Article

"I'm Told I Don't Look Like a Foreigner": Everyday Racism in Contemporary Italy

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Abstract
In our article, we aim to explore the experience of everyday racism of young people with migrant parents in Italy. Drawing on the analysis of 20 interviews, we seek to reconstruct the overall dynamics of racial microaggressions, highlighting how the context in which microaggressions occur and the interplay between ethnic background, gender, and somatic features influences the interpretations and reactions of the victims. We highlight the boundary work and identity negotiation process carried out in everyday encounters. We also show that participants' experience oscillates between the claim of not-taken-for-granted citizenship, the feeling of being confined within ethno-cultural imaginaries, and the experience of overt manifestations of racism. Finally, we highlight both the process by which victims come to recognise racial microaggressions and the obstacles they face in coping with them.

Keywords
everyday racism; intersectionality; Italy; racial microaggressions; second-generation migrants

1. Introduction

Philomena Essed introduced the concept of "everyday racism" in her seminal text of 1991, defining it as "the integration of racism into everyday situations through practices (cognitive and behavioural) that activate underlying power relations" (Essed, 1991, p. 50). At the centre of her reflection is the relationship between the macro-social dimension of racism—understood as the result of long-term historical processes that tend to crystallise according to specific spatiotemporal modalities in a system of structural inequalities, legal norms, and institutions—and the micro-social dimension, where the constant reactivation of this system is seen at work in everyday interactions and routines. Even if everyday racism manifests itself as a contingent phenomenon, it plays a central role in reaffirming pre-existing relationships of power and domination. According to Essed (1991, p. 39), "specific practices are, by definition, racist

only when they activate existing structural racial inequality in the system."

The dynamic character of this relationship constitutes an invitation for scholars to focus on the social and political processes of racialisation—which are always linked to the specific historical and cultural context and emblematic of the power relations existing between different social groups—opposing a static and essentialised view of identities (Frisina, 2020; Giuliani & Lombardi-Diop, 2013).

According to Lamont and Mizrachi (2012, pp. 366–367), manifestations of everyday racism can be described as a kind of relational boundary work through which "ordinary people claim inclusion, affirm their distinctiveness, contest and denounce stereotyping and claim their rights in the face of discriminatory behaviour and other more subtle slights to their sense of dignity." It permeates different spheres of experience, from public spaces (Chou & Feagin, 2015) to workplaces (Showunmi

& Tomplin, 2022; Wingfield, 2013), from classrooms (Tyson, 2011) to sports practices (Long, 2000).

When analysing manifestations of everyday racism, at least three aspects should be considered. First, as critical race theory reminds us, "racism is ordinary, not aberrational" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 20). One of the reasons why, despite being widespread, racism is underestimated stems precisely from its ambiguous, insidious, not easily recognisable character. We are not referring, in fact, to overt discriminations such as those present in the labour market (Platt et al., 2021), in housing (Pager & Shepherd, 2008), in the criminal justice system (A. Goffman, 2014), but to seemingly innocuous actions which are based on stigmatising implicit premises.

Secondly, the reference to racial difference lato sensu is often intertwined with social class, gender, and age, highlighting the importance of adopting the perspective of intersectional analysis (Collins & Bilge, 2019).

Finally, the power relationship between those belonging to the dominant (racialising) group and those belonging to the dominated (racialised) one can manifest itself in various ways. By comparing the experience of everyday racism suffered by African-American women in the USA and those of Surinamese origin in the Netherlands, Essed highlighted how, in the former case, boundary work is based on the explicit reference to race (white vs. black); whereas in the Dutch context, definitions centred on cultural differences prevail. We see at work here a kind of racism without race (Barker, 1981), a differentialist and culturalist reconfiguration of racist discourse based on enduring processes of de-historicisation, essentialisation, and stigmatisation (Balibar, 2008), which implies a worldview punctuated by cultural, ethnic, or religious differences, always hierarchically ordered, closely linked to physical and moral traits, and embodied by migrants from the Global South, i.e., the former colonies of the West, as well as their offspring.

A second conceptual repertoire to explore and analyse racialisation practices emerged in clinical, cognitive, and social psychology in the same period. Developed by Solorzano in the 1990s (Solórzano & Pérez Huber, 2020) from Pierce's (1980) observations and later developed by Sue et al. (2007), it centres on the concept of "racial microaggressions." This concept refers to the set of racist episodes that manifest themselves in everyday experience in an indirect form, tending to be unintentional, through verbal and non-verbal moves. Microaggressions can be divided into three subtypes: microassault, which refers to direct and explicitly racist verbal or non-verbal attacks; microinsult, which refers to statements or allusions that do not contain anything intentionally aggressive but are perceived as irritating and embarrassing by the recipients; and microinvalidation, which tend to deny the feelings and, in general, the experiential reality of minority groups.

The concept of microaggressions is particularly relevant because of the high level of ambiguity, pervasiveness, and vagueness that can characterise microinsults and microinvalidations. Indeed, it can be difficult for the victim to identify them and equally difficult for the perpetrator to recognise the implications of such practices (Constantine & Sue, 2007; Essed, 1991; Pierce, 1980). As Pérez Huber and Solórzano (2015, p. 302) write:

> Microaggressions allow us to "see" those tangible ways racism emerges in everyday interactions. At the same time, they have a purpose. For instance, whether conscious or not, microaggressions perpetuate a larger system of racism. Microaggressions are the layered, cumulative and often subtle and unconscious forms of racism that target People of Colour. They are the everyday reflections of larger racist structures and ideological beliefs that impact People of Colour's lives.

A third relevant theoretical and epistemological perspective is that of everyday multiculturalism (Wise & Velayutham, 2009), which invites us to consider a kind of "multiculturalism from below." It embraces an ethnographic approach to analyse the interaction strategies through which cultural diversity is defined, invoked, experienced, and negotiated in specific situations and meeting places in super-diverse urban settings. As Essed has pointed out, to analyse everyday racist practices and racial microaggressions in highly culturally differentiated contexts in Western Europe, a definition of racism that is not self-confined to race is needed. Instead, the concept of racism should refer to the broad repertoire of "othering" devices through which differentialist racism (Taguieff, 2001) is practised and experienced in a web of references to "race," ethnicity, cultural diversity, gender, citizenship, and social class.

In our article, we will adopt these three perspectives to explore the experience of everyday racism among second-generation youth in Italy. As we will see, this experience oscillates between the claim of not-taken-for-granted citizenship, the feeling of being confined within colonial ethnocultural imaginaries, the denial of the "right to indifference" (Delgado, 1999), and explicit racism. More specifically, we will show how being de jure Italian but not being recognised as such by the "real" Italians is a "normal" experience for second-generation youth. From this point of view, inquiring into their experience can reveal how hetero-self-identification and boundary work allow establishing who should be considered part of the in-group and who should be placed outside based on representations that exalt common (national) belonging and how "othering" devices allow for the legitimisation of exclusion and discrimination.

The article is organised as follows: Drawing on the most relevant studies in this field, we will first outline an overview of the main features of public discourse on immigration in Italy and then present the research design and the methodology. The results will be reported concerning two macro-themes: the function

of microaggressions in identity negotiation processes and the resistance strategies adopted by youth with migrant parents when confronted with everyday racism. The results will be discussed in light of two key aspects: the ambiguity that often characterises microaggressions and that makes a gradual problematisation of social reality necessary (Essed, 1991) and the still neglected relevance of the racial issue in Italy.

2. Immigration and Racism in Italy

Many studies over the last three decades have highlighted how, except for the five years between 2009 and 2014, immigration has been central to the public debate in Italy (Bonsaver & Faloppa, 2015). The dominant frames in immigration narratives and migrant representations to date have been two: a first, less important one, in which immigration is presented as a social, economic, and cultural problem that refers to the complex and risky process of integration/assimilation of foreign citizens into Italian society; a second, decidedly dominant in quantitative terms, in which migrants have been represented as a threat—both physical and symbolic—to native citizenship, and immigration is inextricably associated with the issue of security (Palidda, 2011; Richardson & Colombo, 2013).

The consolidation of largely negative discourses on foreign immigration has gone hand in hand with the introduction, at the national level, of policies that, in addition to focusing on controlling and limiting human mobility, have made the legal entry of citizens from non-EU countries increasingly difficult and the legal status of foreign citizens residing in Italy increasingly precarious (Ambrosini & Triandafyllidou, 2011; M. Colombo, 2013; Fontanari, 2019).

The issue of the recognition of different forms of international protection and reception policies for asylum seekers has remained firmly at the centre of the political debate since the 2011 "Arab uprisings" and has seen increasingly bitter confrontations between pro-refugee NGO coalitions, public administrators, high-level officials, left- and right-wing movements, political leaders, and public intellectuals (Ambrosini, 2021; Anselmi et al., 2023; Cuttitta, 2018). This constant sort of fibrillation of the political-media discourse paved the way, in November 2018, for the approval of a "security decree" (Decree No. 133/2018, later to become Law No. 132/2018), by which the weakest form of protection under Italian law—humanitarian protection—was repealed and the most effective and innovative reception system for asylum seekers and refugees (Sprar) was dismantled (Campesi, 2018).

The hegemony of a strongly negative interpretation of migratory phenomena and the emergency nature of policies to govern them is also reflected in relation to the opportunity to revise the citizenship law introduced when Italy was one of the main countries of emigration to central-northern Europe and fundamentally based on the principle of ius sanguinis (Einaudi, 2007). The regulatory framework has not only prevented or discouraged first and second-generation migrants from applying for Italian citizenship (young people born in Italy to foreign parents number over 1 million, and of these only 22.7% have acquired Italian citizenship) but it has also consolidated an image of "Italian-ness" substantially based on a genealogical and ethno-racial conception of national identity (E. Colombo et al., 2011).

In this context, it is not surprising that racism in its various manifestations—as a dominant media and political discourse (Palidda, 2011), a widespread practice within public institutions (Quassoli, 2013), a set of violent behaviours and explicitly negative attitudes that dot the everyday experience of foreign citizens (Lunaria, 2020; OSCAD, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2019), as well as a feature of a non-negligible part of popular media production (Bordin & Bosco, 2017)—is not only widespread but widely tolerated (Frisina, 2020; Levy, 2015).

3. Research Design

The research is based on twenty semi-structured interviews, recorded and transcribed in full. The participants, homogeneous in age (from 18 to 31 years old), were selected to balance gender (12 males and eight females), the national origin of the parents, together with some somatic traits that we assumed could expose the interviewees to racial micro-aggressions to a greater or lesser extent.

Contact with the respondents was made through both personal relationships and social networks. An additional consideration that, for reasons of space, we cannot go into here concerns the positioning of those who conducted the interviews concerning those who were interviewed. Despite the common generational belonging, a palpable boundary emerged between the interviewer and interviewees. The latter were willing to share their experience of racism and discrimination within the framework of a research project while simultaneously recognising the former as a member of the dominant in-group who, as such, could not have directly experienced microaggressions. The interviews were analysed from the triple subdivision of microassault, microinvalidation, and microinsult. In presenting the results, we will focus on microinvalidation and microinsult. The analysis is divided into three phases:

1. We being with the identification of typical incidents from the nine recurring themes identified by Sue et al. (2007; see also Sue, 2010): aliens in one's own land, the ascription of intelligence, colour blindness, criminality, denial of individual racism, the myth of meritocracy, pathologising cultural values, second class citizen, and assumption of abnormality.
2. We analyse the victims' perception of the event and the reactions typically put in place as an

immediate response to the incident based on the distinction between cognitive, behavioural, and emotional reactions (Sue, 2010).

3. The interpretation of the event follows, as well as its development over time to show how the interpretative work that leads second-generation boys and girls to recognise the microaggressions of which they are victims should be read as the outcome of neither straightforward nor linear pathways of awareness acquisition thanks to constant intra- and intergenerational confrontation.

4. Microaggressions and Identity Negotiation

Before examining the cases of microaggression connected to the processes of self and hetero-identification, let us see how "objective data" and subjective perception create a crucial tension for the very definition of microaggression. As we mentioned earlier, central elements in the definition of racial microaggressions are the ambiguity and the halo of uncertainty that characterises them, from which derives the difficulty of understanding the meaning of the event and the tendency not to react on the part of those who suffer it. The interviewees repeatedly emphasised the dilemma of identifying the kind of veiled racism that can manifest itself, even in a gaze:

> The looks of people who notice that you are different, who notice that you are not Italian, made me reflect and change the way I behave with people. At one point, I decided to shave off my beard because I didn't want to look Egyptian….Now I ask myself: "So what?" But at the time, I didn't….I noticed that people always asked me: "Where are you from? I hear you speak very good Italian, but where are you from?" They always look at me like that….Is it natural that they look at me like that? Or is it because they have xenophobia towards me? (26-year-old male, born in Italy to Egyptian parents)

In the interviewee's experience, the gaze that expresses the perception of a difference starting from somatic clues is often accompanied by the question about the place of origin that makes explicit the underlying process of negotiation of belonging to the in-group: a belonging that, by definition, implies the coincidence between the national and ethnic/racial group. It is a very persistent experience, as signalled by the adverb "always" and inscribed within the processes of self and hetero-identification that take shape in everyday interactions. This type of event falls into the category of *microinvalidation* (Sue, 2010), i.e., those messages that deny the experiential reality of minorities and which, once decoded and interpreted, produce a clear perception of alienation. The sub-category *alien in one's own land* clusters those situations in which those who recognise themselves as "Italian" because they were born in Italy and acquired

Italian citizenship when they turned eighteen are perceived as a foreigner:

> Ah, an event, I don't know whether to call it racist, it happened on my first day at university. I was terrified because I'd already been to Milan, but I'm really a country girl as they say….Coming to Milan, here in Bicocca: Wow! Everything is so big and amplified. First day of university, business administration course, I sit at the end of the desk, the last seat near the door, ready to escape, and this girl asks me if the seats near me are free. So far so good, but it was the way she asked….I think I laughed for three hours. Gesticulating she says: "Sorry, is this seat free?" [spelling and gesticulating]. I said: "Everything's fine." And she says: "Ah, sorry, I didn't think you spoke Italian." (28-year-old female, in Italy since she was eight, Cameroon)

The interviewees did not expect that her presence in a university lecture hall could be perceived as "out of place" and that someone might address her differently than they would have done with a subject unequivocally recognisable as a member of the in-group ("we Italians"). Again, the underlying ambiguity that pervades the account does not allow the interviewee to state with certainty that this was an explicitly and intentionally racist episode.

Furthermore, being addressed in a language other than Italian generates the feeling of being out of place, of being identified as a person one does not expect to meet in a certain context:

> When I go to a restaurant it often happens that they speak to me in English as soon as I enter because they take me for a foreigner. If they address you directly in English it is because they assume that I actually shouldn't be in the restaurant, not because I can't go there but because it doesn't fit the norm…and it makes you understand a lot of things actually, because [the waitress] automatically excludes that a black person can speak directly to her in Italian. From the moment she saw me, she must have thought "eh, this must be a foreigner coming from who-knows-where" because they are not used to seeing someone black who can enter certain environments. (27-year-old male, in Italy since he was 10, Togo)

In the three aforementioned cases, skin colour in itself triggers the dynamic that leads the interviewees to question the meaning of an event that initially produces a surprise reaction. An Italian citizen is perceived as an outsider through an interactional move that puts him/her outside the boundaries of the in-group based on somatic traits revealing that for the "perpetrators" being Italian implies by definition being white. A criterion—whiteness/Italian-ness—that would most likely not be invoked explicitly but that nonetheless operates as a

taken-for-granted assumption by which membership based on the colour line is reaffirmed (Morning & Maneri, 2022).

Such a cognitive short circuit often manifests itself through the verbal and non-verbal modalities used to address those placed in the out-group. The involuntary perpetrators assume, in fact, that the Italian language is spoken and understood with sufficient competence only by those who are Italian citizens.

Here another type of micro-invalidation manifests itself, which includes all the situations in which the perpetrator is surprised by the fluent knowledge of the Italian language on the part of those who, although born in Italy, is considered to be of "foreign origin" either concerning the nationality of their parents or, as in the following example, simply because they are "African in appearance'':

> But this thing here is something that happens to you often even when maybe you are shopping at the supermarket and someone says: "Ah, but how well you speak Italian! Since when is it that you are here?" Look, I was born here. And they go on saying: "Ah, but how good you are." At that point, I say "yes, yes thank you" and act like nothing. I mean, it's these kinds of questions when maybe they hear you talking. For instance, when you go also to public offices you can always get this question (26-year-old male, born in Italy to parents from Ivory Coast)

Astonishment at one's competence in the use of the Italian language depends on the fact that the speaker is automatically classified as a foreigner. This can happen in two ways: first, regarding somatic features; second, concerning ethno-cultural descent. In both cases, the otherness associated with the alleged foreign origin is automatically shifted to linguistic competence, as a marker of national belonging, even in the presence of objective elements that should or could suggest otherwise, as narrated in this interview excerpt:

> An episode that hurt me a lot happened in high school. My Italian was always perfect, and I was also one of the best at writing essays….Once it happened that we were doing an essay in social sciences and I passed my draft to a classmate. In the end, she got an eight and a half and I got a five [grades go from zero to 10]. Obviously, I asked the teacher for an explanation. He couldn't give me an explanation for the bad mark, so he told me: "Well, it's because being Albanian, you have difficulties with the Italian language." I was furious and I told him: "Excuse me, but in Italian, I'm one of the best." But that's not the point because you think: I can speak Italian very well, I can have done primary, middle, high school, and university in Italy but, still, I'm always labelled as a foreigner. (27-year-old female, arrived in Italy at the age of six, Albania)

This last episode introduces the *second-class citizen* sub-category of micro-invalidation (Sue, 2010), which refers to situations in which the message is conveyed that minority group members are less able to cope with difficult and prestigious paths and should be treated differently regardless of an assessment of individual merits. This is an important aspect fraught with consequences that can to some extent explain both the less brilliant performance and the preference for shorter and more vocational courses of study of young people of foreign origin compared to their "Italian" peers:

> When I was in middle school, the teacher advised my mother not to send me to high school. She was amazed because she could not understand why the teacher would advise someone who had excellent marks not to follow a difficult path. (27-year-old male, arrived in Italy at the age of 10, Togo)

In this last case, it was easier for the interviewee to clearly recognise the discriminatory and racist meaning of the event since the somatic difference is associated with an inability/inferiority that invalidates the objective factual data (the excellent grades). This episode highlights how pre-existing structural racial inequality is constantly re-activated in everyday interactions (Essed, 1991).

From many interview excerpts, it emerges how the "black = foreigner" equivalence possibly characterises, with different implications and nuances in terms of racism, every everyday situation, signalling that skin colour constitutes an element that is difficult to assimilate, sufficient to sanction the non-membership of the in-group:

> I went to a dinner where a lot of jokes were being made. But you think about it before you make a joke because you think I will be misunderstood. You are only seen when you smile. And so you're not comfortable, they don't make you feel that you're one of them, that you're part of the group, they always make you feel, at least here in Italy I've always felt that way, that you're not Italian, you can never be Italian because Italian always has to be of Italian blood and white. (26-year-old male, born in Italy to parents from Ghana)

As Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop (2013) point out, the social construction of the "foreigner" often implies a simultaneous depreciation of specific social groups (the minorities) and the implicit enhancement of the in-group:

> A "race-free" whiteness is emerging in Italy that denies being racist and at the same time naturalises both the other and its cultural (and colour) difference as inferior, and itself, its own historical and cultural characteristics, reinvigorating the idea of an obvious

("natural") whiteness that is all Italian. (Giuliani & Lombardi-Diop, 2013, p. 12)

It is primarily a question of ethno-national imagery linked to the whiteness-blackness opposition, as is revealed by another episode involving a girl of Brazilian origin, who, in addition to not corresponding to the stereotypical image of *carioca* culture (football, dancing, and Carnival), often provokes a reaction of surprise among her acquaintances because she is "too white":

I am often told: "Ah, you're Brazilian, but you are light-skinned." If I were not, would I have been treated differently? I don't know. Maybe my experience wouldn't have been as good....Should I consider myself lucky to be a white Brazilian? (26-year-old female, arrived in Italy at the age 13, Brazil)

On the one hand, being "too white"—and therefore somatically distant from the widespread stereotype—does not spare the interviewee the embarrassment and annoyance of often being the object of undue attention and questions; on the other hand, it in itself gives her a superior social and cultural status that prevents her from the risk of suffering discriminatory treatment.

Equally emblematic is the experience of a girl born in Italy to Albanian parents who mentions a kind of suitability test she is not infrequently subjected to:

People often look at me and tell me that I don't look Albanian, meaning it as a compliment, and in reality I never know how to respond: I mean, should I say thank you...? Probably because I speak Italian fluently and I feel integrated into the life of my community...but I don't understand why they want to cancel that part of my identity by telling me that I don't even vaguely resemble an eastern girl....Their intention is anything but offensive, they want to pay me a compliment, but I never know how to interpret it, so I usually say "thank you" and try to cut it short. (25-year-old female, arrived in Italy at the age of three, Albania)

A test with three possible outcomes: When the comparison is congruent with the widespread stereotypes, one is included in the out-group; when, on the other hand, there is a discrepancy, one can be classified as an atypical foreigner or promoted in full in the in-group, implying that "being Italian" is an advantage. Moreover, precisely those who deviate from widespread imagery of a strongly racially hierarchical society are more frequently exposed to micro-aggressions, while those who are in the right place on the scale of prestige may simply not be noticed:

A friend of mine, who is a beautician and has had a lower level of education than me, has not experienced racism so strongly. She is never asked her surname, she goes and makes a massage, and that's it....If you talk to an Albanian guy who is a worker, no

problem, no racism. (27-year-old female, arrived in Italy at the age of six, Albania)

5. Recognising and Resisting Everyday Racism

The excerpts above highlight the fundamental ambiguity and opacity of micro-insults and micro-invalidations. The references to the hierarchical character of the in-group/out-group relationship constitute an implicit premise: It is generally taken for granted and is hardly ever stated directly. The vocabulary used also refers to differences defined in terms of cultural stereotypes: You are different from what you should be as an Albanian, Brazilian, Togolese, and so on, and this is why I recognise you as similar to me. Ethno-racial hierarchy is taken for granted and is invisible because the situation is perfectly consistent with what is expected.

As a result, those who suffer a microaggression may have difficulty recognising it and successfully attributing a racist meaning to it; an aspect that may affect the possibility of an immediate reaction:

I was always considered different, so how can you react, if someone doesn't invite you to a birthday party because you are a foreigner? You can't say you have to invite him, you can't even make requests because they can simply tell you: "I'm not inviting you because we are not friends." On the other hand, I was also younger, so I felt bad because, obviously, you feel bad. These are all experiences that you carry inside you. (27-year-old female, arrived in Italy at the age of six, Albania)

Many aspects of everyday experience that for the majority may be taken for granted because they are unproblematic—and which for that very reason denote an implicit condition of privilege—become for those who are subjected to inappropriate attention and often feel out of place a constant source of anxiety and frustration.

Not only that: The frequent feeling of unease makes the racialised subjects much more aware of how the meaning of social experience depends on the ability to recognise a series of implicit premises and to activate specific interpretative frames (E. Goffman, 1974).

In this regard, Essed (1991) emphasises the importance of understanding how a subject builds up a set of information, practical and theoretical, regarding racism. By distinguishing "racist ideas" from "ideas about racism," Essed highlights that understanding racism involves a problematisation of social reality. A common theme in the interviewees' narratives is learning from direct experience what can be interpreted as racism. The repeated exposure to different forms of microaggressions reveals a discriminatory reality that not everyone expected or was prepared to cope with:

I began to realise certain things....Here is a trivial example: I went into a café I used to go to every day

to have a coffee. The waitress was always talking to old people who usually were there early in the morning. She never gives the slightest shit about me, but I'm in a hurry, I have to go to work, I'm in a hurry, I only have 10 minutes to drink coffee and have a brioche, but she would not care about me, she would make me the coffee when she decides to, she never [respects me]. Even if I'm buying coffee and I'm paying, she doesn't behave with me the same way she does with other people. (26-year-old male, born in Italy to parents from Ghana)

The possibility of recognising microaggressions is the outcome of a gradual process ("I began to realise"). The interviewee reports that, over time, he started perceiving a difference in treatment and, based on repeated exposure to similar incidents ("I went every day"), finally traced it back to the discriminatory purpose of his interlocutor.

The formal learning opportunities provided by the school and the media seem to have little relevance to this process. All the people interviewed reported how racism is seldom spoken of at school and when it does happen, it is always in connection to the Italian colonial past.

The two spheres in which they experienced the possibility of learning how to recognise and deal with microaggressions are the family and the friendship circle. The case of Me (31 years old, arrived in Italy as a child from Morocco) is significant. He told us that, as a boy, he was teased by his peers with "impertinent" nicknames and that he did not care because no one had ever told him they were derogatory terms until, after witnessing the violent reaction of one of his friends towards the person who was insulting him, he realised that it was a way of insulting him for his different origin: "I had not given it the weight that word should have."

As far as coping strategies and tactics are concerned, Sue (2010) distinguishes three levels: (a) cognitive, concerning the thoughts that are developed about the incident, its nature, and the questions about a possible reaction; (b) emotional, concerning what the individuals involved feel (such as anger, frustration, fear, impatience); and (c) behavioural, concerning the response. In general, the reaction is strongly intertwined with the severity of the episode, and the latter depends on recognising intentionality attributable to one's interlocutor. Non-reaction is reported as the most frequent response by our interviewees:

I let it pass because, in the end, I have nothing to hide, it's not like I can argue about it because you say he [the policeman] has more power than me in the sense that he could denounce me, do something to me, create trouble. So you say, ok, I'll give him the document even if you believe that I am a criminal only because of my skin colour. You try for a moment to go along with it also because you see these videos in America where black men are killed just because they are black. So, you try to protect yourself and not

clash with the police force. (31-year-old male, arrived in Italy at the age of three, Morocco)

The reasons for not reacting are diverse: from the ambiguity of the situation that does not allow a clear interpretation to indecision in the response, from the perception of having limited time available (so the incident is over before even the possibility of reacting) to denial (convincing oneself that nothing bad has happened), from a sense of powerlessness whereby reacting or not reacting does not change the outcome to fear of the consequences. Even to the point of "self-aggrandisement" in order to prevent the most embarrassing situations, as this interviewee recounts:

The ugliest thing that happened to me is when this year I offered to tutor some middle and primary school kids….Initially, people contacted me a lot and I didn't think I had to specify that I don't have Italian parents. I mean, I didn't think it was a problem. [When] this boy even came to my house the first time, his mother asked me: "But are you Italian?" I replied: "I was born here, but my parents are not Italian." And she said: "Don't worry, I don't have a problem with this." From that [point] on, I never saw her again. From that moment [on], I started to specify that I am not Italian, in the sense that I study here, I live here, I was born here, but my parents are of Tunisian origin….I didn't think it was a problem. (18-year-old female, born in Italy to Tunisian parents)

6. Discussion

The analysis of the interviews revealed that all participants have repeatedly been victims of different types of racial microaggressions but that, in most cases, they preferred not to react. Our interviewees learnt from their direct experience the fundamental ambiguity of many manifestations—daily, colour-blind, and politically correct—of contemporary racism. In the absence of a direct attack that could substantiate the accusation of racism, the offender may have a good game in denying any offensive intention. As Sue (2010, p. 110) reminds us: "We do not want to be racist–so much of the time we go around trying not to be, by pretending we are not." In agreement with Bonilla-Silva (2012), one can speak of racial grammar that shapes our common sense and proceeds by naturalising and hierarchising differences to the point that, in some cases, the opacity of the situation and the difficulty of anticipating the reactions of possible witnesses can lead victims even to question their own capacity for judgement.

If giving a voice and a name to experiences of discrimination is the first step to combat them (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), awareness of their pervasiveness represents the outcome of a long and complex learning process that involves the acquisition of a set of knowledge thanks to which one can problematise

the common-sense interpretative schemes that make widespread racism invisible. A kind of knowledge that is not static and acquired once and for all:

> [It must always be] consistently adapted and modified to include new information. New experiences are tested and interpreted in terms of earlier acquired notions of racism and add to or (partly) replace parts of previous representations of racism. In other words, knowledge of racism is a process of constant intake, testing and interpretation of new information and remodelling of previous representations. (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 74)

Finally, the acquisition of this awareness has a substantial impact on the identity level, which can translate into a more intense affirmation of one's being Italian and a claim to one's right to participate in collective life, which benefits from the innovative use of the vocabulary and grammar of citizenship.

Finally, our analysis highlights how often microaggressions are perceived regarding a visible difference, which relates to physical appearance and is therefore traceable, albeit without naming it, to race. Difference defined in ethno-cultural terms is also a way of establishing the boundaries of national belonging. However, when skin colour causes one to be automatically labelled as a foreigner or when one is told that he or she is too white to embody the *carioca* culture, it is again the colour line that defines diversity. This feature, not surprisingly, is relevant because it shows how the racial question is still very important in Italy and that an interpretation of contemporary racism in a differentialist or cultural key (Barker, 1981) is not able to account for its multifarious manifestations. While it is unquestionable that difference defined in ethno-cultural terms today performs a discursive function homologous to that which race played in race theory, legitimising discrimination and social exclusion, the issue of race, though muted, has by no means disappeared in contemporary Italy.

7. Conclusion

It seems appropriate to dwell on some specificities of the Italian case, which can help us connect the everyday experience of racism, as perceived and narrated by those who are racialised, with the more structural dimension that microaggressions reactivate.

In Italy, there is a lack of awareness of racism as a system of reproduction of inequalities that is substantiated not only by widespread physical violence against members of minorities but also by a common sense steeped in stereotypes that, by racialising or ethnicising others, implicitly imposes whiteness as a standard of reference.

Racism, says the dominant vulgate, as a system of thought is a relic of the past: The categories on which it is based—that of race above all—are without foundation; it is sometimes manifested explicitly and brutally by a fanatical minority, etc. Seen from another angle, however, it constitutes a kind of blind spot in national culture. To realise this, one only has to think of the difficulty with which only in recent years has one begun to reflect on the Italian colonial experience. As Igiaba Scego, an Afro-descendant writer, recounts in her novel *The Colour Line*, Italy seems to have a clear problem with its colonial past and with the twenty-year fascist period (Filippi, 2020, 2021). As Morning and Maneri (2022) show, the reference to a past in which racism manifested itself as anti-Semitism together with the consideration of the connection between racism and slavery as an eminently American issue may explain the difficulty in recognising how the colour line constitutes a well-present element in today's Italian society.

There is basically no glimpse either on the part of those who in the stories and experiences of our interviewees often unwittingly feed inferiorising and stigmatising representations of otherness or on the part of the protagonists of the public debate (politicians, experts, public intellectuals columnists) an awareness of the fact that if the differences that constituted the core of racist ideology until the end of World War II are by no means objective, nevertheless the consequences that this ideology—and the policies that have been legitimised by it—has produced are still very much present and relevant in Italian society.

In this sense, we agree with those who assert that there is nothing more artificial today than a non-racist perception of society and that the colour line manifests itself as much in the way in which a political response to the challenges posed by international migration has been attempted so far as in the light-heartedness and unawareness with which the dominant position of a white, Italian subject is continually and implicitly reaffirmed in everyday interactions.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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