

The Jury's Still Out on What Constitutes a Microaggression

Musa al-Gharbi

The concept of microaggressions gained prominence with the publication of Sue et al.'s 2007, "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life," which defined microaggressions as communicative, somatic, environmental or relational cues that demean and/or disempower members of minority groups in virtue of their minority status.¹ Microaggressions, they asserted, are typically subtle and ambiguous. Often, they are inadvertent or altogether unconscious. For these reasons, they are also far more pervasive than other, more overt, forms of bigotry (which are less-tolerated in contemporary America). The authors propose a tripartite taxonomy of microaggressions:

- *Microassaults* involve explicit and intentional racial derogation;
- *Microinsults* involve rudeness or insensitivity towards another's heritage or identity;
- *Microinvalidations* occur when the thoughts and feelings of a minority group member seem to be excluded, negated or nullified as a result of their minority status.

Sue et al. go on to present anecdotal evidence suggesting that repeated exposure to microaggressions is detrimental to the well-being of minorities. Moreover, they assert, a lack of awareness about the prevalence and impact of microaggressions among mental health professionals could undermine the practice of clinical psychology—reducing the quality and accessibility of care for those who may need it most.

Towards the conclusion, however, the authors acknowledge the "nascent" state of research on microaggressions and call for further investigation. They emphasize that future studies should focus first and foremost on *empirically substantiating the harm caused by microaggressions, and documenting how people cope (or fail to cope) with experiencing them*. They suggest further research should also probe whether or not there is systematic variation as to who incurs microaggressions, which type or types of microaggressions particular populations tend to endure, how harmful microaggressions are to different groups, and in which contexts microaggressions tend to be more (or less) prevalent or harmful. Finally, the authors recommend expanding microaggression research to include incidents against gender and sexual minorities, and those with disabilities.

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The State of Microaggression Research Today

In the decade following Sue et al.'s landmark paper, there have been extensive discussions about microaggressions—among practitioners, in the academic literature, and increasingly, in popular media outlets and public forums. But unfortunately, very little empirical research has been conducted to actually substantiate the ubiquity of microaggressions, to systematically catalog the harm they cause, or to refine the authors' initial taxonomy.

In “Microaggressions: Strong Claims, Inadequate Evidence,” Scott Lilienfeld highlights five core premises undergirding the microaggression research program (MRP):²

1. Microaggressions are operationalized with sufficient clarity and consensus to afford rigorous scientific investigation.
2. Microaggressions are interpreted negatively by most or all minority group members.
3. Microaggressions reflect implicitly prejudicial and implicitly aggressive motives.
4. Microaggressions can be validly assessed using only respondents' subjective reports.
5. Microaggression exert an adverse impact on recipient's mental health.

His comprehensive meta-analysis suggests that there is “negligible” support for these axioms—individually or (especially) collectively.

However, Lilienfeld emphasizes, an absence of evidence regarding the prevalence and harm of microaggressions should *not* be interpreted as evidence of absence. Over the course of the essay he repeatedly asserts that it is “undeniable” that minorities regularly experience slights which could be construed as microaggressions; he acknowledges that these incidents are likely often deeply unpleasant or unsettling for affected minorities, and likely harmful in aggregate. Nonetheless, important research questions remain, namely: *how* harmful are microaggressions, for *whom*, in *what ways* and *under what circumstances*?

These are not just a matters of intellectual curiosity, but instead, prerequisites for crafting effective responses, evaluating attempted interventions, and minimizing iatrogenesis³ along the way. It is similarly critical to clarify and substantiate claims about microaggressions for the sake of blunting skepticism and resistance—particularly from those whose identity, perceived interests and routines are most likely to be challenged by reforms in social norms, practices and policies (i.e. those who are white, native-born, heterosexual, able in body and mind, economically-comfortable and/or men). Finally, it is essential to the continued integrity and credibility of social research that basic evidentiary standards be met—especially for strong psychological claims—particularly in light of how prominent and politicized the issue of microaggressions has become. In other words, it is in *everyone's* interest to address the profound conceptual and evidentiary shortcomings of the MRP literature to date.

Evidentiary Gaps

According to Lilienfeld, one of the most striking aspects of microaggression research is that over the course of nearly ten years, the literature has hardly advanced beyond the taxonomy and methods laid out in the original paper.

For instance, with regards to demonstrating the harm caused by microaggressions, there has been very little engagement with contemporary cognitive or behavioral research—and virtually no experimental testing. Instead, advocates have relied almost exclusively on small collections of anecdotal testimonies, from samples that are neither randomized nor established as representative of any particular population. This is problematic, Lilienfeld asserts, because the preponderance of contemporary social psychological research strongly suggests that the perception of, and response to, microaggressions would vary a great deal between and within minority populations as a result of individuals' particular situational, cognitive, psychological, cultural, and personality traits.⁴

It is important to account for these factors in order to isolate and better measure the potential harm caused by microaggressions. Identifying the impact of particular traits on microaggression response could also help researchers determine who is most sensitive to perceiving microaggressions, and who is most adversely affected by them—allowing for tailored interventions to better assist those who are particularly vulnerable.

Meanwhile, collecting information on the base-rate prevalence of microaggressions (relative to particular institutions or circumstances) can help researchers identify exemplary environments where these incidents seem relatively rare, as well as environments which seem especially toxic. This can help prioritize interventions and provide models for reform. This information is also essential for evaluating whether particular interventions seem to be increasing, decreasing or failing to impact the prevalence of microaggressions (without a base-line, it is impossible to measure progress)...not to mention determining how bad the problem is to begin with.

Conceptual Problems

Beyond the evidentiary gaps, Lilienfeld asserts that one of the biggest problems with microaggression literature is the lack of clarity on exactly what *constitutes* a microaggression, what *does not*, and *in virtue of what*. As things currently stand, the microaggression concept is so inclusive that even those committed to doing the “right thing” often find themselves in impossible situations. Consider the following example:

A white teacher puts forward a question the class. A number of students raise their hands to answer—including some minority students. According to the literature, if the teacher fails to call on the minority student(s), this could be interpreted as a microaggression by favoring the dominant perspectives at the expense of minorities. However, deciding to call on a minority student would merely create a new dilemma:

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if the instructor criticizes or challenges any aspect of the student's response, this could be construed as a microaggression as well: invalidating their perspective. On the other hand, if the teacher praises the student's answer as insightful or articulate, this might *also* be considered a microaggression: why should it be remarkable or noteworthy that the minority student provided an apt response?

That is, for those who are "privileged" (i.e. white, native-born, heterosexual, able in body and mind, economically-comfortable and/or a man), virtually anything one says or does could be construed as a microaggression.⁵ In such a climate it may seem desirable or even necessary for many to minimize interactions with those outside their identity group(s) in order to avoid needless (but otherwise seemingly inevitable) conflict.⁶ This is a major problem given that, according to Sue et al., the main purpose of the MRP is to foster broader and deeper openness, understanding, dialogue and cooperation.

Lilienfeld suggests that the term "microaggression" causes further polarization: "Aggression" implies hostile intent. Yet microaggressions, as defined in the literature, tend to involve neither hostility nor intent. Most violations are microinsults and microinvalidations—which are typically unintentional slights resulting from ignorance, insensitivity or unconscious bias among people of good-will.

By classifying such incidents as "aggressions," those who commit these *faux pas* as "perpetrators," and those who experience them as "victims" all parties involved become disposed towards responding to incidents in a confrontational rather than conciliatory fashion,⁷ as *both* sides feel unfairly maligned or mistreated.

Lilienfeld suggests advocates would be better served by revising terms and concepts to better capture the indirect and typically inadvertent nature of the phenomena in question. Microassaults, he argues, should probably be struck from the taxonomy altogether: the examples provided in the literature tend not to be "micro" at all, but outright assaults, intimidation, harassment and bigotry—even rising to the level of crimes in some instances. In contrast with microinvalidations or microinsults, microassaults are necessarily overt, intentional and hateful acts. Including these types of incidents as "microaggressions" is both unnecessary and confusing.⁸

Derald Wing Sue Responds

In "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life" Sue and his collaborators acknowledged the need for further empirical research on microaggressions, and suggested avenues future work should prioritize. Lilienfeld has argued that these recommendations have gone largely unheeded, and as a result, many of the authors' claims remain just as tenuous in 2017 as they were in 2007.

In a rejoinder,⁹ entitled “Microaggressions and ‘Evidence’: Empirical or Experiential Reality?” Sue declines to contest Lilienfeld’s overall picture. In fact, he acknowledges that the critiques are generally valid—adding that he actually shares many of the concerns Lilienfeld raised about the contemporary state of microaggression research.

Given this apparently broad agreement between Sue and Lilienfeld, most of the rest of the rejoinder proves perplexing. For instance, despite having called for further empirical research on multiple occasions himself, Sue claims (without support) that highlighting conceptual or evidentiary gaps in the MRP somehow undermines or negates the phenomenological significance of microaggressions. This assertion is particularly baffling given that Lilienfeld repeatedly calls for *greater* emphasis and attention to the subjective reality of microaggressions in the very paper Sue is responding to.

More confusing is Dr. Sue’s insinuation that it may not be necessary to experimentally validate microaggressions at all. He argues, psychology, science and empiricism are not the only ways of understanding human experience--nor are they necessarily the best method(s) in every instance. Of course, one anticipates Lilienfeld would simply agree with this point—albeit while insisting that context also matters with regards to which tools or frameworks are most useful or important:

In the 2007 essay and subsequent works, Dr. Sue was speaking *as a psychologist*, and relying on his credentials *as a psychologist* to publish and disseminate his work—often in journals related to the social and behavioral sciences or the clinical practice of psychology /psychiatry. Engaging in these capacities entails agreeing to the evidentiary, methodological and ethical norms or standards of one’s chosen profession or field. Lilienfeld was arguing that the current state of research on microaggressions seems to fall short in these regards—nothing more, nothing less. So there is a sense in which Sue’s response, evoking questions about the ultimate nature of truth or humanity, is more-or-less irrelevant to Lilienfeld’s arguments. It also seems deeply problematic for Sue to put forward microaggression research *as scientific* when this seems to lend credibility to his project, but then claim microaggressions need not be subject to empirical testing when faced with criticism.

Ultimately, Sue responds directly to only one of Lilienfeld’s 18 recommendations—namely that until microaggressions are better understood, we should be conservative in executing policies intended to address them. Sue condescendingly dismisses this suggestion, asserting that only “[t]hose in the majority group, those with power and privilege, and those who do not experience microaggressions are privileged to enjoy the luxury of waiting for proof.”

Such a reply is striking given the long and ignoble history of harm caused by hastily applied (and often later discredited) social and psychological research—with the costs borne primarily by women, people of color, the poor and other vulnerable populations.¹⁰ In other words, Lilienfeld’s advice should not be understood as an expression of privilege: guarding against *iatrogenesis* and adverse second order effects is important, including for minorities—in fact, on average these safeguards prove *especially* critical for minorities given their already more precarious socio-economic position.

In this instance, it seems plausible that poorly conceived or implemented policies intended to address microaggressions could endanger the free exchange of ideas, lead to unjustly severe consequences for minor (even unintentional) infractions, heighten animus between minority and majority groups, or even *exacerbate* the harm caused by microaggressions (for instance by making already-vulnerable individuals even more sensitive to perceived slights or injustices).¹¹ In virtually any of these eventualities everyone—including minorities—may be worse off than before. This possibility seems to warrant more than a snarky retort about Lilienfeld’s supposed privilege.

More reliable data on the prevalence and harm of microaggressions could help to avoid these negative externalities by enabling more nuanced policy responses from university administrators. Sue was correct in calling for this research in 2007, and Lilienfeld is correct in reaffirming that call ten years later.

¹ Sue, Derald et al. (2007). "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice." *American Psychologist* 62(4): 271-86.

² Lillienfeld, Scott (2017). "Microaggressions: Strong Claims, Inadequate Evidence." *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 12(1): 138-69.

³ For an accessible introduction to the concept of iatrogenesis as it relates to these issues see:

Ghraiba, Noomen (2006). "Adverse Effects and Iatrogenesis in Psychotherapy." *Psychotherapy in the Arab World* 9: 69-71.

⁴ For a good summary on the variable impacts of negative emotions on mental health, see:

Rodriguez, Tori (2013). "Negative Emotions Are Key to Well-Being." *Scientific American*, 1 May.

⁵ Campbell, Bradley & Jason Manning (2014). "Microaggressions and Moral Cultures." *Comparative Sociology* 13(6): 692-726.

⁶ For an examples of this mentality see:

Dreher, Rod (2017). "The Left, Feeding the Alt-Right." *The American Conservative*, 13 August.

⁷ For elaboration on this point see:

Haidt, Jonathan & Greg Lukianoff (2017). "Why It's a Really Bad Idea to Tell Students Words Are Violence." *The Atlantic*, 18 July.

⁸ Given that "microassaults" do not seem to make much analytic sense within the microaggression framework, why are they included? It is hard to resist the reality that adding them significantly inflates the perceived prevalence and harm of microaggressions. The harm caused by overt and intentional bigotry, harassment, physical altercations, etc. (counted as "microassaults") is much easier to demonstrate than the harm cause by subtle, typically unintentional slights. So it is convenient for MRP researchers to include "microassaults" even if they are not *micro* aggressions at all. Without including them, it would become *much* more difficult to empirically establish significant harm from microaggressions. Indeed, as Lillienfeld argues, even with the current taxonomy (which includes microassaults), this bar does not seem to have been met.

⁹ Sue, Derald (2017). "Microaggressions and 'Evidence': Empirical or Experiential Reality?" *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 12(1): 170-2.

¹⁰ For more on this point see:

Easterly, William (2015). *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Leonard, Thomas (2016). *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

¹¹ For more on these points:

al-Gharbi, Musa (2017). "A Lack of Ideological Diversity is Killing Social Research." *Times Higher Education*, 23 March.

ibid. (2015). "White People Are Not the Enemy." *Salon*, August 25.

Lukianoff, Greg (2014). *Unlearning Liberty: Campus Censorship and the End of American Debate*. New York, NY: Encounter Books.

Taleb, Nassim (2014). "Naïve Intervention." *Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder*. New York, NY: Random House. pp. 110-33.