

Through a Glass, Darkly: Microaggressions and Psychological Science

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Abstract

In this rejoinder, I respond to the comments from three sets of eminent scholars regarding my critique of the microaggression research program (MRP). I concur with Haidt (2017, this issue) that a significant shortcoming of the MRP is its insufficient emphasis on the subjective appraisal of microaggressions. I concur with Ong and Burrow (2017, this issue) that intensive longitudinal studies of microaggressions should enhance our knowledge of their short-term and long-term impact, although I urge researchers to assess microaggressions in conjunction with personality traits using a multi-informant framework. In contrast to Sue (2017, this issue), I argue that psychological science is our best hope for understanding microaggressions and that well-intentioned but untested interventions designed to reduce microaggressions may do more harm than good. I conclude that the MRP would benefit from greater modesty in its assertions and more open acknowledgment of its marked scientific limitations.

Science aims to subject assertions to constructive criticism (Bartley, 1964; Popper, 1963). By doing so, it helps to counteract biases and, ideally, afford us a somewhat less murky glimpse of the state of nature. In my article (Lilienfeld, 2017, this issue), I contended that the microaggression research program (MRP) is scientifically problematic, largely because it has not consistently exposed its core presuppositions to adequate scrutiny. I further argued that the MRP is not close to ready for practical application, although in substantially amended form it may hold promise as a program of scientific investigation.

I welcome the opportunity to respond to comments from three sets of eminent scholars, who offer diverse perspectives regarding my critique of the MRP. I hope that this conversation will help to launch a long overdue debate concerning the scientific status of the MRP and its implications for prejudice-reduction efforts.

Haidt

Haidt (2017, this issue) rightly notes that a key shortcoming of the MRP is its insufficient emphasis on subjective appraisal. Because people's interpretations of ambiguous stimuli are shaped by their personality dispositions, such as negative emotionality (Watson & Clark, 1984), scores on microaggression scales are very likely saturated with extraneous trait variance. Dating back at least to Allport

(1937), psychologists have recognized that personality traits operate in part by influencing people's evaluation of ambiguous situations (see also Funder, 1991). Framed in cognitive lingo, traits generate schemas that affect information processing (Bowers, 1973). As Haidt observes, the MRP largely neglects the role of personality in influencing responses to ostensible microaggressions, placing the locus of causation—and typically the onus of responsibility—squarely on the alleged deliverers of microaggressions.

Like Haidt, I worry that microaggression training programs will exacerbate racial tensions, predisposing individuals to become hypervigilant toward perceived subtle signals of potential prejudice (even in their absence). I would add that the MRP has been surprisingly disconnected from the broader literature on the ideal conditions for prejudice reduction. Over six decades ago, Allport (1954) delineated four optimal conditions for prejudice reduction under conditions of intergroup contact: (a) shared higher-order goals, (b) cooperation between groups, (c) equal status of groups, and (d) institutional support for reducing prejudice. Meta-analytic evidence

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suggests that although these conditions may not be necessary, as Allport had supposed, they are facilitatory (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; see also Haidt & Jussim, 2016). Although research on this question is wanting, it seems implausible that training programs insinuating that emitters of ambiguous statements are implicitly aggressive, as implied by the MRP, are conducive to either of Allport's first two conditions. Instead, microaggression training programs may heighten mutual mistrust between majority and minority group members and impede efforts to achieve intergroup unity.

Haidt suggests that I was overly charitable regarding the MRP's scientific and applied prospects, and he may be correct. At the same time, I remain open to the possibility that subtle and inadvertent racial slights, especially when cumulative over lengthy time periods, exert a detrimental impact on the mental health of some minority individuals. Hence, I continue to encourage longitudinal investigation of microaggressions with the caveat that such research must pay considerably greater heed to considerations of psychometrics, personality psychology, and other domains of basic psychology.

Ong and Burrow

In their constructive commentary, Ong and Burrow (2017, this issue) maintain that the MRP would benefit from a great focus on intensive longitudinal studies in naturalistic settings. I find myself in agreement with everything they say and concur that such investigations should allow us to examine how microaggressions affect psychological adjustment in everyday life, both (a) between and within individuals and (b) in the short- and long-term.

I offer two friendly amendments to Ong and Burrow's analysis—namely, that in future research along the lines they delineate, it will be essential to (a) incorporate well-validated indices of personality dispositions, especially perceived victimization and hostile attributional bias (e.g., Epps & Kendall, 1995), and (b) assess microaggressions within a multi-informant approach that incorporates self- and observer reports. By doing so, researchers should be better able to ascertain how differing sources of variance contribute to scores on microaggression measures and to psychological outcomes.

Sue

While acknowledging that my criticisms of the MRP have merit, Sue (2017, this issue) contends that my reliance on a psychological science framework toward microaggressions imparts only one side of the story. Sue will not be surprised to learn that I differ with him sharply in several respects.

First, the position that scientific empiricism is merely one valid means among others of apprehending reality

almost inevitably leads to logical contradictions, and Sue's statements are no exception. On the one hand, Sue maintains that the studies I cite do not necessarily impugn the MRP, given their presumption of a scientific approach to truth; on the other hand, he cites the important computer simulation studies of Correll et al. (2007), who demonstrated that participants are more likely to "shoot" an African-American man than a White man holding an innocuous object (e.g., a wallet) as opposed to a gun, to support his position concerning implicit biases. One cannot simultaneously dismiss the relevance of well-conducted psychological science that runs counter to one's position while invoking well-conducted psychological science to bolster one's position. Moreover, Sue and colleagues have consistently maintained that each microaggression communicates a consensual implicit message (e.g., Sue et al., 2007, pp. 276-277). For example, they wrote that "microinsults . . . clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient of color" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). One cannot simultaneously maintain that there are multiple valid interpretations of reality with regard to scientific findings while maintaining that there is only one accurate interpretation of reality with regard to microaggressions.

Second, Sue implies that I had minimized the reality of "microaggressive suffering" (p. 171) on the part of minorities. In fact, I was explicit that prejudice and discrimination are undeniably real and problematic; I wrote that "racial prejudice remains an inescapable and deeply troubling reality of modern life" (p. 138), and "Prejudice and discrimination remain part and parcel of the daily landscape of many minority individuals" (p. 158). The experiential reality of minority individuals is not in question. Instead, the question is how best to construe this reality. In the case of microaggressions, is such reality best regarded as a reflexive, virtually ineluctable response to implicit bias, as proposed by the MRP, or as the outcome of an enormously multifaceted set of subjective appraisals to ambiguous stimuli? Sue and colleagues' perspective on microaggressions appears to reflect the assumption of *naive realism* (Ross & Ward, 1996)—the belief that people's perceptions of the world reflect a direct, veridical representation of reality that is uncontaminated by their preconceptions. If the field of psychology has taught us anything over the past several decades, it is that naive realism is erroneous (Kahneman, 2011).

Third, Sue's comments regarding the recent police shootings of African American men appear to imply that microaggressions played some role, direct or indirect, in these tragic events. Although implicit bias may have been a culprit in some of these shootings, the evidence that a better understanding of microaggressions could have helped to prevent them seems minimal.

Fourth, Sue takes issue with my assertion that microaggression training programs are premature given the

preliminary state of the scientific evidence, maintaining that to “ask them [members of minority and other oppressed groups] to wait for individual, institutional and societal change is to ask them to continue to suffer in silence” (p. 171). I disagree. When faced with a pressing social problem, such as prejudice, well-meaning individuals may understandably be tempted to insist on doing something, even if that something has not been adequately tested. Nevertheless, the histories of psychological and social interventions have taught us the hard way that face validity (the extent to which an intervention appears plausible) is a feeble barometer of real-world effectiveness. Numerous interventions that struck many researchers and policymakers as eminently reasonable (e.g., crisis debriefing, Scared Straight programs, boot camp programs) turned out to be ineffective or harmful (Lilienfeld, 2007; Wilson, 2011). As I noted (Lilienfeld, 2017), there is ample reason for concern that some diversity training programs, especially those that induce reactance in majority group members, can inadvertently boost prejudice (Legault, Gutsell, & Inzlicht, 2011; Moss-Racusin et al., 2014). Good intentions and face validity appeal to our emotions and intuitions, but they can mislead us.

Concluding Thoughts

We all have our biases. Psychological science is not a panacea, but it is our best prescription for overcoming such biases. In the case of the MRP, we are inevitably confronted with the formidable task of attempting to compensate for our sociopolitical biases while striving to understand the biases of others, especially the deliverers and recipients of microaggressions. In this sense, we are all looking through a glass, darkly. Nevertheless, psychological science, which is a finely honed set of safeguards against error, is our best armamentarium of tools for achieving a clearer view through the glass.

As David Shakow (1969) noted, “psychology is immodest” (p. 146): As a field, we have too frequently made confident proclamations before adequate data are available. The MRP, I contend, would benefit from a healthy dose of humility. Far from affording a single, myopic perspective on reality, psychological science helps to keep us modest by forcing us to attend to data and conclusions that challenge our worldviews.

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