Microaggression: Conceptual and Scientific Issues

Emma McClure (University of Toronto)
Regina Rini (York University)

Abstract:　　　　Scientists, philosophers, and policymakers disagree about how to define microaggression. Here we offer a taxonomy of existing definitions, clustering around (a) the psychological motives of perpetrators, (b) the experience of victims, and (c) the functional role of microaggression in oppressive social structures. We consider conceptual and epistemic challenges to each and suggest that progress may come from developing novel hybrid accounts of microaggression, combining empirically tractable features with sensitivity to the testimony of victims.

Microaggressions remain a contentious subject. A brief Google News search reveals a vast array of competing definitions. To give just a few examples, consider a recent press release from the U.S. Department of Justice (2018), written in response to the University of Michigan's attempt to ban conscious and unconscious expressions of bias, like microaggressions:

> The United States' Statement of Interest argues that the University of Michigan's Statement of Student Rights and Responsibilities, which prohibits "harassment," "bullying," and "bias," is unconstitutional because it offers no clear, objective definitions of the violations. Instead, the Statement refers students to a wide array of "examples of various interpretations that exist for the terms," many of which depend on a listener's subjective reaction to speech… It encourages students to report any suspected instances of bias, advising them: "[t]he most important indication of bias is your own feelings."

The Department of Justice and University of Michigan both emphasize the subjective feelings of the target, but this method of defining microaggressions is diametrically opposed to the one suggested in other recent reports. *USA Today* quotes Roberto Montenegro, a psychiatric expert at Seattle Children's Hospital who studies the biological effects of discrimination: "It isn't about having your feelings hurt. It's

about how being repeatedly dismissed and alienated and insulted and invalidated reinforces the differences in power and privilege, and how this perpetuates racism and discrimination" (Dastagir, 2018). Montenegro focuses his research on racism and transphobia, but differences in power and privilege occur along many other axes of oppression. In a similar vein, the *New York Times'* Michelle Golberg writes that Islamophobic and anti-Semitic microaggressions are "inadvertent slights that are painful because they echo whole histories of trauma," rather than isolated incidents of hurt feelings (2019). Bianca Barratt at *Forbes* attempts to combine all of the above views in her discussion of sexist microaggressions. "So what does a microaggression look like in action?" she asks: "it often falls into either one of two camps: biased actions that feel discriminatory… and comments that signal, at best, insensitivity and, at worst, derogatory views" (2018).

One might hope that the scholarly discourse would be more unified in its definitions, but as we'll demonstrate below, the same disagreements appear. In his recent critique of the Microaggression Research Project (MRP), psychologist Scott Lilienfeld (2017) echoes the concern raised by the Department of Justice: "How can we know whether a given microaggression occurred or was merely imagined?" (145).[1] This question turns out to stand for a number of complicated epistemological and metaphysical questions. Their answers will depend upon which definition of microaggression we accept. We will show that scientists and philosophers who study microaggressions fall into three broad camps, which we will call Psychological, Experiential, and Structural. Lilienfeld's challenge primarily targets the first of these three camps. We consider prospects for sustaining either of the other accounts – or, perhaps most promising of all, a hybrid approach. Ultimately, we suggest that the concept of microaggression does need to be refined, and we hope scholars in all fields of study will continue exploring these alternatives.

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[1] Lilienfeld (2017) raises problems for each of the "five core assumptions" (140) of the MRP. In this paper, we consider four of these five broad concerns. Previously, only one of Lilienfeld's problems has been considered at length in the philosophy literature in McClure (2019).

Three Types of Definitions

An example will help us to become more exact about the three definitions that appear in scholarly research on microaggressions:

Donna, an African-American woman, is working the register at a convenience store near the airport. Yumiko, a young Japanese woman, enters the store. Yumiko has never been to America before; she just got off the plane from Tokyo an hour ago. When she brings her purchase to the front, she places her cash on the counter, just as she always does in Japan. When Donna tries to hand her the change, she hesitates, though eventually she accepts it.

Donna has no idea that Yumiko just came from Japan, nor does she know about the Japanese custom regarding money-passing: in Japan the norm is to place cash in a small tray on the counter. By contrast, in the U.S. it is normal to pass cash hand-to-hand. Donna, like many other African-American retail employees, has noticed that people of other ethnicities avoid making physical contact with her during these transactions (Sue 2010, 71). Given her past experiences, Donna perceives Yumiko's hesitation as a typical microaggression. Yet if you were to follow Yumiko the next several days, you'd notice that she does the same thing to every retail employee, regardless of ethnicity.

Meanwhile, Yumiko has left the store. But now in walks Angela, Yumiko's Japanese-American cousin whom she has come to visit. Angela was born in America. She's never been to Japan, and she doesn't know anything about Japanese money-passing customs; she is thoroughly American in culture. Unfortunately, that means she harbors some unconscious American racism. When Donna goes to hand Angela her change, Angela hesitates before accepting the direct contact. Again, Donna perceives this treatment as a typical microaggression. And if you were to follow Angela the next several days, you'd see that she does indeed treat African-American retail

employees a bit differently than everyone else; she does not hesitate in the same way when

she's being helped by non-Black workers.

A theory of microaggression should be able to answer two questions about the above example: (1)

Which of these women committed a microaggression, and (2) which feature(s) makes their action count

as microaggressive? As we will see, accounts of microaggression can be sorted by their differing

answers to these questions.

Psychological Accounts

Yumiko and Angela have done the exact same thing. They each hesitated before receiving

money from Donna. And Donna perceived their actions as the same, each expressing a microaggressive

racial insult. But there is at least one difference between the cases. Yumiko's hesitation was caused by

her unfamiliarity with American cultural practices, while Angela's hesitation was caused by an

unconscious mental state of prejudice against African-Americans. On some views of microaggression,

this difference in mental state is crucial.

Lilienfeld (2017) would answer our two questions by saying (1) only Angela counts as

committing a microaggression because (2) only she was motivated by prejudice. In his paper, while

listing key assumptions of the Microaggressive Research Project (MRP), he includes the claim:

"Microaggression reflect implicitly prejudicial and implicitly aggressive motives" (159). Lilienfeld appears

to assume that all researchers in the MRP adopt what we'll call a *Psychological Account* of

microaggressions:

A Psychological Account defines microaggressions based upon an (unconscious) mental state in

the microaggression perpetrator, as a causal antecedent of the act.

However, Lilienfeld immediately points out the problem with definitions that hinge on the mental state

of the perpetrator. Recipients of microaggressions don't have access to the perpetrator's mental state:

the presumed microaggressions that are widely accepted in the MRP literature (e.g., Sue et al.,

2007) may be an undetermined mix of (a) intentional statements reflecting actual prejudice, (b)

well-intentioned but implicitly prejudicial statements, (c) culturally insensitive faux pas that do

not reflect implicit prejudice, and (d) entirely innocuous statements that are misinterpreted by

recipients. (159)

Our example demonstrates the force of Lilienfeld's worry: Donna isn't tracking the presence or absence

of prejudice. She *inaccurately* perceives Yumiko as committing a microaggression, even though Yumiko's

act falls into group (c), culturally insensitive faux pas, rather than the prejudicial acts of groups (a) or (b).

Lilienfeld makes this worry even more forceful by pointing out that the MRP tends to rely solely

on recipient self-report, and observers can disagree about whether an act arises from prejudiced or

neutral motivations: "If Minority Group Member A interprets an ambiguous statement directed toward

her… as patronizing or indirectly hostile, whereas Minority Group Member B interprets it as supportive

or helpful, should it be classified as a microaggression?" (143). Returning to our example, imagine that a

coworker had been present during the interactions with Donna: Ijeoma, a Nigerian immigrant, who isn't

offended by either Yumiko or Angela and thinks Black Americans tend to be too sensitive to perceived

racism. These two minority group members disagree about whether a microaggression was committed.

In real-life examples, where we can't stipulate the perpetrator's unconscious motivations, we would

have no way of independently verifying who is correct. For these reasons, Lilienfeld argues that recipient

self-report is an unreliable indicator of prejudicial motives, and research on microaggressions needs to

be rethought.

Lilienfeld's challenge is especially problematic for the creator of the concept of microaggression,

Harvard psychiatrist Chester Pierce. Pierce (1970) defined microaggressions as "offensive tactics" that

arise from "feelings of superiority" in the white majority (265). More recently, philosophers like Kristie

Dotson (2011) and Mark Tschaepe (2016) have defined microaggressions in relation to pernicious,

interfering ignorance, which also resides (unseen) in the mind of the perpetrator. All these authors

emphasize the psychological state of the perpetrator, and their Psychological Accounts must explain

how targets of (apparent) microaggressions can have reliable access to the unconscious mental states of

other people. What prevents Donna's inaccurate perception of Yumiko—or Ijeoma's inaccurate

perception of Angela—from being the norm rather than the exception? And if recipient self-report is not

reliable, then how else could we study microaggressions?

Lilienfeld's challenge also seems to be a problem for Derald Wing Sue, the psychologist who

popularized microaggressions in the early 2000s. In his book on microaggressions, Sue (2010) highlights

unconscious bias in the mind of the perpetrator, but he has a response to worries about relying on

victim's self-report. He argues that recognizing unconscious bias is a necessary survival skill for members

of marginalized groups: "Accurate perception means the ability to read between the lines, to see

beyond the obvious, and to become aware of inconsistencies between verbal and nonverbal behaviors

of oppressors. For people of color, for example, it has meant vigilance in discerning the motives,

attitudes, and the unintentional biased contradictions of White people" (73). More recently, Ornaith

O'Dowd (2018) has offered a similar argument in the philosophical literature, highlighting the relative

reliability of marginalized people's perceptions, when compared to privileged people's self-reflection

about their own motivations: "I am vulnerable to self-deception that may lead me morally astray; likely,

the target understands the context better than I" (1230).

This is a natural way to defend Psychological Accounts of microaggressions. Unfortunately, this

attempt quickly runs into difficulties. Lilienfeld (2017) has a second, linked argument that targets Sue's

reply. He argues that constant exposure to oppression may make marginalized people *less* reliable

perceivers of discrimination, since these exposures may have caused them to develop a set of

personality traits that psychologists call "negative emotionality" (NE): "the MRP has all but ignored the

potentially crucial role of negative emotionality... NE is a pervasive temperamental disposition to

experience aversive emotions of many kinds, including anxiety, worry, moodiness, guilt, shame, hostility, irritability, and perceived victimization" (153). Negative emotionality could lead members of marginalized groups to feel victimized even in the absence of prejudicial motives, as happens in our example when Donna mistakenly assumes that Yumiko has committed a microaggression.

However, contra Lilienfeld, Williams (2019) and Kanter et al 2017 have offered preliminary data showing that victim's negative reaction tends to be an accurate indicator of the perpetrator's prejudice. This remains a very active and unresolved disagreement in the empirical literature, which we'll return to in the Future Directions Section.

Experiential Accounts

In his more recent work, Sue (2017) has responded to Lilienfeld's NE objection by moving in a different direction. He now seems to commit to what we'll call an *Experiential Account*:

An Experiential Account defines microaggressions based upon the phenomenological mental state in the microaggression victim, as a causal consequence of the act.

An Experiential Account would say that (1) *both* Yumiko and Angela committed a microaggression, because (2) their actions caused Donna to experience a race-based slight. Donna's experience itself is what settles the matter; the incident counts as microaggressive simply because of how Donna experienced it. Adopting this account allows Sue to avoid both of Lilienfeld's worries. Donna experiences the microaggressions, even though her coworker, Ijeoma, does not. Disagreement is based on differences between each woman's phenomenological state that determine whether or not she, personally, experienced a microaggression. Negative emotionality may lead Donna to be more susceptible to microaggressions than Ijeoma, but she's not wrong about the negative reaction that she experienced as a causal consequence of Yumiko's and Angela's reluctance to touch her hand. Therefore, Donna is not wrong to call the acts microaggressions.

However, as Sue (2017) realizes, this answer to Lilienfeld comes with a cost. Sue claims that the subjectivity involved in his Experiential Account goes against the traditions of empirical science, including psychological science:

> Lilienfeld's critique is problematic, not because the points he makes are invalid, but because he fails to acknowledge the limitations of psychological science to the study of the human condition and uses the inherent values of empiricism to determine truth...The study of microaggressions is a complex scientific challenge… It is more than quantification, objectification, and logic/rationality. It is a study of powerful emotions, subjective experiences, biases, values, and beliefs, as well as especially the pain and suffering of oppression. (171)

Sue concludes that microaggressions are not appropriately studied using traditional scientific methods, and researchers must instead trust the emotional experiences of marginalized groups.

If Sue's retreat from empirical science seems too quick, Saba Fatima (2017) provides a more philosophical argument for why we should be suspicious of 'objectivity.' Drawing from the work of Jeanine Schroer, Fatima demonstrates how emphasizing 'objectively' verifiable facts tends to disrespect and dehumanize the marginalized people who are sharing their stories. As Schroer (2015) writes:

> The focus on quantifying the harm, ignores the significance of expressing the hurt… The continued development of stereotype threat and microaggression research is its own form of testimony. It testifies to the central import of interpreting and experiencing one's life, including the pain, through sharing it with others, not to prove your injury, but instead to demonstrate your humanity. (104-5)

Fatima further adds that in the case of microaggressions, "reason" and "objectivity" have been used to silence and gaslight women of color (148). She argues that those targeted by microaggressions should "be strong" and trust their own perceptions of the event (149), even if there is no way for those perceptions to be verified by the (white) majority or scientific standards of objectivity. Fatima shares

Sue's view that taking microaggressions seriously requires turning away from the skepticism of empirical science and employing other methods of study based on trust and empathy.[2]

At this point, prospects for the Microaggression Research Project look somewhat stark: follow Lilienfeld's suggestions for radically rethinking the concept of microaggressions or follow Sue and abandon the project of objective scientific research. But there is room for more nuance here, as we will see below. First, let's turn to a third option for defining microaggression..

Structural Accounts

Daniel G. Solórzano (1998) was the first to develop a structural approach to defining microaggressions, connecting racial and gender microaggressions to legal scholarship on Critical Race Theory (CRT): "Critical race theory recognizes that the experiential knowledge of women and men of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination" (122). In CRT, experiential knowledge is valuable because it reveals society-wide structures of institutional racism. As Solórzano says in a more recent paper, co-authored with Lindsay Pérez Huber: "we offer a racial microaggressions model that can help researchers analyze how everyday experiences with racism are more than an individual experience, but part of a larger systemic racism that includes institutional and ideological forms" (2015, 301).

We will call this kind of model a *Structural Account* of microaggressions:

A Structural Account defines microaggressions based upon their functional role within an oppressive social system, with multiple possible causal realizers.

This account has much in common with an Experiential Account, but the emphasis on institutional discrimination adds an important, distinguishing feature: Structural Accounts do not depend upon the mental state of either the perpetrator or the victim in any particular case. Returning to our example,

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[2] See also Rini (ms, chapter 2) for a sustained development of another Experiential Account.

Pérez Huber and Solórzano would say that (1) Donna is correct in her assessment of both incidents, because (2) her interactions with Yumiko and Angela occurred in the U.S., where structural and interpersonal discrimination against Blacks is rampant, and where this particular microaggression (selectively avoiding physical contact with Blacks) has played a causal role in perpetuating discrimination.

Pérez Huber and Solórzano (2015) leave the details of their model somewhat vague, but it has since been more precisely articulated in philosophical research (McTernan, 2017; Friedlaender, 2018; Freeman and Stewart, 2018). Christina Friedlaender (2018) sheds light on how Structural Accounts can avoid the problems that Lilienfeld raises for Psychological Accounts:

> As contextually defined acts, microaggressions are communicative in accordance with their background conditions… [B]y linking microaggressions to structural oppression in this way, there is a stronger case for showing how microaggressions occur in patterned ways and with a certain frequency. If perpetrators argue that their acts are not microaggressions, we can point to a pattern of similar acts that have historically and currently manifested in relation to an objectively existing form of structural oppression. (9)

A similar emphasis appears in Emily McTernan's claim that microaggressions perform a particular functional role in oppressive social structures. Microaggressions, like other forms of oppression, remind marginalized people of their vulnerable position in social hierarchies, but they do so in a distinctive way that is hard to identify or combat. As McTernan puts it: "the very innocuousness of microaggressions is essential to their being able to perform these roles in perpetuating troubling status hierarchies, through contributing to the pervasiveness of the ranking system across a life" (McTernan, 2017, 271).

This emphasis on structure provides an answer to Lilienfeld's first worry. Background social conditions determine with certainty whether a microaggression has occurred, and the self-report of victims is reliable if it corresponds to the microaggressive act's playing a role in broader structures of

systemic discrimination. The emphasis on structure also neatly sidesteps Lilienfeld's second worry.

Different personality types may experience microaggressions differently without disrupting the central

premises of the Microaggression Research Project. Some victims may experience prejudice where there

is none, and others may fail to see oppression when it is present. But there is an objective fact of the

matter, determined by the act's functional role in social structure, and many microaggression victims

are indeed reliable with regard to detecting that role.

The Structural Account answers Lilienfeld's worries by settling these metaphysical facts, though

the worries rearise as soon as we consider the epistemological question: how do we know which specific

actions contribute to oppression? It may be difficult to settle disagreement about whether any token

action truly plays a functional role in oppressive social structures, given the vast size and complexity of

social systems. It's true that if marginalized people are better at detecting prejudice, this will help decide

disagreements between marginalized and privileged observers. But what about cases where members

of marginalized communities disagree among themselves? If Ijeoma were the one working the counter

and she claimed she was not offended by the exchange, should we believe her? Or should we believe

Donna, who witnessed the exchange, and claimed that the act perpetuated the oppression of Black

people? In these cases, the Structural Account risks making these situations epistemically irresolvable in

much the same way as the Psychological Account.[3]

Avenues for Future Research

We've seen that the three main approaches to defining microaggression each have drawbacks.

The Psychological and Structural Accounts both risk making disagreements about microaggression

irresolvable (at least in some cases), while the Experiential Account avoids this epistemic problem at the

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[3] For more on this point, see Rini (2020).

cost of abandoning objectivity. In this section, we will consider options for future research, aiming to address problems among these accounts by drawing together their most promising features.

We suggest two different ways forward. Each is an attempt to hybridize the Experiential Account with one of the other two Accounts; the goal is to preserve the Experiential Account's priority on the lived experience of microaggression victims while incorporating the objectivity of the others. When fully developed, such a hybrid may be able to address epistemic challenges without completely dissociating from objective phenomena.

Psychological/Experiential Account

The first option is to return to the Psychological Account, aiming to meet Lilienfeld's challenge directly. That challenge, recall, was that on the Psychological Account, the objective existence conditions for microaggression are contained in the (often unconscious) motives of an alleged perpetrator. But how is the victim supposed to reliably know what is going on in another person's head? How do we rule out Lilienfeld's suggestion that some victims may be imagining prejudice where there is none?

One might reply by drawing on the broad resources of standpoint epistemology (originated by Code, 1991, Collins 1991): if members of marginalized groups have epistemically privileged access to their own oppression, then they would be better at identifying microaggressions. However, Crasnow (2013) points out the difficulties with this kind of argument, and it may be too theoretical to satisfy empiricists like Lilienfeld.

Thus we would need some sort of empirical test: are marginalized people really better at detecting prejudiced mental states than others? The current empirical record seems mixed. A study by Kanter et al (2017) found a correlation between Black participants' perception of microaggressive statements as racist and negative racial attitudes in whites who indicated a willingness to make those statements. In other words, Black participants do seem to accurately perceive something of the

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motivations in microaggressors (though perhaps only dispositionally, as the research did not test specific instances).[4] On the other hand, a study by Tao et al (2017) found *no difference* between Black and white participants' evaluations of videotapes of variably ambiguous microaggression scenarios. This seems to count against the claim that marginalized people have enhanced access to the truth about these situations.

It may be that a direct empirical test of enhanced psychological access hypothesis is vanishingly difficult to execute, at least by the standards of typical experimental psychology. The problem is that we would need a battery of *uncontroversial* instances of people acting from prejudiced motives, reproducible under experimental conditions in a psychology lab. But it is difficult to do this, because uncontroversial cases are likely to be so blunt and obvious that any specialized prejudice-detection among marginalized participants will be statistically swamped by background agreement among nearly everyone. And any case detected by *only* members of marginalized groups is likely to be controversial, and prone to challenge by microaggression skeptics. This may be an inescapably circular problem with empirically demonstrating microaggression: any case subtle enough to generate different patterns of prejudice-detection will also be too controversial to scientifically demonstrate the role of prejudice. In other words, trying to meet the challenge in this way seems only to displace the epistemic irresolvability of microaggression onto the test items in any prejudice-detection experiment.

Another option might be to revive an old methodological idea from early perceptual psychology. Critics like Lilienfeld complain that much microaggression research relies upon qualitative focus group methodology, rather than naïve subject experimentation: e.g. "To generate microaggression items, Constantine, Smith, Redington, and Owens (2008) selected African American faculty in counseling psychology and counseling programs who 'acknowledge(d) that subtle racism continues to exist in U.S. society' and reported 'personal experiences with subtle forms of racism in America'" (Lilienfeld, 2017,

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[4] See also Williams (2019) for an overview of related research.

149). But psychology has a long history of relying on experienced observers. A hundred years ago E.B. Titchener, one of the founders of the discipline of scientific psychology, advocated focusing on the introspective experience of trained experts in perceptual psychology (Titchener, 1917). As Eric Schwitzgebel explains, for Titchener "it was standard to rely exclusively on observers with graduate training in psychology and thus presumably with at least some months, and often several or more years, of intensive experience with introspective methods" (Schwitzgebel, 2011, 74). In other words: Titchener assumed that trained experts were useful research participants. Returning to modern times, on Sue's experiential view, members of marginalized groups *are* the trained experts on detecting prejudice— precisely because of their personal experience with subtle racism. Accordingly, proponents of microaggression theory may wish to re-examine Titchener's approach as a forerunner to modern qualitative methodology. This has the advantage of shifting the terms of debate, from whether existing research meets contemporary methodological standards to *which* methodology is appropriate for an intrinsically subtle phenomenon.

Structural/Experiential Account

We'll turn now to prospects for hybridizing the Structural Account. Recall that here the problem is with settling disagreements over whether a particular act counts as a microaggression, especially when the disagreeing parties are members of the same marginalized group. On the Structural Account, there is an objective fact about who is correct in such disagreements: the act in question either does or does not play a particular functional role in an oppressive social system. The epistemic problem is that it will often be difficult to assess whether any specific claim of this sort is correct, given the size and complexity of social systems. We can advance speculative claims about the functional relationship between a particular act and a vast social system, but it will be hard to demonstrate to the satisfaction

of doubters. There's a risk that some claims of this sort are unfalsifiable, given the malleability of social structural explanations.

One route might be to turn again to empirical social science, but this time avoid the individualistic orientation of psychology and further incorporate the insights of the Experiential Account through studying a broader range of victim narratives. Torino et al. (2018) have recently suggested that the "future of microaggression theory" requires a "systematic, transdisciplinary empirical research program" (325). Interdisciplinarity would allow proponents of the Structural Account to find better tests in the methods of social-level disciplines, like sociology, organizational psychology, and economics. We will highlight two particularly promising interdisciplinarity connections.

The first would be for Structural Accounts to adopt the framework of organizational psychologist Mary Rowe, who coined the term 'micro-inequity' to describe hard-to-identify systemic unfairness in corporate and university environments (Rowe, 1977). Unlike psychological approaches, Rowe de-emphasizes the motives of individual perpetrators, instead focusing her analysis on the structural effects of repeated unequal treatment and how those effects can be counteracted at the level of institutions. Shifting the paradigm from Sue's microaggression to Rowe's micro-inequity would also allow researchers to study harms that arise from unequal distribution of positive microaffirmations (Brennan, 2013)—another promising route for future research. If, however, Structural Accounts choose to stay focused purely on microaggressions, they could revisit the work of legal scholar Peggy Davis (1989), who studied the functional role of microaggressions in legal institutions. She argues that microaggressions have been institutionalized in the structure of our court systems—not just in the actions or motives of individual jurists, but in the laws themselves. (See also Freeman and Stewart 2018 for a discussion of how microaggressions have been institutionalized in the medical field's treatment of patients.) Alternatively, Structural Accounts could draw inspiration from philosopher Ron Mallon's work on the material consequences of social science concepts. Rather than focusing on individual psychology,

Mallon has argued that the conceptual boundaries of some marginalized categories (such as race) may be fixed by what he calls "accumulation mechanisms" – the long-term economic and material impact of microaggressions and other forms of prejudice (Mallon, 2018).

But the above are still broadly theoretic approaches. Will they satisfy empirically-minded challengers? A second route might be to start linking these theoretic frameworks to empirical work that does not explicitly study microaggression. For example, there is a substantial literature on 'CV effects': are equally-qualified applicants for jobs evaluated differently when they have typically female or Black names (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004; Moss-Racusin et al 2012)? Not all of the behaviors studied necessarily count as microaggressions; some may be overt discrimination instead. But consider a large study of US government agencies by a group of economists (Giulietti, Tonin and Vlassopoulos 2017). They emailed 19,000 local government offices requesting simple information, such as opening hours. Emails from white-sounding names received a higher response rate than those from Black-sounding names; white citizens were also more likely to get a polite reply. Not getting a reply to a minor email is an everyday problem, and this research demonstrates that it is systematically correlated with membership in a marginalized category. That looks like empirical demonstration of a small slight's functional role in a larger social system—exactly the sort of thing that an amended Structural Account of microaggression needs to posit. Similar methodologies should be able to generate many more examples.

There may still be a problem with this approach. At best, it can show only that action *types* play functional roles in oppressive social structures. It cannot show that any particular *token* action plays such a role. This means that we are still unable to settle disagreements about the functional relationship between any specific instance and a social structure – maybe this one time it really was just an innocent misunderstanding, not causally related to systemic oppression at all. The response to this worry needs to be conceptual rather than empirical: Structural Account theorists must say that all instances of the type count as a microaggressive in virtue of their type relationship (and the statistically demonstrated

functional role of that type in social structures), not in virtue of the particular cause and effect of that individual act. In other words, it doesn't matter whether the token was an innocent misunderstanding if the type clearly counts as microaggressive.

Will this satisfy critics? That depends on the nature of their criticism. If their point is meant to be conceptual or scientific (as in Lilienfeld's case) then this response seems like it might work. The empirical claims are falsifiable, and the conceptual links between type and token are clear. But if the criticism is moral or political, there's more work to be done. Can we morally blame a person for perpetrating a microaggressive act-type when we can't be sure whether the token act really has the appropriate functional linkage? What can we do in law or activism to fairly confront unwitting perpetrators? These are large unsettled questions. Hopefully progress on the conceptual and scientific background of microaggression will put us in a stronger position to answer them.

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