

Microaggressions and Daily Experience:

Depicting Life as it is Lived

In press, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*

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Abstract

Psychologists use the term microaggressions to describe subtle forms of bias and discrimination experienced by members of marginalized groups. Lilienfeld (2016, this issue) makes an important contribution to the literature by presenting a critical review of the meaning and measurement of microaggressions. In this commentary, we argue that advancing the construct of microaggressions rests on research approaches that move beyond static representations of individuals to dynamic methods that capture life as it is lived. We discuss the conceptual potential of microaggressions as a bridging concept across multiple levels of analysis. We conclude that the intensive study of individuals over time can contribute to theory testing and offer new insights into the nature of temporally unfolding processes that are theorized to be central to the manifestation of microaggressions in everyday life.

Keywords: microaggressions, daily experience, idiographic-nomethic design, multilevel data

There are very few African American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me. There are very few African American men who haven't had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me... There are very few African Americans who haven't had the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off. That happens often.

(Obama, 2013)

The term *microaggression* was coined by Chester Pierce, who defined it as "...subtle, stunning, often automatic and nonverbal exchanges which are 'put-downs' of blacks by offenders" (Pierce et al., 1978, p. 66). Sue and colleagues (2007) expanded the definition to include common place daily exchanges that send denigrating messages to members of marginalized groups. More recently, a spirited debate of the microaggression concept has appeared in popular writings (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015) and the discourses of academics (Sue et al., 2008). In his review, Lilienfeld (2016, this issue) presents sensible recommendations for advancing microaggression research. Here, we focus on what we believe to be a key challenge to advancing the concept of microaggressions and its application—the paucity of intensive longitudinal studies that assess the psychological dynamics of peoples' everyday lives.

Prioritizing Ecological Validity

Intensive longitudinal investigations are those that assess experiences as they unfold in the natural environment. However, as Lilienfeld (this issue) notes, longitudinal data linking microaggressions to mental health has, to date, remained limited. The question of how microaggressions influence adaptational outcomes over time is of particular theoretical relevance given that the psychological effects of microaggressions have been purported to result from their subtle, brief, and recurring nature (Pierce, 1995; Sue, et al., 2007). Indeed, it is precisely idiographic (within-person) questions regarding individuals' psychological adaptation to

everyday events that microaggression researchers and clinicians hope to answer. Said differently, while behavioral interventions endeavor to help minority members cope with the psychological toll of microaggressions in daily life (Sue, 2010), the bulk of research designed to inform those interventions continue to rely on nomothetic (between-person) methodologies.

Beyond bringing researchers closer to the real world of individuals, intensive longitudinal studies increase the precision with which rapidly fluctuating processes are characterized, minimize retrospection bias, and strengthen causal inference by establishing temporal precedence (Affleck et al., 1999; West & Hepworth, 1991), thereby overcoming some of the methodological limitations inherent in the vast majority of cross-sectional work reviewed by Lilienfeld. Importantly, time-intensive designs allow researchers to simultaneously account for within- and between-person sources of variation. Thus, the potential of microaggressions as a bridging concept hinges on multilevel analyses that link individuals to their proximal social contexts. When positioned as a multilevel framework, the study of microaggressions may also offer a rich descriptive base from which to explore a number of central but as yet unresolved issues raised in Lilienfeld's review, including the role of personality in shaping individuals' perceptions and reactions to microaggressions, the impact of microaggressions above and beyond overt prejudice, the degree of correspondence between "recipients' and deliverers" judgments of microaggressions (i.e., vis-à-vis analysis of dyadic diary data), and other factors that may be collinear with microaggression experiences (e.g., vigilance and anticipatory stress).

"Nothing So Theoretical as a Good Method"

Wohlwill (1991) likened the exchange between theory and method to a dance in which theory can both lead and be led by methods. This consideration prompted Greenwald (2012) to assert, "there is nothing so theoretical as a good method." Like Greenwald, we believe that the

development of methods can lead to further precision and refinement in theory. In particular, methodological approaches that allow for the assessment of individual differences in the patterning of microaggression dynamics that play out over minutes, hours and days may give rise to new constructs and ultimately strengthen microaggression theory. Although Lilienfeld's review called for more longitudinal research, time-intensive studies of day-to-day discrimination were given only brief mention (e.g., Douglass et al., 2015; Hoggard, Byrd, & Sellers, 2012; Swim et al., 2003). Our own daily process studies have uncovered stress and negative mood spillover effects that demonstrate the "residue" of daily microaggression experiences (Burrow & Ong, 2010; Ong et al., 2013; Ong, Fuller-Rowell, & Burrow, 2009; Torres & Ong, 2010). These findings afford insights into within-person associations that could not have been obtained through traditional between-person approaches. Notably, the scope of these investigations and others now in the literature underscores the growing interest in the application of real-time assessments and within-person analytic strategies to the study of microaggressions.

One might reasonably ask whether experimental analogues might be a better way of examining inherently dynamic phenomena such as microaggressions. For example, Lilienfeld suggests using laboratory paradigms to evaluate "...the possibility that labeling deliverer statements as 'microaggressions' may fuel anger and even overt aggression in recipients..." Although this may be a sound approach to parsing attributions of intent, we argue that if subtle cues regarding deliverer intent are to be implicated as a cause of hostile responses, they must occur with some frequency in the recipient's natural environment. Yet we know very little about the extent to which laboratory-based indicators of microaggressions actually reflect real-life microaggression experience.

The Stuff of Psychological Science

In closing, we agree with Lilienfeld that microaggression research should continue to advance in methodological sophistication. The relation between microaggressions and health is undoubtedly complex and demands the intensive study of individuals in their natural settings. However, we suggest that psychological science with its multilevel approach (Brewer, 2013) is uniquely equipped to add to our understanding of the nature of microaggression experiences, their context and implications for health. Far from abandoning the concept, we advocate for microaggression research to move beyond static models of “if-then” relations to dynamic models that depict life as it is lived.

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