

Microaggression Research and Application: Clarifications, Corrections, and Common Ground

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Abstract

In this issue, Williams (p. ♦♦♦) responds to my 2017 critique in this journal of the scientific status of the microaggression research program (MRP). In some cases, she presents helpful data that partially address several of my recommendations for enhancing the MRP's rigor. Nevertheless, because she appears to misconstrue many of my arguments regarding the MRP, many of her rebuttals are not relevant to my criticisms. Furthermore, her assertions notwithstanding, Williams does not effectively address my concerns regarding the (a) excessively fuzzy boundaries of the microaggression construct, (b) psychometric hazards of relying exclusively on subjective reports when detecting microaggressions, and (c) hypothesized causal impact of microaggressions on mental health. In other cases, Williams appears to draw causal inferences from correlational data and conflate within-group with between-group differences. Although several of Williams's recommendations for MRP research are worth considering, I contend that some others are unlikely to be conducive to a scientific approach to microaggressions. The MRP remains a promising but provisional research program that would benefit from greater openness to outside criticism. I conclude with a discussion of areas of potential common ground in microaggression research and application.

Keywords

Microaggressions, prejudice, racism, aggression, neuroticism

Science thrives on criticism (Popper, 1940). Only by subjecting assertions to incisive scrutiny can we hope to identify and root out errors in our “web of belief” (Quine & Ullian, 1978) and thereby arrive at a more veridical approximation of reality (O'Donohue, 2013). When constructive questioning is discouraged, research programs frequently stagnate, as they effectively cut off their vital blood supply of potential self-correction. In this respect, I welcome Williams's (2019b) spirited and at times impassioned response to my critiques (Lilienfeld, 2017b, 2017c) of the microaggression research program (MRP). Although I disagree, in some cases forcefully, with many of Williams's contentions, I believe that the field will ultimately benefit from vigorous debate regarding the scientifically fraught issues raised by the MRP.

First, a bit of background is in order. In an article in this journal (Lilienfeld, 2017b), I raised a number of concerns regarding the MRP's scientific status. I acknowledged that “The MRP has brought much-needed attention to relatively mild manifestations of prejudice

that have far too often been overlooked” (p. 158). Nevertheless, I contended that the core tenets of this research program rest on shaky conceptual and empirical foundations. Specifically, I maintained that there is insufficient evidence that microaggressions (a) are operationalized with sufficient clarity and consensus to allow for systematic scientific inquiry, (b) are interpreted negatively by most or all members of culturally stigmatized groups, (c) are associated with established measures of aggression and prejudice, (d) can be validly assessed exclusively via self-report, and (e) are causally—and not just correlationally—associated with adverse mental health among minority individuals. More broadly, I contended that the MRP at large has been marked by undue intellectual insularity, and that

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to actualize its full scientific potential, it needs to forge fruitful connections with numerous other domains of psychological science, including personality psychology, health psychology, industrial-organizational psychology, and social cognition. I concluded with 18 recommendations for enhancing the scientific rigor of the MRP.

Williams (2019b) responds to my criticisms of the MRP. In addition, she presents data from recent studies in an effort to address several of my recommendations. In the spirit of Rapaport's rules of argumentation (see Dennett, 2013) and guidelines for responsible scientific criticism (Hyman, 2001), I begin with several points of agreement with Williams before moving on to my numerous areas of disagreement.

I agree with Williams that we all have our biases and that we must strive continually to compensate for them. I concur with Williams that prejudice and racism are not close to being eliminated in U.S. society and that research on implicit prejudice is important. Williams and I agree that racial prejudice occurs in many guises, some of them covert. In addition, I concur with Williams that most microaggressions do not lie entirely in the minds of observers, although I (Lilienfeld, 2017b) place considerably more emphasis than does Williams on the subjectivity involved in interpreting microaggressions. Williams and I agree that microaggressions in some cases reflect genuine racial prejudice on the part of those who emit them. I further agree with Williams that microaggressions as operationalized by current measures tend to be correlated with adverse mental-health outcomes. In addition, I found Williams's delineation of the potential reasons why certain individuals may be especially perceptive at detecting microaggressions—such as a past history of exposure to racism, regional differences, and interpersonal skills—to be helpful. Finally, I was pleased that Williams presented data from new lines of research that may help to address several of my recommendations for microaggression research.

Responding to a detailed scholarly critique is invariably a challenge. Still, I found the challenge of addressing Williams's critique to be especially formidable, because in many cases I frankly found it nearly impossible to recognize my own arguments in Williams's characterizations of them. Because Williams appears to misconstrue many of my criticisms of the MRP, many of her rebuttals are not relevant to my analysis of this research program. At the same time, I suspect that some of Williams's interpretations of my positions are likely to be shared by a subset of thoughtful readers. Hence, I welcome the opportunity to clarify and address Williams's characterizations of my arguments. My hope is that by better delineating our points of agreement and disagreement, we may pave the way for identifying fruitful areas of research on the MRP.

The Definition and Operationalization of Microaggressions

One of my primary criticisms of the microaggression concept (Lilienfeld, 2017b) is its excessive fuzziness and elasticity, allowing such statements as "America is a land of opportunity" or "I believe that the most qualified person should get the job" (e.g., Sue et al., 2007, pp. 276–277) to be housed within its capacious borders. Williams defines microaggressions as "deniable acts of racism that reinforce pathological stereotypes and inequitable social norms" (p. ♦♦♦), but this definition leaves unresolved the often knotty question of how to operationalize a potentially racist act, especially one that is subtle and open to interpretation and differences of opinion among reasonable observers.

In particular, it is a priori unclear what statements or actions could *not* be classified on a post hoc basis as microaggressions by those offended by them. In her article, Williams counters my criticisms regarding the definitional ambiguities of the microaggression concept, but I worry that many of her arguments have merely brought the serious definitional problems of the microaggression concept into bolder relief.

The first source of ambiguity is the definition of microaggressions themselves. Williams finds fault with my assertion that microaggressions are ostensibly "barely visible or at least challenging to detect" (Lilienfeld, 2017b, p. 10). She suggests that I mistakenly interpreted the prefix "micro" to imply that microaggressions often lie on the threshold of detection. The basis for Williams's criticism is unclear to me, however, given that Williams herself describes microaggressions as "small" and "sometimes ambiguous" (p. ♦♦♦). Furthermore, most other microaggression scholars have characterized microaggressions in terms virtually identical to those I used. For example, in their seminal article, Sue et al. (2007) contended that "The power of racial microaggressions lies in their invisibility to the perpetrator and, oftentimes, the recipient" (p. 275).

Williams's definition of microaggressions as "deniable acts of racism" (p. ♦♦♦) declares microaggressions to be inherently racist by fiat, thereby placing the critical question of whether microaggressions are statistically associated with racist tendencies (e.g., Kanter et al., 2017) outside the scope of scientific inquiry. Williams's definition further precludes the possibility that certain microaggressions reflect misstatements or misunderstandings of cultural norms.

Williams examines the fraught question of whether microaggressions are intentional, but I found her reasoning to be difficult to follow. She declares, in the absence of research evidence, that all microaggressions "are in fact intentional, although the intentionality may

represent individual bias in the offender (conscious or unconscious) or may be the manifestation of the aggressive goals of the dominant group” (p. ◆◆◆). According to Williams, microaggressions can therefore be either intentional or unintentional *at the level of the individual*. Yet elsewhere, she writes that microaggressions are “aimed and launched” (p. ◆◆◆), clearly implying that they are intentional; to continue Williams’s analogy, one cannot aim and launch a car unconsciously at a pedestrian. Contradicting this assertion, however, she elsewhere acknowledges that it is “impossible to know” whether some microaggressions reflect good intentions (p. ◆◆◆) and that “subjective inferences about harmful intent are not particularly useful” (p. ◆◆◆). Indeed, in an article coauthored by Williams, Kanter et al. (2017) argued that the question of “Was that a microaggression?” is one that “psychologists likely should avoid trying to answer,” likening such reluctance to “to an expert witness refusing to provide opinion on the state of mind of a defendant at the time a crime was committed” (p. 296). Hence, Williams reasonably contends that we can probably never infer with certainty the true intent of an ostensibly microaggressive act. Yet at the same time she contends that we can be certain that all microaggressions are intentional at some level, thus justifying her adoption of the term “offenders” to describe individuals who emit them. Therefore, Williams’s reasoning is internally inconsistent. In addition, her reasoning renders her assertions concerning intentionality unfalsifiable, as she asserts that all microaggressions are necessarily intentional, at least within the context of societal systems in which implicit and explicit prejudice remain widespread.

As I noted in my article (Lilienfeld, 2017b), microaggressions are like most or arguably all psychological constructs in that they are open concepts (Meehl, 1986), which are marked by unclear boundaries, an indefinitely extendable indicator list, and an unknown inner nature. Williams argues erroneously that microaggressions are not open concepts, thereby suggesting to me a misunderstanding of the heart of my critique. The problem with microaggressions is not their status as open concepts, but rather that they are “wide open,” with boundaries so nebulous and pliable that they can accommodate virtually any and all behaviors that non-trivial proportions of individuals find offensive.

Indeed, Williams’s counterarguments only fuel my concerns regarding the “wide open” nature of the microaggression concept. When discussing microaggression research in general, she provisionally selects a 30% cut-off of individuals offended by a statement to classify it as microaggressive, acknowledging parenthetically that “this cutoff is arbitrary and illustrative”

(p. ◆◆◆) and that perhaps 25% would instead suffice. Yet this seemingly minor concession poses a serious threat to Williams’s contentions. Although she claims that “we simply need to demonstrate that a sizeable percentage find [a statement or action] racially objectionable” (p. ◆◆◆), she does not address the question of what constitutes a “sizeable percentage” of individuals. Should it be 30%? Or 25%? What about 10% or even 5%? The problem becomes apparent were we to import Williams’s criteria into other widespread research domains, such as emotion recognition. We would presumably all agree, for instance, that a facial emotion (e.g., happiness, sadness, fear) was unreliably classified if 70% or more of participants disagreed on its presence versus absence.

To address my concerns regarding the ambiguity of microaggressions, Williams reports an intriguing set of analyses on student perceptions of statements and actions as microaggressions (Michaels, Gallagher, Crawford, Kanter, & Williams, 2018; see also Kanter et al., 2017). On the basis of these results, she argues that there are high levels of agreement on what constitutes a microaggression. On careful inspection, however, her evidence is less than compelling. To address the question of whether there are high levels of concurrence among individuals regarding microaggressions, one would ideally want to (a) begin with a broad range of behaviors, varying continuously in their ostensible levels of offensiveness; (b) provide independent raters with a working definition of the microaggression concept; and (c) determine whether they agree on which behaviors are, and are not, microaggressions.

Nevertheless, this is not what Michaels et al. (2018) did. Instead, they presented 63 Black and White college students with a set of hypothetical scenarios and asked them to rate 88 ostensible microaggressions in these scenarios on their degree of racism; they also asked White students how likely they would be to engage in each action. Michaels et al. found extremely high levels of agreement between the two sets of ratings, leading Williams to conclude that this finding “tells us there is some degree of agreement between Black and White students as to what microaggressions are” (p. ◆◆◆).

But that is not what the results tell us. Instead, they tell us which statements already deemed by the authors to be microaggressions are perceived to be racist or unacceptable, which addresses a substantially different question. The findings *do not* bear on the extent to which people agree on which behaviors do or do not constitute microaggressions. The findings of Michael et al., informative as they may be for some purposes, do not address unresolved concerns regarding the excessively open boundaries of the microaggression concept.

The Interpretation of Microaggressions by Stigmatized Individuals

In my article (Lilienfeld, 2017b), I argued that there was insufficient evidence that microaggressions are interpreted negatively by most, let alone all, culturally stigmatized individuals. To address my concerns, Williams presents data from a small sample ($N = 33$) of Black undergraduates to buttress her assertion that microaggressions emitted in the context of various interpersonal scenarios are interpreted negatively by most people of color; these microaggressions had earlier been rated as offensive by an independent sample of diversity experts (Kanter et al., 2017; see also Michaels et al., 2018 and Williams, 2019a). These analyses may be difficult to interpret, however, in the absence of data on the level of these students' exposure to microaggression education and training.

Moreover, Williams does not cite the results of the survey of Americans conducted by the CATO Institute, a libertarian think-tank, in conjunction with the data analytic firm YouGov (Ekins, 2017). This survey was not peer-reviewed, although its sample size was considerably larger than that of Kanter et al. (2017), consisting of 2,300 Americans recruited online using a stratified sampling scheme. According to this survey, many of the microaggressions listed by Sue et al. (2007), which have been used in microaggression training programs at a number of U.S. universities and colleges (Ekins, 2017; Kingkade, 2017), are *not* perceived by most minorities as offensive. For example, telling a recent immigrant to the United States that he or she spoke "good English" was deemed *not* to be offensive by 67% of Black and 77% of Latino respondents. Saying "I don't notice people's race" was rated as inoffensive by 71% of Black and 80% of Latino respondents. The corresponding numbers for those who deemed the following statements *inoffensive* were as follows: "America is a melting pot" (77% and 70%, Black and Latino respondents, respectively); "Everyone can succeed in this society if they work hard enough" (77%, 89%); and "America is the land of opportunity" (93%, 89%). The lone microaggression in the CATO study rated as offensive by most minorities was "You are a credit to your race" (68%, 50%). In aggregate, these percentages suggest that Williams's conclusion that "the evidence suggests most people of color agree that most microaggressions (as identified by researchers) are offensive" (p. ♦♦♦) may require qualification, at least with respect to the widely invoked microaggressions presented by Sue et al. (2007). Nevertheless, because these data relied on only seven microaggressions drawn from the writings of one team of scholars, conceptual replication of this work using broader a broader sampling of microaggression terms is warranted.

Williams contends, not unreasonably, that it can be challenging to judge whether a statement or action is a microaggression devoid of its context. Indeed, in retrospect, one point that I should have made more explicit in my original article (Lilienfeld, 2017b) is that many ambiguous statements and actions that may appear innocuous to members of the majority may be perceived as hostile by individuals in the minority who have experienced a lengthy history of racism in various guises. Many of the latter individuals may be responding to subtle contextual variables that are readily overlooked by individuals who have had little or no exposure to a history of prejudice and discrimination (Kraus & Park, 2017). Nevertheless, Williams, like Sue et al. (2007), does not offer explicit guidance concerning what types of contextual variables should be considered or how to weight these potentially important contextual variables in conjunction with ostensible microaggressions. This omission leaves the door open for interpretation biases, allowing individuals to classify certain statements and actions as microaggressions after the fact as a function of insufficiently explicated contextual factors.

Do Microaggressions Reflect Aggression and Prejudice?

Implicit in the MRP, as well as in the term *microaggression* itself, is the notion that microaggressions are related to aggression and prejudice on the part of those who emit them. Williams suggests that the question of whether microaggressions are related to aggression is settled by definition: "If we accept that racism is a form of violence, then more research is not necessary to classify microaggressions as a form of aggression" (p. ♦♦♦). Still, she proceeds to discuss a study by Mekawi and Todd (2018). To her credit, she acknowledges that the study revealed no consistent correlations between perceived acceptability of microaggressions and self-reported verbal hostility or aggression. Although Williams points to methodological limitations in its design, she leaves unaddressed the question of how MRP scholars ought to respond should future research disconfirm a link between microaggressions and aggression. Should they acknowledge that microaggressions are not tied to aggression and that they are therefore mistaken, or should they merely proclaim their position correct by fiat? In any case, the evidence that microaggressions are tied to aggression is at present negligible.¹

To address the question of whether microaggressions are associated with prejudice among those who emit them, Williams presents the results of a study by Kanter et al. (2017), which examined the correlations between the likelihood of engaging in microaggressive actions in five hypothetical scenarios and several indicators of

prejudice, including a racial-feeling thermometer. The microaggressive actions were generated by Black students in focus groups who had received the authors' definition of microaggressions. Kanter et al. reported significant correlations between the two sets of scores, with the absolute magnitudes collapsed across scenarios ranging from $r = .36$ to $.45$. The findings of Kanter et al. are potentially important, given that they represent the first published research to my knowledge suggesting a correlation between microaggression propensity and established prejudice indicators. They are also broadly consistent with my conjecture that a subset of microaggressions reflect implicit or even explicit prejudice on the part of those who emit them (Lilienfeld, 2017b, p. 159).

Still, the Kanter et al. (2017) study raises at least two questions. First, on a post hoc basis, the authors deleted 16 of their 46 items (35%) because they were not rated as "possibly racist" or higher by Black respondents. This finding suggests that many behaviors perceived by diversity researchers as microaggressions are not perceived as racist by Black students. Second, Kanter et al.'s aggregate correlations, although not trivial, were far below unity. Furthermore, at the level of individual items, many of the correlations were negligible: 16 of the 30 were below $.20$ in magnitude and 17 fell short of statistical significance. Hence, even correcting for measurement error, it is unlikely that microaggressions are invariably reflective only of prejudicial attitudes, although some may very well be.

Reliance on Self-Report and the Role of Negative Emotionality

I observed (Lilienfeld, 2017b) that one serious shortcoming of the MRP is the assumption that one can detect microaggressions exclusively using subjective reports (see also Haslam, 2016). Williams defends this approach with recourse to the broader psychological literature: "we understand many psychological concepts exclusively in terms of subjective states, and so that alone does not invalidate the concept" (p. ♦♦♦). This analogy is flawed because it conflates stimulus with response. Microaggressions are posited by Williams and most other MRP investigators to possess an external reality, independent of observers; the subjective states to which Williams refers are individuals' responses to microaggressions, not microaggressions themselves. I do not dispute that individuals' responses to microaggression items validly reflect their negative perceptions of, and reactions to, ambiguous evoking stimuli; nevertheless, the extent to which these responses validly reflect objective properties of these stimuli themselves remains unclear.

Furthermore, psychological science almost always progresses optimally via triangulation, and by incorporating multiple modes of assessment (Cook, 1985). For example, data consistently indicate that informant reports afford incremental validity above and beyond self-reports for a variety of psychological attributes, including personality indicators (Connelly & Ones, 2010). Self-reports of microaggressions are almost surely informative, as noted by Williams, but they are unlikely to be sufficient to capture all of the information needed to detect or understand microaggressions. This point is important given that the overwhelming majority of microaggression studies rely solely on self-reports of microaggressions (see Lilienfeld, 2017b; Lui & Quezada, 2019) and that at least some microaggression training workshops, including those advocated by Williams (2019b), explicitly inform participants that they should not question other individuals' self-reports of microaggressions.

As I noted, one potential contaminating variable that has received inadequate attention in the MRP is negative emotionality (NE), a pervasive personality disposition closely related to—although broader than—neuroticism, which reflects a propensity to experience a host of unpleasant affective states. Ample data using numerous paradigms demonstrate that NE is related to a generalized tendency to interpret ambiguous stimuli in a negative and often threatening light (McNally, 2019; Stegen, van Diest, van de Woestijne, & van den Bergh, 2000; Watson & Clark, 1984).²

When I authored my review 2 years ago, few studies (e.g., Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja, & Sue, 2013) had incorporated measures of NE as covariates in analyses, and these studies relied on measures of NE that did not afford adequate coverage of hostile attribution bias, a component of NE potentially relevant to microaggression responsiveness (Tellegen & Waller, 2008).³ Such bias, which is a crucial and explicitly social element of NE that is largely absent from standard measures of neuroticism (Tellegen & Waller, 2008), is associated with individual differences in negative interpretations of ambiguous interpersonal scenarios (Kokkinos, Karagianni, & Voulgaridou, 2017). As a consequence, it may be especially relevant to predicting individuals' responses to microaggression items.

In my article, I hypothesized that NE accounts for some, but by no means all, of the relation between microaggressions and adverse mental-health outcomes. After reviewing literature on the relation between self-reported prejudice and mental-health outcomes, I wrote that "It seems reasonable to posit a similar state of affairs for microaggression indices, with NE accounting for some, but not all, of the covariance between these indices of adverse mental health outcomes" (Lilienfeld,

2017b, p. 155) and that “Nor do I contend that individual differences in NE account for all of the association between microaggressions and mental health, only that they may account for part of it” (Lilienfeld, 2017b, p. 160). In this respect, Williams errs several times by contending that I had argued that NE is the sole contributor to microaggression responsiveness.⁴

Williams reports that for two of these three hierarchical regression analyses, NE measures account for sizeable chunks, but not all, of the variance in the association between perceived racial mistreatment and psychopathology, and perceived microaggressions account for substantial amounts of additional variance (Williams, Kanter, & Ching, 2018). With one exception, these findings actually corroborate what I had hypothesized in my article: NE tends to account for some but not all of the relation between microaggressions and adverse mental-health outcomes. Furthermore, as I observed in my article, it will be crucial to provide more stringent tests of the MRP by incorporating measures of NE that encompass coverage of hostile attribution bias and closely allied constructs. The study of Williams et al. (2018) does not directly address this omission because it relied on a measure of classical neuroticism, which primarily comprises anxiety-proneness and moodiness.

A recurrent error in Williams’s article is her conflation of within-racial group and between-group racial differences. My arguments concern only the former. For example, Williams asserts that I had argued that minority individuals are more prone to neuroticism than majority individuals, thereby accounting for their higher susceptibility to perceived microaggressions. Yet I never contended that culturally stigmatized or minority individuals are more prone to (a) neuroticism than are majority individuals or (b) perceiving microaggressions than are majority individuals, and I concur with Williams that both propositions are at best dubious. As a consequence, my criticism of the MRP’s neglect of *individual differences* in NE bears no implications whatsoever for *racial-group differences* in microaggression propensity. Furthermore, I am unaware of any evidence that NE operates differently in minority than in majority individuals; in both groups, NE almost surely relates to and probably shapes individuals’ interpretation of ambiguous stimuli. Indeed, because NE is linked to more threatening interpretations of ambiguous stimuli of many kinds, including homophones, sentences, social scenarios, workplace stressors, children’s behavior, and bodily sensations (e.g., Stegen et al., 2000; Watson & Clark, 1984; Watson & Pennebaker, 1989), it would be remarkable if microaggression items were entirely immune to this well-replicated tendency within each race. Hence, Williams’s assertion that I invoked a “cultural-deficit

model” (p. ♦♦♦) of microaggressions reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of my position (for a similar error, see West, 2019).

The Causal Status of Microaggressions

In my critique, I observed that one of the key sticking points in the MRP is the unclear causal status of microaggressions (Lilienfeld, 2017b). Contrary to Williams’s implications, I never questioned whether microaggressions are correlated with adverse mental-health outcomes; in fact, I concluded in several places that “microaggression measures display consistent criterion-related validity with indices of mental health” (p. 160; also see p. 152).

After reviewing a number of studies that demonstrate correlations between microaggressions and a variety of mental-health outcomes, Williams immediately poses the question, “How do microaggressions cause harm?” (p. ♦♦♦), saying that these studies provide “mounting evidence that microaggressions are harmful and even deadly to our clients of color” (p. ♦♦♦). Yet because all of the studies she cites are correlational/quasi-experimental, they do not permit causal inferences. Hence, Williams’s question places the cart before the horse. Williams also erroneously draws causal conclusions from hierarchical multiple regression findings. After presenting data demonstrating that a measure of microaggressions affords incremental validity above and beyond a measure of general ethnic discrimination for statistically predicting anxiety-related trauma symptoms stemming from discrimination, she writes that “Thus it seems clear that microaggressions are traumatizing in their own right” (p. ♦♦♦). Nevertheless, multiple regression analyses do not permit inferences of causality, although when adequately powered they can sometimes be helpful in ruling out implausible causal models. Williams’s causal conclusion is rendered still more problematic by the possibility that the microaggression and trauma-symptom measures are both saturated with NE.

Fortunately, a recent meta-analysis (Lui & Quezada, 2019) sheds provisional light on the causality question. After canvassing a large body of literature on the relation between microaggressions and an array of mental-health outcomes ($N = 18,719$, $k = 72$), the authors reported a mean weighted effect of $r = .20$; after correcting for potential publication bias (which was inconsistent across different bias metrics), the correlation fell to $r = .16$. The associations were more pronounced for internalizing symptoms, negative emotionality/stress, and low levels of positive adjustment than for externalizing and physical-health symptoms. These findings broadly corroborate the statistical association between

microaggressions and mental health, and they suggest that this correlation is likely to be small to medium in magnitude. Contrary to a core presupposition of the MRP (Sue et al., 2007) that has been endorsed by a number of other scholars (e.g., West, 2019), there was no support for the contention that the more subtle the microaggression, the greater the harm. As the authors observed, few studies examined whether microaggressions afford incremental validity above and beyond overt indicators of prejudice, so the extent to which microaggressions *per se* are tied to adverse mental-health outcomes remains unclear (see also Lilienfeld, 2017a).

Needless to say, for both pragmatic and ethical reasons, it is not feasible to expose stigmatized individuals to repeated microaggressions over a period of months or years to ascertain their potential effects on clinically significant mental-health outcomes. Hence, microaggression researchers are inherently limited in their ability to implement causally informative designs. Still, two studies in the Lui and Quezada meta-analysis used an experimental design, in which participants were randomly assigned to receive either microaggressions or nonmicroaggressive stimuli and asked to report on their short-term emotional reactions to them. Neither study yielded statistically significant results, raising questions regarding the presumed causal potency of microaggressions. Hopefully, more studies using experimental designs will become available in the near future (indeed, I am collaborating on one such investigation myself), which should allow for firmer conclusions regarding the potential causal role of microaggressions in influencing short-term affective reactions. It will also be important for longitudinal studies to test the hypothesis that microaggressions exert a cumulative effect on mental health over lengthy spans of time (e.g., years, decades) given that stigmatized individuals may suffer a metaphorical “death by thousand little cuts” as a consequence of repeated exposure to subtle racial snubs and slights. In the interim, however, unqualified pronouncements regarding the causal role of microaggressions are unwarranted.

Microaggression Training Programs

I am puzzled by Williams’s accusation that I am somehow attempting to suppress information regarding microaggressions. She does so on the grounds that I (Lilienfeld, 2017b, 2017c) called for a temporary moratorium (which I have elsewhere described as a “time-out”; Lilienfeld, 2017a) on microaggression training programs pending compelling data to demonstrate their long-term effectiveness and safety. She writes that “The only sensible recourse, [Lilienfeld] seemed to conclude, is to withhold the information, suggesting that people

of color might not have the mental constitution to withstand it” (p. ♦♦♦). She further argues that Haidt (2017) and I are saying that “we should stop educating people about the findings of microaggressions research and silence the recommendations made by leaders in the field” (p. ♦♦♦). In addition, she asserts that I implied that microaggression training would make stigmatized individuals, such as persons of color, psychologically weaker.

Because I believe essentially *the exact opposite* of everything that Williams suggests that I believe about microaggression training programs, I am left to wonder whether I was sufficiently clear in my original article. In the event that I was not, I will be explicit now. I am in wholehearted support of educating all people regarding the research literature on microaggressions and of presenting them with a scientifically balanced picture of the MRP, including arguments and counterarguments regarding the merits of this line of research. I enthusiastically encourage more and better research on microaggressions, as well as unfettered discussion of diverse viewpoints regarding the MRP in classrooms, at conferences, and in the public arena at large. I also believe that persons of color and other culturally stigmatized individuals are more than capable of emotionally handling information regarding microaggressions. Imposing a temporary moratorium on microaggression training pending research on its effectiveness and potential harms in no way precludes educating minority and majority individuals about microaggressions, any more than the U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s withholding approval of a new medication pending data regarding its effectiveness and safety precludes open discussion regarding evidence for and against this medication’s effectiveness, potential mechanisms of action, side effects, and the like.

In contrast, the microaggression training workshops advocated by Williams inform participants that certain statements and actions are unequivocally microaggressions and that these behaviors invariably reflect racist intentions on the part of individuals or majority society at large (Williams, 2019b). I very much worry that the ex cathedra pronouncements inherent in such programs may risk indoctrinating rather than educating participants, and that, ironically, they themselves may inadvertently suppress dissent. Because these programs often inform participants in unqualified terms that certain behaviors are microaggressions and imply that any doubts they voice regarding this presumption reflect implicit bias, they are likely to stifle open debate. Indeed, in both her article in this journal (Williams, 2019b) and in a chapter that describes recommendations for diversity training workshops, Williams explicitly discourages participants from considering alternative

explanations for microaggressions and related racially provoking stimuli (Williams, 2019a, p. 140).

I would further contend that such training programs may be ethically problematic—especially if conducted without full informed consent that features an explicit acknowledgment of the lack of long-term data regarding potential harms—in light of provisional laboratory evidence that some well-intentioned antiprejudice programs can backfire, resulting in heightened levels of prejudice (Legault, Gutsell, & Inzlicht, 2011). Williams reports unpublished data suggesting that White participants reported increases in positive mood following these workshops and that participants reported liking them. Such preliminary findings are perhaps reassuring, but considerably more research will be needed to demonstrate that such programs yield beneficial long-term effects on prejudice without concurrently engendering adverse effects, such as increased levels of racial animus in a subset of majority-group members. We would and should expect no less of any other psychological intervention (see also Lilienfeld, 2017c).

Fostering Open Debate on Microaggressions

To her credit, Williams and her colleagues have endeavored to address several of my scientific challenges to the MRP, and in a few cases they have made helpful progress in this regard. I am disappointed, however, that Williams does not acknowledge any merit in any of my 18 recommendations, discuss any potential limitations in microaggression research or application, or offer any tangible suggestions for enhancing the scientific quality of microaggression research. As a result, her article may leave readers with the impression that she believes that the key questions in this subfield are all settled or self-evident.

Williams concludes her article with a number of recommendations for further work on microaggressions, several of which I can heartily endorse. For example, I wholeheartedly support her calls to researchers to cultivate close personal and professional connections across racial lines; to adopt a broad, multicultural framework in their thinking and research; and to strive to better understand the subtle forms of racism experienced by culturally stigmatized individuals.

Still, I worry that some of Williams's other statements are unlikely to be conducive to scientific debate regarding microaggressions or subtle prejudice at large. Direct and at times even blunt substantive disagreement is healthy in science, and the self-correcting mechanisms of science operate most effectively when scrutiny is maximized (Bartley, 1962). Such criticism is an essential antidote against confirmation bias, which is perhaps

the foremost impediment to scientific progress (Tavris & Aronson, 2007). When considering ongoing debates regarding microaggressions, all participants in these discussions should be careful not to discourage scrutiny of their conceptual and empirical assumptions. For example, contending that merely raising a scientific hypothesis—in my case (Lilienfeld, 2017b), that a portion of the variance in self-reported microaggression response is attributable to individuals' NE—itself constitutes a microaggression (see Williams, 2019b) may imply that certain legitimate empirical questions should be ruled out of bounds. In the spirit of Popper (1940) and many other philosophers of science, I urge MRP scholars who hold differing views to embrace constructive criticism from outsiders, not to foreclose it by questioning their presumed motives or biases.

The Search for Common Ground

Many academic debates in the pages of scientific journals are decidedly unsatisfying, because opposing authors frequently talk past each other in an effort to score symbolic victories. Like many politicians on Capitol Hill these days, they often seem more invested in defending their ideological turf than in attempting to find pockets of common ground. In this respect, readers of *Perspectives on Psychological Science* may be forgiven for cynicism regarding the prospects of resolution in the microaggression debate. Given my sharp differences of opinion with Williams, and vice versa, is the quest for consensus regarding microaggressions quixotic? Perhaps. Still, I hope that readers will indulge me for a moment and allow me to share a few idealistic reflections.

Although I am afraid that Williams and I will need to agree to disagree on the current scientific status of the MRP and the likely merits of most microaggression training programs, perhaps we can partially agree on one point. Specifically, I suspect that a discussion of microaggressions, however we choose to conceptualize them, may indeed have a place on college campuses and businesses. After all, if Williams and most other microaggression researchers are correct that repeated exposure to microaggressions often exerts severe detrimental effects on mental health—which I contend remains to be seen—the stakes are high indeed. Still, I envision this role rather differently from Williams. As I have written elsewhere (Lilienfeld, 2017a):

Microaggressions should be the start of an open dialogue, not the end. Telling someone: 'What you just said is a microaggression. You offended me and should stop' is unlikely to be conducive to a productive two-way conversation. In contrast, it could be a fruitful entry point into a difficult but

mutually enlightening discussion to say: ‘You probably didn’t mean this, but what you said bothered me. Maybe we’re both misunderstanding each other. I realize that we’re coming from different places. Let’s talk.’ (para. 44)

When it comes to potentially offensive behaviors that lend themselves to diverse interpretations by thoughtful individuals of good will, “let’s talk” should be the mantra (see also Torres, Salles, & Cochran, 2019). It should not be “you are engaging in implicit racism.” This is a conversation stopper, not a conversation starter. On college campuses and elsewhere, we sorely need more open and nondefensive discussion of emotionally charged racial and cultural issues, not less, and I strongly support scientifically supported initiatives that will help to make both sides feel less defensive and more willing to share their perspectives.

This is where I part ways with many or most proponents of microaggression training workshops. In contrast to Williams, who says that she is not “inclined to give offenders the benefit of the doubt” (p. ◆◆◆) and who disagrees that we should countenance alternative explanations for microaggressions in everyday life (see Williams, 2019a), I believe that we are far better off adopting the *principle of charity* when confronted with statements or actions that offend us (see also Haidt, 2017). We should impute implicit or explicit racist motives to others not as a default, but only as a last resort, once we have ruled out other plausible alternatives (cf. Williams, 2019a). Many statements that Sue, Williams, and others dub microaggressions may very well be inadvertent racial and cultural slights (Lilienfeld, 2017b, 2017c).

Still, this principle of charity must cut both ways, and we should strive to adopt it when reacting to individuals who accuse us of microaggressions. We should start by assuming that most or all individuals who tell us that we have microaggressed against them were genuinely offended. Furthermore, we should be willing to attempt to listen nondefensively to their concerns and reactions even when do not share their perceptions, while recognizing that raising racially charged issues may be uncomfortable for them. We should also be open to the possibility that we have been inadvertently insensitive.


Like most if not all microaggression researchers, I believe that raising the consciousness of those who emit such slights is a worthy aspiration. We should be striving to foster frank conversations regarding ostensible microaggressions in which each party to the discussion respectfully and empathically acknowledges the other’s need to be heard. Acknowledging that we need more and better data on this front, I conjecture

that such discussions are most likely to be effective if each individual in the dialogue starts off by assuming that the other is sincere and well-intentioned. If the MRP is ultimately to do more good than harm, it must be a prescription for intellectual humility and mutual respect.

Action Editor

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The author declares that he has given two conference talks critical of microaggression research and training, and he received an honorarium for one of these talks.

Notes

1. I here adopt the widespread definition of aggression in mainstream psychology as involving not merely harm, but intentional harm (e.g., Allen & Anderson, 2017; Baron & Richardson, 2004; VandenBos, 2007).
2. In several places, Williams equates the personality trait of neuroticism with psychopathology, arguing that I am guilty of “pathologizing [microaggression victims] character” (p. ◆◆◆). Nevertheless, neuroticism, like other general personality traits, is not inherently pathological, although it can sometimes place individuals at risk for psychopathology in conjunction with other personality traits and life experiences (Harkness & Lilienfeld, 1997; Nettle, 2006).
3. Williams writes that “even if negative affectivity played a role, it could be that the directionality is in the opposite direction: years of experiencing unchecked microaggressions could result in trait-like negative emotionality and neuroticism” (p. ◆◆◆). I agree, and I had addressed this possibility in my article (Lilienfeld, 2017b, p. 155). As I also observed in my article, controlling statistically for hostile attribution bias and other elements of negative emotionality might constitute “statistical control” in that it may indirectly remove variance stemming from stigmatized individuals’ exposure to racism, discrimination, and other experiences that engender understandable hostility. Following Meehl (1971), my position is that because we cannot know which analysis (uncontrolled or controlled) better approximates the true state of nature, researchers should report the analyses in both ways.
4. On five occasions, Williams uses the term “simply” to imply that I argued that NE or neuroticism account entirely for variance in microaggression response—for example, “measures of microaggression frequency tend to have high Cronbach’s α because they are simply a manifestation of negative personality

attributes of high scorers” (p. ♦♦♦) and “a strong and significant relationship between racial mistreatment and symptoms of psychopathology was found that cannot be explained simply by negative emotionality” (p. ♦♦♦).

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