White people) with them (Zerubavel, 1996). For people of color, learning about White people may also come well before interacting with any White person, and socialization about and acculturating toward White culture are constantly available through the presence of White cultural products and the absence or marginalization of communities of color (Howard & Sommers, 2017). People of color, thus, are constantly learning that one of their places and roles in White dominant culture is to be invisible, innocuous, quiet, and unthreatening because success in White dominant culture demands these behaviors and beliefs. For instance, being accosted in public or asked for citizenship papers creates an environment where Latinx people understand that speaking Spanish is not welcomed by White people. This racism becomes ecological such that Latinx people do not need repeated interpersonal encounters to know that Spanish is not permitted and that their brown skin invites surveillance.

**White Fragility and Racial Innocuousness**

In the United States, acculturation is a process tied to White supremacist ideology, White cultural values, and Whiteness, and as such, there is an asymmetric power dynamic between the dominant group and people of color. White cultural values already legitimize inequality via meritocracy (Hindriks et al., 2014), and consequently, dominant group members are likely to defend this power and their privileges and ensure its continuation (Piff, Kraus, & Keltner, 2018)—by requiring people of color to adopt White cultural norms but not necessarily granting them all the same affordances and opportunities that come with being born White. That is, being born White is akin to winning a racial competition in the United States, and as a consequence, White people are more likely to look for ways to maintain or increase their favored status (Mutz, 2018; Schurr & Ritov, 2016), as well as being spitefully sensitive to perceived unfairness (Ding, Wu, Ji, Chen, & Van Lange, 2017) against their group. Within White spaces, Whiteness may, thus, be as much privileged as it is fragile (Cabrera, Watson, & Franklin, 2016).

DiAngelo (2011) suggested that White fragility and anger occur with the most modest amount of racial distress because White men and White women are unaccustomed to these “stress-inducing situation[s]” (p. 57).

Racialized distress may come from being confronted with dialogue about race and racism where White men and women may believe they need to be shielded from the discussions and distress. Anger, physical withdrawal, and sadness (i.e., tears) are also ways in which White people react as a means to restore equilibrium (DiAngelo, 2011; DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014)—their status quo of safe racial discourse, which protects them and privileges their centrality to the discussions (DiAngelo, 2011). For other White people, “civil” conversation is a way to regulate White spaces and avoid critical, meaningful conversations (Rudick & Golsan, 2017). Racial traumas and microaggressions within this framework, therefore, may be regarded as ways in which people of color are reminded of their “role” to absolve White people of the consequences of racism and to protect White people from difficult racialized discourse. These forms of racism and microaggressions may be direct violations and/or subtle reminders such as racialized or sexist jokes (Douglass, Mirpuri, English, & Yip, 2016) where the target of the joke is expected to “play along” or to have a “thick skin.” Those microaggressive jokes may harbor underlying racist attitudes (Kanter et al., 2017), but when confronted, White people may feel aggressed upon (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014). In these instances, White worldviews and feelings become paramount and need to be protected, and people of color are enlisted via acculturation and potential privileges to serve in these roles.

But who is enlisted, and how do people of color participate in protecting White people’s racial fragility? How have generations of people of color learned to traverse White spaces, learned to avoid and circumvent difficult dialogues, all with the implicit and explicit goal of becoming *innocuous racialized* beings? As articulated, some of these behaviors and attitudes may be forms of survival and self-protection. Psychological research has suggested that people of color quickly learn to adopt attitudes and behaviors (e.g., withdrawing into ethnic groups; Houshmand, Spanierman, & Tafarodi, 2014) that would minimize their presence (Davis, 2017; Keum, 2016; Settles et al., 2018) and lower their expectations or entitlement, silence their voices, and subdue their expressions, which may be perceived as threatening (Griffith & Cornish, 2018). In other words, although people of color may not be able to hide their skin color, being racially innocuous means that they are able to behave in ways that may soften their racial, ethnic, and cultural expression (Kaiser & Pratt-Hyatt, 2009) so as not to stand out. For some, navigating this racial dynamic may entail intentionally changing how they speak, dress, and/or eat to camouflage themselves in White spaces (Garcini et al., 2017; Keum, 2016). For others, becoming racially innocuous may be a means by which they “thrive” within White spaces such as business and education; that is, becoming racially innocuous may come with rewards such as proxy privilege (i.e., privilege that is tied to the power of a White person and only within certain spaces), advancement, and promotion (Liu, 2017) that may allow some people of color to retain nuanced ways that challenge and critique the White cultural status quo. Still yet, for others, being racially innocuous may not be a consciously deliberate choice; such individuals may wholeheartedly believe that they are not persons of color at all or understand that they are being tokenized within White institutional spaces (Settles et al., 2018), a kind of “pre-encounter” stage of their racial or ethnic identity (Neville & Cross, 2017). They may believe in meritocratic outcomes—that accumulating a professional degree and living in an affluent neighborhood, for instance, would protect them from traffic stops by police officers or having a gun drawn upon them by a neighbor (O’Brien, Forrest, Lynott, & Daly, 2013). They may believe that having sufficient aspects of White culture and its value systems would translate to protections and privileges like their White counterparts. This incongruence between one’s perceived proxy privileges and one’s racial reality (e.g., as a Black man in his car) may be experienced as continually racially traumatic—physically and emotionally.

Acculturation, then, might be a dual process of learning the explicit White cultural norms, beliefs, and expectations and of understanding racism and microaggressions as forms of racialized management—subtle and explicit, direct aggression or withdrawal of privileges to help people of color “know their place.” Acculturation, therefore, is not a singular, one-time process but a continuing activity, because any resistance to the dominant expectations (e.g., kneeling during the national anthem) calls for renewed forms of racial trauma and microaggressions against people of color (e.g., threats of deportation or physical assault). To this end, the idea of “successful” acculturation, in and of itself, implies conditionality, and the alternative is not simply being unsuccessful but potentially enduring consequential psychological distress (e.g., depression and anxiety; Garcini et al., 2017), death and illness (Chae et al., 2015), and the withdrawal of proxy privileges and monetary punishment.

That acculturation, or becoming American, is anything but a benign process is certainly not a revelation. Critical race theorists have understood that the economic, religious, and legal foundations on which America has been founded have always elevated and privileged Whiteness while prohibiting and restricting daily life practices (e.g., marriage, property ownership, citizenship, education) for communities of color (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1996). People of color who did not act appropriately or dress in accordance with White expectations were often met with racialized terror (e.g., physical threats or lynching; Crenshaw et al., 1996; Davis, 2017). The histories of racialized terror and trauma were not anomalies but were codified, legislated, and normalized behaviors by White communities against communities of color to maintain geographic boundaries and restrict economic opportunities for White people (Crenshaw et al., 1996; Davis, 2017). White civilian men and women were often authorized to act on behalf of the state to surveil, count, and keep people of color “in-line” (Davis, 2017; Rothstein, 2017). Today, racist comments against African Americans like “You do not belong here” (Davis, 2017, p. 329) or the “perpetual foreigners” image against Asian Americans (Wong-Padoongpatt, Zane, Okazaki, & Saw, 2017, p. 574) represent examples of White perceptual ownership over territory and membership to communities (i.e., White spaces; Fine et al., 2003). Hence, Liu (2017) defined White privilege as “an entitlement and unearned authority of White men to engage in attitudes, beliefs, and practices in any place and time [in order] to perpetuate the status quo of White supremacy, social and racial segregation, and systemic inequality” (p. 352).

**Implications for Psychology Research and Practice**

If the acculturation process and acculturation experiences via microaggressions and racial trauma are continuous, then so, too, are the healing processes and experiences for people of color. Indeed, healing is a personal and community effort that occurs throughout the life span (American Psychological Association [APA], 2017). Helping communities to thrive requires evolving psychological scholarship on acculturation, microaggressions, and racial trauma and developing psychological tools to more effectively work with various communities. To this end, psychologists and researchers might conceptualize these everyday occurrences for people of color (e.g., not being acknowledged when one enters a store) as acculturative iterations meant to teach and/or remind people of color how to act in White spaces and around White people. Our proposed research and practice recommendations, thus, are intended to help psychologists and researchers better understand how acculturation, microaggressions, and racial trauma are manifested in the lives of people of color.

**Research Recommendations**

In this article, we posit that acculturation is not just for new immigrants or from the first contact with a host culture (cf. Ibrahim & Heuer, 2016); instead, research and theory development around the acculturation process could focus on perceived microaggressions and racism. This would expand the research populations to include communities of color typically not associated with acculturation (e.g., African Americans and Native Americans). As suggested, acculturation may be reconceptualized as an iterative process by the dominant society to show how people of color are to behave in the United States (Omi & Winant, 2015); thus, acculturation theory could further explore the underlying tenets of White supremacy in dominant cultural values and how some of these tenets also articulate a racial hierarchy that people of color are expected to understand and to which they should subscribe (Sue, 2004).

First, we recommend that psychological research specify the places and times (i.e., perceived White spaces) in which White people enact microaggressions and racial trauma. Racism, as Liu (2017) argued, has a distinct purpose to control spaces and opportunities that White people consider to be theirs (Wilkins, Wellman, Babbitt, Toosi, & Schad, 2015). Surveillance on an African American shopper, directing adolescents of color to turn down their music, telling a Latinx person to “go back to your own country,” or asking an Asian American “where are you from?” are examples of White people’s perception of their ownership over White spaces and how people of color are perceived to be “aliens” in these White spaces.

White people may not explicitly understand “White spaces,” but people of color understand when they venture into many White-dominated spaces; hence, the head nods to other people of color (Jones, 2017) or the scanning of the room for racially and ethnically diverse peoples. Research may focus on the ways in which racial management occurs within White spaces—a form of racism that integrates perceptions and behaviors within racialized space (Lipsitz, 2011). Along with psychological distress, research should focus on the physiological consequences (e.g., diabetes and obesity) of racial traumas and microaggressions within these racialized spaces (Chae et al., 2015; Grineski & Collins, 2018; Wen & Maloney, 2011). For psychologists, trauma transmitted over generations of people of color (i.e., historical trauma) cannot simply be interpersonal; racism must be conceptualized as purposeful structural and spatialized racism.

Our second recommendation is for psychological research to explore the ways in which a person’s of color racial identity is related to perceived privileges. More specifically, research may explore racial identity and perceived privileges (i.e., proxy privileges) within certain White spaces and how persons of color may negotiate the psychological tension related to maintaining these privileges and recognizing and addressing racism. As suggested, one way that persons of color may choose to maintain their proxy privileges is to become racially innocuous. In this way, being racially innocuous is related to adopting a false consciousness (Neville, Coleman, Falconer, & Holmes, 2005) that allows the person of color to maintain close proximity to power and privilege (Liu, 2017). Research on healing, then, requires persons of color to understand the internalized stereotypes (i.e., false consciousness; Neville et al., 2005) and expectations that they have about themselves and how these have operated in their lives.

A third research recommendation is to operationalize acculturation to include the process by which persons of color have also learned ways to understand the triggers for White people’s discomfort around racial discourse (White fragility), and of importance, to avoid, prevent, and/or diffuse such discomfort. To avoid being labeled as “uppity,” persons of color may allow White persons to feel they have a higher status in comparison to persons of color (Wilkins et al., 2015). Certainly, some people of color have learned to hide or repress their emotions—to not react to racism and microaggressions (Griffith & Cornish, 2018)—so as to help manage White people’s racial sensitivity and fragility around race and racism. Research may also identify the psychological distress a person of color encumbers with respect to this form of emotional labor (Holoien & Shelton, 2012). In return, people of color are sometimes rewarded with economic and positional privileges as well as being identified as an exemplar (i.e., a model minority). Similarly, high levels of endorsement of dominant cultural norms (i.e., individualism or self-reliance) or high acculturation may also mean a high endorsement of internalized racialism and justification for inequality. That is, endorsing or subscribing to dominant White cultural values may also mean that persons of color internalize the negative stereotypes of other people of color and rationalize their poor treatment and unequal status. Thus, research may focus on the relationship of racial identity and justifications around racial and economic inequality.

But not all persons of color choose to be racially innocuous via a false consciousness (i.e., pre-encounter status). Other persons of color may better understand how to negotiate when it is acceptable to even elicit White fragility and how to use these opportunities to help White persons explore racism and White supremacist ideology. Hence, our fourth research recommendation is for psychologists to understand the relationship between racial awakening and activism that comes from understanding the acculturative process (Neville & Cross, 2017). Whether through direct microaggressions and racism or vicariously learning these lessons (Truong, Museus, & McGuire, 2016), people of color understand the racial decision of “when to make a fuss” or “when to let it go” (LaFromboise et al., 1993). Research should examine the capacity for people of color to evaluate when and how to speak up as a source of strength and resilience despite the fact that there is little in the environment or even in interpersonal relationships to help reinforce this competency.

Finally, for persons of color who are conducting psychological research and scholarship, it is important for self-critique and critical reflexivity to illuminate ways in which they, too, have internalized “standards” of scholarship suffused in White supremacist ideology. What is considered appropriate English, how to engage in discourse around racially provocative topics, and what is meaningful in research, for example, are often framed by White epistemological ideals to which many scholars of color have acculturated and accommodated (Hall et al., 2016).

**Practice Recommendations**

With a more holistic comprehension of the relationships of racial trauma, microaggressions, and acculturation within White spaces, psychologists could better help clients and patients heal from these traumas. First, psychologists need to understand that psychotherapy and their conceptualization of mental well-being are based on White masculine norms (Katz, 1985) and White supremacist ideology (Hindriks et al., 2014; Howard & Sommers, 2017). This means, for both White psychologists and psychologists of color, that an examination of conceptualizations of health and well-being needs to incorporate White supremacist ideology and justifications for inequality within conceptualizations of acculturation (Wilkins et al., 2015).

Parents of color may understand that racial traumas and microaggressions begin early in their child’s life (Todd et al., 2016). Thus, our second recommendation is for psychologists to help parents develop forms of “microprotections” (Dotterer & James, 2018, p. 38) that could help buffer children of color against microaggressions and racial trauma. Critical aspects of these microprotections are parental warmth and acceptance of the child’s experiences, cultural socialization (i.e., egalitarianism, ethnic pride, cultural history), and preparation for racial bias (Dotterer & James, 2018)—all of which are aspects of positive forms of racial identity (Butler-Barnes et al., 2017). As psychologists work with parents on these microprotections, it would be critical to also offer emotional and psychoeducational support for these parents of color (Ayón, Marsiglia, & Bermudez-Parsai, 2010).

Third, psychological healing and resiliency needs to include a realistic appraisal and understanding of racism and its purposes. Psychologists need to understand that racial traumas and microaggressions are not merely interpersonal conflicts but also spatial and economic—that racism is not random but deliberate acts against a person of color (Sue, 2004). One outcome of this understanding is for people of color to develop and nurture a more resilient worldview (Comas-Díaz, 2016) and to fortify their racial identity in order to buffer against racial traumas and microaggressions (Butler-Barnes et al., 2017). For instance, racist jokes could be regarded as attempts to assert White dominance (Douglass et al., 2016) and maintain economic inequality (Liu, 2017). Psychologists could help people of color to see this dual purpose for racial traumas and microaggressions and create opportunities for greater racial and ethnic identity exploration and intentional actions (i.e., racial awakening) around these microaggressions and racism.

The fourth recommendation for psychologists is to conceptualize acculturation stress or distress (Ibrahim & Heuer, 2016) as racialized interactions wherein persons of color must question how they should engage with White people, despite having adopted dominant cultural norms and behaviors. For persons of color, developing better resilience means understanding how to be intentional in their actions—when to take care of and/or when to question the White person’s presumed expectations. Regardless, at all times, it also means understanding that White privilege protects White people from the consequences of their actions (Spanierman & Smith, 2017). Helping persons of color understand the spatial and temporal limits of their perceived privileges may be an important aspect of their racial awakening and feelings of empowerment.

Fifth, psychologists may help persons of color embody their intersectional identities (APA, 2017) and cultures and recognize that the central ideology for them is resistance and egalitarianism. In this way, acculturation does not have to be predicated upon one dominant cultural value system and ideological structure, wherein people of color are acculturated into it via racial traumas and microaggressions. Instead, persons of color may thrive in mainstream and dominant culturally White spaces, be intentional about their behaviors, and choose when and how they discuss racial issues and how they choose to live in or disrupt these White spaces. People of color may adopt their own spatial metaphors against those who infringe (i.e., microaggress or commit racism) upon their space and say to them, “stay in your lane” (Thompson, Her, Nitzarim, Sampe, & Diestelmann, 2017).

Finally, racial healing cannot be achieved alone but must be accomplished in collaboration with White allies. Psychologists may work with White people in psychotherapy or consult with White psychologists who have a critical consciousness around Whiteness, power, and privilege (Spanierman, Poteat, Whittaker, Schlosser, & Arévalo Avalos, 2017; Spanierman & Smith, 2017). The support of White allies would help other White people understand that racism and microaggressions are not just “perceptions” (Banks, 2014, p. 312) but experiences of racialized traumas and assaults.

Psychologists should be aware that White people also experience frustrations, fatigue, and demoralization related to the constant need to work on their own critical consciousness and to being empathetic in supporting their White racial identity development.

To conclude, acculturation is far from an easy process, be it for people who are new migrants or for communities of color who have thrived in the United States for generations. In the United States, dominant White culture’s values, beliefs, attitudes, and expected behaviors must be contextualized in a history of White supremacy, that of which has explicit roles for people of color and their cultures. In this article we focused on the underlying ideologies of White dominant culture in the United States and the way in which people of color are constantly acculturating, resisting, and creating intersectional identities to disrupt White supremacist ideology and White racialized spaces. We contend that conceptualizing acculturation as a process related to White supremacist ideology allows psychologists to connect constructs like internalized racialism, acculturation and distress, and microaggressions as constant features for people of color. Recognizing these interrelationships will enable psychologists to further refine research and scholarship as well as clinical approaches for communities of color and, in so doing, move toward a more just world.