

Microaggressions and Daily Experience: Depicting Life as It Is Lived

Anthony D. Ong^{1,2} and Anthony L. Burrow¹

¹Department of Human Development, Cornell University; ²Division of Geriatrics and Palliative Medicine, Weill Cornell Medical College

Abstract

Psychologists use the term *microaggressions* to describe subtle forms of bias and discrimination experienced by members of marginalized groups. Lilienfeld (2017, this issue) makes an important contribution to the literature by presenting a critical review of the meaning and measurement of microaggression experiences. In this commentary, we argue that advancing the construct of microaggressions rests on research approaches that move beyond static representations of individuals to dynamic frameworks that observe people's lives as they unfold day to day. 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 evaluation and offer new insights into the nature of unfolding processes that are theorized to be central to the manifestation of microaggressions in everyday life.

Keywords

microaggressions, daily experience, idiographic–nomothetic 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, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978, p. 66). Sue and colleagues (2007) expanded the definition to include commonplace, 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, Capodilupo, Nadal, & Torino, 2008). In his review, Lilienfeld (2017, this issue) presents

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 people's everyday lives.

Prioritizing Ecological Validity

Intensive longitudinal investigations are those that assess experiences as they unfold in the natural environment. However, as Lilienfeld 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) phenomena regarding individuals' psychological adaptation to everyday events that microaggression

Corresponding Author:

Anthony D. Ong, Department of Human Development, G77 Martha Van Rensselaer Hall, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853-4401
E-mail: anthony.ong@cornell.edu

researchers and clinicians often wish to understand. Said differently, although mental health professionals endeavor to help minority members cope with the psychological toll of microaggressions in daily life (Sue et al., 2007), the bulk of research designed to inform clinical practice continues to rely on nomothetic (between-person) methodologies.

Beyond bringing researchers closer to the real world of individuals' daily lives, intensive longitudinal studies increase the precision with which rapidly changing processes are characterized, minimize retrospection bias, and strengthen causal inference by establishing temporal precedence (Affleck, Zautra, Tennen, & Armeli, 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 in data. The potential of microaggressions as a bridging concept thus hinges on multilevel analyses that link individuals to their proximal social contexts. When situated within 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 acts of prejudice and discrimination, 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 strongly identified with or theoretically 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” (p. 99). 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, Mirpuri, English, & Yip, 2015; Hoggard, Byrd, & Sellers, 2012; Swim, Hyers, Cohen,

Fitzgerald, & Bylsma, 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, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja, & Sue, 2013; Ong, Fuller-Rowell, & Burrow, 2009; Torres & Ong, 2010). Notably, the scope of these investigations offer insights into within-person associations that could not have been obtained through conventional between-person methodologies.

One could reasonably ask whether experimental analogues might better represent intrinsically dynamic phenomena such as microaggressions. Lilienfeld suggests using laboratory paradigms to evaluate whether “. . . labeling deliverer statements as ‘microaggressions’ may fuel anger and even overt aggression in recipients. . .” (p. 147). 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 reliable cause of hostile responses, they should generalize to real life circumstance and show some frequency in the recipient's natural, everyday contexts. Yet we know relatively very little about the extent to which laboratory-based indicators of microaggressions actually reflect real-life microaggression experience. We know even less about the underlying constitutive cues in everyday settings (e.g., workplaces, academic institutions) that might signal threatening social identity contingencies or an uncertain sense of belonging for marginalized groups (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Ditlemann, & Randall Crosby, 2008). Such inquiries are notably grounded in theoretical conceptualizations that see microaggressions, not as personal traits, but rather as basic features of everyday relationships and social contexts.

The Stuff of Psychological Science

In closing, we concur 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. Nonetheless, 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 contexts, and their 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.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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