

# Microaggressions: Clarification, Evidence, and Impact

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## Abstract

In a 2017 article in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Scott Lilienfeld critiqued the conceptual basis for microaggressions as well as the scientific rigor of scholarship on the topic. The current article provides a response that systematically analyzes the arguments and representations made in Lilienfeld's critique with regard to the concept of microaggressions and the state of the related research. I show that, in contrast to the claim that the concept of microaggressions is vague and inconsistent, the term is well defined and can be decisively linked to individual prejudice in offenders and mental-health outcomes in targets. I explain how the concept of microaggressions is connected to pathological stereotypes, power structures, structural racism, and multiple forms of racial prejudice. Also described are recent research advances that address some of Lilienfeld's original critiques. Further, this article highlights potentially problematic attitudes, assumptions, and approaches embedded in Lilienfeld's analysis that are common to the field of psychology as a whole. It is important for all academics to acknowledge and question their own biases and perspectives when conducting scientific research.

## Keywords

microaggressions, racism, validity, ethnic differences, diversity, education

Although it is no longer socially acceptable to be openly racist in America (e.g., Nadal, 2018), racism continues to be part of the fabric of American life. Racism can be defined as beliefs, attitudes, policies, and acts that denigrate or disadvantage individuals or groups because of presumed racial or ethnic-group affiliation (R. Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 1999; Schmid, 1996). According to R. Clark et al. (1999), the conceptualization of racism can generally be placed into two broad categories: attitudinal (e.g., prejudice) or behavioral (e.g., discrimination); however, it is important to understand that racism is also structural in nature, in that it is woven into nearly all of our social systems, institutions, and policies for the benefit of White Americans at the expense of people of color (Salter, Adams, & Perez, 2018). Individual and structural racism exist in synergy, each supporting the other. People of color experience racism in many forms, including covert acts of racial discrimination that go unseen and unacknowledged by offenders (e.g., Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005).

Chester Pierce (1974), a prominent African American Harvard-trained psychiatrist, was the first to describe these covert acts as *microaggressions* in the 1960s. He

defined microaggressions as “black-white racial interactions [that] are characterized by white put-downs, done in an automatic, preconscious, or unconscious fashion” (p. 515). Since that time, both popular use and the academic study of microaggressions have grown rapidly (e.g., Sue et al., 2007), and the definition has been expanded to describe this phenomenon when it occurs between various groups where there exists stigma and/or a power imbalance. In contrast to what Pierce (1970) called “macroaggressions,” which would include severe acts of racism (e.g., lynchings, beatings, cross burnings), microaggressions are considered small, common, and sometimes ambiguous, yet they are particularly stressful for those on the receiving end given their ubiquity and deniability.

Scott Lilienfeld (2017a,b) has critiqued both the conceptual basis for microaggressions as well as the scientific

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rigor of academic scholarship on the topic. In a 2017 article published in this journal, he argued that the microaggression research program rests on five faulty premises:

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. Microaggressions exert an adverse impact on recipients' mental health. (Lilienfeld, 2017b, p. 140)

Some scholars have supported his critique (e.g., Haidt, 2017), and so it is critical that these points be addressed with sound reasoning and current empirical findings. This article will address each premise, using the existing literature base and my own research. Specifically, as elaborated in Table 1, I argue the following:

1. Microaggressions are well defined.
2. Adequate agreement exists regarding what constitutes a microaggression.
3. Microaggressions are correlated with valid measures of racism.
4. Microaggressions can be validly assessed using respondents' subjective reports.
5. Microaggressions are linked to negative mental-health outcomes.

On the basis of Pierce's original descriptions and current scholarship, I define microaggressions as deniable acts of racism that reinforce pathological stereotypes and inequitable social norms. This definition is not based on the conscious intent of the offender or the perception of the target, although I will illustrate how microaggressions are related to racial biases, are offensive to many, and are harmful to victims. Lilienfeld also made a number of additional claims and comments that deserve a response, but not all of the issues can be addressed here because of space issues, so in addition to these five major premises, I address a few of his most problematic points in the discussion. Specifically, I argue that Lilienfeld's approach to understanding these issues uses a cultural-deficit model, that he endorsed what may amount to suppressing information about microaggressions,<sup>1</sup> and that microaggression education can beneficially be taught to students.

Before examining specific claims, I first address the approach to the scientific process. Although ultimately this article is aimed at systematically and carefully deconstructing Lilienfeld's arguments, claims, reasoning, and misrepresentation of the state of microaggression research, it is important for all academics to acknowledge and question their own biases and perspectives when conducting research (Barber & Silver, 1968; Does et al., 2018; Orne, 1962). This principle is inherent in statistical approaches for reducing confirmation bias and in the academic encouragement of open discussion and debate (Littell, 2008; Nickerson, 1998). In responding to Lilienfeld's article, I consciously choose to share my vantage point. Note that I approach this issue from my own perspective as a clinical psychologist, psychopathology researcher, disparities

**Table 1.** Addressing Lilienfeld's Key Assertions

Questioned assertion	Response
1. Microaggressions are operationalized with sufficient clarity and consensus to afford rigorous scientific investigation	Microaggressions are well operationalized and can be identified on the basis of pathological ethnic or racial stereotypes, the content of which is dictated by legitimizing myths. The defining features of microaggressions are largely shared among diversity researchers, who have created many validated measures of microaggressions that have been used in several rigorous scientific investigations.
2. Microaggressions are interpreted negatively by most or all minority group members	It is not necessary for microaggressions to be interpreted negatively by all minorities for the construct to have meaning. Nonetheless, the evidence suggests that most people of color agree that most microaggressions (as identified by researchers) are offensive.
3. Microaggressions reflect implicitly prejudicial and implicitly aggressive motives	Microaggressions are correlated to multiple indicators of racism, including symbolic racism, color-blind racial attitudes, modern racism, and explicit racial attitudes (feelings thermometer), and they are negatively correlated to positive feelings toward people of color.
4. Microaggressions can be validly assessed using only respondents' subjective reports	Microaggressions are routinely assessed using validated self-report measures. Further, people of color, White people, and diversity experts alike largely agree as to what constitutes undesirable microaggressive behavior.
5. Microaggressions exert an adverse impact on recipients' mental health.	Microaggressions are correlated to numerous severe mental-health conditions, including suicidality. Correlations remain even after controlling for negative affectivity. Several studies have examined the effects of microaggressions proactively to establish cause and effect. Thus microaggressions pose an important mental health concern.

researcher, psychometrician, behaviorist, diversity instructor, university educator, clinical supervisor, target of microaggressions, person of color, American, African American, and woman. Some of these identities are stigmatized (e.g., Black woman) and some are privileged (e.g., university professor). All of these identities are salient as they inform my approach, perspective, and priorities (Does et al., 2018). As part of my African American cultural values and ethnic/racial socialization, I value being clear, direct, and honest. I regularly experience all forms of racism, probably more than most because of the relatively large platform I have to disseminate my antiracism work, but less so than some because of my privileged identities. I am an optimist and believe people can grow and change for the better. All of us carry biases, and challenging ongoing personal work is needed to address these.

### Racial microaggressions terminology

Much of the scholarship surrounding microaggressions has focused on marginalized ethnic and racial groups that tend to be the targets of microaggressive behavior. The term started as a way to describe the common experiences of African Americans (Pierce, 1970; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007), but other groups experience frequent microaggressions as well, including Asian Americans (Nadal, Vigilia Escobar, Prado, David, & Haynes, 2012; Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja, & Sue, 2013), Hispanic Americans (Huynh, 2012; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009), Native Americans/American Indians (Jones & Galliher, 2015; Walls, Gonzalez, Gladney, & Onello, 2015), Asian and Indigenous Canadians (Canel-Çınarbaş & Yohani, 2019; D. A. Clark, Kleiman, Spanierman, Isaac, & Poolokasingham, 2014; Poolokasingham, Spanierman, Kleiman, & Houshmand, 2014), and others. Arab Americans are also subjected to microaggressions, but because individuals of Middle Eastern descent are not officially recognized as an ethnic minority group, research is sparse, and many instances of discrimination are not documented (Awad, 2010).

Sue et al. (2007) proposed one of the first classification systems for racial microaggressions. This included nine categories, described as (a) assumptions that a person of color is not a true American; (b) assumptions of lesser intelligence; (c) statements that convey color-blindness or denial of the importance of race; (d) assumptions of criminality or dangerousness; (e) denial of individual racism; (f) promotion of the myth of meritocracy; (g) assumptions that one's cultural background and communication styles are pathological; (h) the experience of being treated as a second-class citizen; and (i) environmental messages of being unwelcome or devalued. These are specific to the types of microaggressions

experienced by people in our culture as a result of race or ethnicity. Although there are other types of microaggressions (i.e., gender, religious, etc.) and unique intersectional stressors for people with various marginalized identities (e.g., Asian American sexual/gender minorities; Ching, Lee, Chen, So, & Williams, 2018), the focus of this article is on microaggressions connected to the target's presumed racial and ethnic group, and so herein *microaggressions* should be taken to mean ethnoracial microaggressions, unless otherwise indicated. This is because microaggressions against groups that are stigmatized differently have a unique history that changes the nature of the construct in ways requiring a different understanding than what is presented here.

In terms of who commits microaggressions, Lilienfeld objected to Sue et al.'s (2007) use of the term *perpetrator* in order to avoid any connotation of intentionality or malevolence and instead uses the term *deliverer*. He also preferred the term *recipient* over *victim*, which perhaps diverts attention away from the harm done by the *deliverer*, given that he openly questioned the mental-health impact of microaggressions. *Deliverer* and *recipient* are, by Lilienfeld's own admission, awkward, but they are also misleading. Consider that the term *deliverer* may conjure up images of a student driver holding pizza in a cardboard box, a UPS carrier with a long-awaited package, or even Santa Claus with gifts, and yet microaggressions are nothing a child would want to find under a Christmas tree. Pierce (1970, 1974) describes microaggressions as emotionally damaging "offensive mechanisms," a type of analogue to the Freudian concept of defensive mechanisms, which, like microaggressions, often occur outside conscious awareness. Further, Pierce (1970) likens the performance of microaggressions to an offensive maneuver one might observe in the sport of football, and consequently he urged people of color to have ready defenses to counter these attacks. Therefore, I will use the term *offender* to refer to those who microaggress, in homage to Dr. Pierce, and also in recognition of the fact that microaggressions are, by nature, offensive in the sense that they are a form of racism (Kanter et al., 2017), making the term *offender* an apt description. Given that not all microaggressions are consciously deliberate, some may wonder if *offender* is an appropriate term. Consider the case of an inexperienced driver who unintentionally strikes and injures a pedestrian. Even though the accident was unintended, the driver can still be considered culpable and can be convicted for not being careful enough or skilled enough, at which point the driver becomes an *offender*.

The foundational perspective of this article is that microaggressions are real and not simply a subjective experience. Consequently, an *offender* directs a microaggression

at a specific person or group of people, and in this sense, a microaggression is aimed and launched, but it may or may not strike a victim and cause harm (e.g., the target may not perceive the microaggression—for example, an offender may mutter an unkind phrase under his breath but not loud enough for the target to hear). Thus, I will use the term *target* to refer to the intended recipient of the microaggression. That being said, the term *victim* is appropriate if the target is harmed by the microaggression. Consider, in the example of the inexperienced driver above, that although the injury is unintended, the injured pedestrian is still a victim.

## Operationalizing Microaggressions

### *Defining microaggressions*

Although we tend to think of microaggressions as statements, they may take many forms. In addition to negative statements (e.g., “Asians are bad drivers”) and seemingly positive statements (e.g., “Black people are good at basketball”), they can include actions (e.g., crossing the street to avoid walking past a Black man), inaction (e.g., failing to offer aid to a person of color in distress because “someone else will do it”), being unseen (e.g., everyone at a banquet getting served except the lone person of color), being treated as contaminated (e.g., a cashier putting change on the counter rather than in hand to avoid touching the person of color), and environmental assaults (e.g., naming a public park after a Confederate Civil War leader). A microaggression would not generally involve direct physical harm, although in certain cases it may (e.g., a person of color is tripped in a crowded train station because a White person is taking the right of way).

Lilienfeld described microaggressions “as subtle snubs, slights, and insults directed toward minorities, as well as to women and other historically stigmatized groups, that implicitly communicate or engender hostility” (p. 139). This is somewhat different from Sue et al.’s (2007) definition: “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color *because they belong to a racial minority group*” (p. 273, emphasis added). Microaggressions are by definition caused by socially conditioned racial biases and prejudices. Lilienfeld’s revision omitted the purported cause of the transgression, leaving us without a sound theoretical basis for the behavior, and so we cannot properly conceptualize it, much less operationalize it. Because the cause of microaggressions is not adequately addressed, Lilienfeld could assert that they are “open concepts” with “fuzzy boundaries” (p. 143). He implied that when microaggressions occur, they are mostly random behaviors that just happen because offenders are careless or

unaware. He urged us to consider that perhaps “certain microaggression items reflect innocuous statements or actions that do not stem from implicit racial biases” (p. 158).

At one time, I might have been inclined to give offenders the benefit of the doubt, had I not read about the experiences of Pierce (1970) and the demeaning microaggressions he endured from his colleagues and medical students more than 50 years ago. It is noteworthy that the events he described continue to happen today to Black faculty, as we encounter more disrespect, patronizing advice, and challenges to our intellectual authority than our White counterparts (e.g., Chambers, 2012). For example, Carlotta Berry, a Black engineering professor, describes her microaggressive experiences in a *New York Times* article, noting,

In class, I have my derivations questioned, lectures critiqued, grading regarded as too harsh or unfair and my expectations dismissed as too high or difficult. I once had a student who would review notes with me that he had taken on my lecture, then offer tips on how I could improve. It seems he thought he was doing me a favor (Berry, 2014, para. 7).

Given what we know about behavioral conditioning, we would expect that random behaviors that are punished or unreinforced would eventually become extinct (Skinner, 1958, 1963; Thorndike, 1933). Given that people of color are not positively reinforcing others for behaving this way, and at least sometimes expressing their displeasure about it (punishment; e.g., Watkins, LaBarrie, & Appio, 2010), we must wonder why such behaviors have persisted since Pierce first described them 5 decades ago. Microaggressions persist because the underlying cause of these behaviors (racism) reinforces social inequalities and hierarchies that are desirable to the in-group at the expense of the out-group. According to social-dominance theory (Pratto, 1999), group-based inequalities are reinforced through intergroup behaviors, including behavioral asymmetry (which applies to microaggressions) and individual discrimination (Sidanius & Pratto, 2012). These behaviors are justified, both morally and intellectually, by widely shared legitimizing cultural myths (Sidanius, Pratto, & Devereux, 1992), giving rise to false stereotypes that ultimately serve to reinforce and propagate inequality. Substantial evidence from social psychology supports the application of social-dominance theory to many forms of discrimination (Foels & Pratto, 2015), and microaggressions can be examined and understood within this context.

Further, although microaggressions are sometimes rebuffed by the target, they must often be accepted

without challenge because of the power differential between the parties. Targets learn that should they reject microaggressive actions, they may experience social harm in the form of anger, defensiveness, and/or denial from the offender (DiAngelo, 2011; Smith et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2007). Thus targets are typically forced to endure these insults without recourse, which contributes to the perpetuation of the problem.

### ***“Microaggressions” and “everyday racism/discrimination”***

Microaggressions overlap with some similar concepts, so one cannot study microaggressions without considering these other close constructs and the related literature base. The concept of “everyday racism” emerged from the work of Essed (1991) and her studies of Black women in different societies. It describes how racism is transmitted through routine practices that seem normal to the dominant group, ensuring that the racism goes largely unrecognized and unacknowledged (e.g., Phillips & Lowery, 2018). Everyday racism is defined as unacknowledged racism integrated into common situations through cognitive and behavioral practices that activate and perpetuate underlying power relations via familiar schemas in common situations. One example Essed describes is the concept of “majority rule,” which may be invoked to legitimize ignoring minority concerns. She notes how minority preferences are often dismissed as something of interest to only a small number of people. By this logic, it becomes possible that no ethnic minority concerns will ever be addressed, because those concerns affect a relatively smaller number of individuals, and yet we unthinkingly defer to majority opinion in many everyday situations. Everyday racism is part of a larger system of structural racism that reinforces the underlying racial hierarchy and has a cumulative negative affect on people of color (e.g., Salter et al., 2018). Essed also describes many situations in which high-achieving Black women were hindered in their attempts at educational progress, such as being given a C grade on an excellent paper or being discouraged from taking an advanced course of study—backlash for attempting to upset the social order.

Everyday racism was followed by the concept of “everyday discrimination,” which largely overlaps with microaggressions and is well studied in terms of impact and outcomes. This describes subjective common discrimination or unfair treatment as a form of stress that is not randomly distributed in society but is strongly related to race (Banks, Kohn-Wood, & Spencer, 2006). Everyday discrimination can be defined as racially motivated minor daily hassles and recent experiences that often constitute an assault to one’s character (Ayalon

& Gum, 2011). Compared with microaggressions, everyday discrimination tends to have a greater focus on discrete discriminatory experiences, sometimes including blatant acts of prejudice, and tends to not include social exclusion or environmental assaults. This construct also sometimes addresses forms of discrimination other than race, such as gender- or disability-related discrimination.

Like microaggressions, everyday racism and everyday discrimination include covert prejudice, are commonplace, and are rooted in power differentials between groups. Therefore, many if not most microaggressions can be conceptualized as manifestations of everyday racism and discrimination. A robust body of literature using national samples has linked everyday discrimination to negative mental and physical health outcomes across racial and ethnic groups (Ayalon & Gum, 2011; Earnshaw et al., 2016).

### ***Why some people have difficulty defining microaggressions***

Lilienfeld finds that acts defined as microaggressions seem contradictory at times (e.g., a professor ignoring a student of color is a microaggression, but focusing too much attention on same that student might also be a microaggression). Faced with this conundrum, he appeared to write off the whole concept as too unclear to be useful. The issue is that because microaggressions are context dependent (Sue et al., 2007), they cannot be defined simply on the basis of the exact behavior performed or the precise words used in a given sentence. For example, a Confederate monument might not be a microaggression in a museum but probably would be on a busy public intersection at a Southern college campus (e.g., Williams, 2019). Telling a Black student that she is smart might not be a microaggression during office hours, but it might be if said during class with a look of surprise on the instructor’s face. Asking an Asian American woman where she is from might not be a microaggression if the desire is to form a genuine connection over similar life experiences, but would be if the goal is to draw stereotypical conclusions on the basis of heritage and/or assumed immigrant status. Identifying microaggressions requires some discernment, but this is no different than the degree of nuance required to do good psychotherapy or to have harmonious interactions with one’s spouse. In all cases, the same statement may be welcomed in one circumstance and despised in another (e.g., Bouton, 1988). This does not invalidate the concept; it simply requires a more sophisticated lens for understanding it.

Correspondingly, Lilienfeld interpreted the prefix “micro” in microaggression to mean that the transgression is “barely visible or at least challenging to detect”

(p. 158). But “micro” is simply meant to contrast with “macro”: A macroaggression would be a racist act resulting in tangible harm, such as an assault or losing one’s job (e.g., Pierce, 1970). However, the meaning of the prefix “micro” can be misunderstood given that White people in our culture have more difficulty identifying and operationalizing microaggressions. They tend not to notice microaggressions levied against their peers of color (Alabi, 2015). Microaggressions are invisible to many White people because they are socialized not to see racial inequities (Phillips & Lowery, 2018; Underhill, 2018); they usually do not directly experience microaggressions, and as dominant-group members, accurate identification is not necessary to ensure personal safety and well-being. However, those who are motivated to understand them can be sensitized to identify microaggressions when they are happening to others, even if they are not directed at the observer. For example, a White parent who adopts a Hispanic child may start to notice microaggressions for the first time as they are leveled against the child or may even start to receive them from others who may be uncomfortable with a multiethnic family (e.g., Caballero, Edwards, Goodyer, & Okitikpi, 2012).

Racism puts people of color at a social disadvantage that can at times lead to severe consequences (e.g., police violence, loss of employment, eviction), and so out of necessity they may learn (from parents, peers, and/or their own experiences) to identify subtle signs of bias in order to most effectively navigate American life. Some have argued that this is critical for well-being (e.g., Stevenson, 1994), although it is worth noting that this discernment is an acquired skill and is neither inborn nor an exact science (Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2000, 2002; van Ryn et al., 2015). Groups of people that have lived in the United States longer, for more generations, and/or with darker skin will tend to have more experience with racial bias than new immigrants or those who appear White (e.g., Keith, Nguyen, Taylor, Chatters, & Mouzon, 2017), and some ethnic groups engage in more ethnic/racial socialization with their children than others do (Hughes et al., 2006). More ethnic/racial socialization is correlated both with better identification of subtle racism and improved mental health (Brown & Tylka, 2010; Thai, Lyons, Lee, & Iwasaki, 2017).

### ***Microaggressions and pathological stereotypes***

As noted, microaggressions are not simply cultural missteps or racial faux pas, but function as a form of oppression designed to reinforce the traditional power differential between groups (e.g., Sue et al., 2007),

whether or not this was the conscious intention of the offender. Consequently, there is an underlying connection between the message embedded in the microaggression and its relationship to pathological stereotypes about the target that reify existing power structures. Pathological stereotypes can be defined as false notions about people in oppressed groups that serve to explain and justify disparities (also known as *legitimizing myths*); social dominance determines the stereotyped content rather than the actual characteristics of group members (Williams, Gooden, & Davis, 2012). Therefore, one can predict that microaggressions will reinforce unfair pathological stereotypes about people of color (Sue et al., 2007). These cultural ideologies are not restricted to White actors: Any person can commit a microaggression. Consider that pathological stereotypes are pervasive and arguably part of our social fabric. People of color are subjected to the same pathological stereotypes about various ethnic and racial groups as everyone else, and so they may hold negative views about other ethnic groups or even their own group if they are in an early stage of ethnic-identity development (Sue & Sue, 2016). Although people with a psychological orientation toward group equality may endorse beliefs that attenuate social hierarchies, ethnic-identity development may moderate the extent to which even people of color subscribe to pathological stereotypes (Hipolito-Delgado, 2016).

### ***Intentionality***

Lilienfeld argued that because such actions are not always intentional, and intention is required for aggression, the term microaggression is inaccurate and should be changed. Microaggressions are part of an ideological social system that confers benefits to the dominant group at the expense of the subordinate group (Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Essed, 1991; Phillips & Lowery, 2018). As such, they 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, taught to unwitting actors through observational learning or other social mechanisms. In either case, the social context is required to understand individual behaviors. For example, during the era of legalized segregation, it was common to observe *caste behavior*, such as Black people quietly deferring to Whites in public spaces, giving them the right of way on sidewalks and streets. Whites grew to expect this behavior, even if not consciously acknowledged, which reinforced feelings of superiority (Davis, 1989).

It would be a mistake to argue that there was no intention to oppress the Black populace embedded in

these subtle behaviors. Blacks deferred because they knew that failure to do so could result in harm. Most Whites would have denied doing anything harmful, aggressive, or intentional as they went about their daily business because it was simply what they had learned and what they had always done. Likewise, even people who may consider themselves unbiased learn that microaggressive statements and actions are an appropriate and harmless way of interacting with people of color, even if not taught this explicitly. Further, this behavior is maintained because targets have learned that should they object, they risk suffering some degree of harm, such as invalidation (e.g., Sue et al., 2007), anger and defensiveness (e.g., DiAngelo, 2011), being called neurotic (e.g., Lilienfeld, 2017b), or having one's character attacked (e.g., Campbell & Manning, 2014). This point is made doubly salient when a person of color is microaggressed against in the form of an unjustified encounter with law enforcement, such as requests for identification, being searched, or being asked to leave a public place, given that targets are powerless to object (e.g., Smith et al., 2007).

Sue et al. (2007) created three classifications of racial microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. The main difference among these terms is that microassaults are considered intentional behaviors, whereas microinsults and microinvalidations are not intended to be offensive. In terms of the latter two, microinsults denigrate the target for being a person of color, and microinvalidations are hurtful because they invalidate the thoughts, feelings, or experiences of the target as a person of color. It has been argued that microassaults do not capture the true definition of microaggressions because they are intentionally meant to cause harm whereas the others are not (Lilienfeld, 2017b). I do not find these categories especially useful because all microaggressions are meant to cause harm, either by the individual or society at large, and this is what makes them all forms of aggression. Further, it often cannot be known how much of a given microaggression was intentional (the offender wanted to harm the target purely because the individual was a person of color) versus quasi-intentional (the offender came up with a reason other than race to aggress, although it was actually motivated by racial hostility) versus "good intentions" (the offender meant to be helpful but was actually being patronizing).

It has been hypothesized that most microaggressions fall in in the "good intentions" category, but this is impossible to know because nearly all offenders profess good intentions. Even those who espouse overtly racist views often simultaneously deny negative feelings or bad intentions toward others. Consider that while supporting school segregation, Alabama governor George

Wallace denied hostility toward people of color, justifying legally codified racism because "white people felt it was the best interest of both races; it was not an antagonism toward black people, and that's what some people can't understand" (Crossely, 1986). These are not so different from the claims of White supremacist and hate groups today. White Nationalist leader David Duke, a former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard, asserts that he does not hate Black people; rather he represents "the very opposite of racism," and wants only to defend his White heritage (Duke, 2011; "Rights for white people," 2017). Many people of color report that they endure racial slurs from White friends or colleagues who believe they are using these terms affectionately (e.g., Harwood, Huntt, Mendenhall, & Lewis, 2012). So subjective inferences about harmful intent are not particularly useful, as even those committing overt racist behaviors may tether actions to purported good intentions. In all cases, whether intentional, quasi-intentional, or unintended, microaggressions reinforce social hierarchies and are racially offensive, explained away as valid, and frustrating to victims. Therefore, microaggressions need not be defined in terms of conscious intentionality.

### ***Are microaggressions truly aggressive?***

In social psychology, *aggression* is most commonly defined as a behavior intended to harm another person who does not wish to be harmed, and *violence* is defined as aggression that has extreme physical harm as its goal (Allen & Anderson, 2017; Bushman & Huesmann, 2010). Because microaggressions are believed to be often unintentional (or even well intentioned) and harms are often small, under this definition they are not automatically considered a form of violence or aggression. However, there are many disciplines that have a broader conceptualization of these terms and consider all forms of racism to be violence and aggression.

In the journal *Aggression & Violent Behavior*, Lee (2015) proposes a definition of violence based on the one provided by the World Health Organization:

The intentional reduction of life or thriving of life in human beings by human beings through physical, structural, or other means of force, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in deprivation, maldevelopment, psychological harm, injury, death, or extinction of the species. (Lee, 2015, p. 202)

Racism can fit this definition because it encompasses multifaceted behaviors by the dominant group that are forced on subordinate racial groups, leading to many

well-documented harms. Microaggressions also fit this definition because they are a form of racism that leads to negative mental- and physical-health outcomes (described further in the sections “Microaggressions Are Caused (at Least in Part) by Racial Biases” and “Microaggressions Exert an Adverse Impact on Mental Health”). So, although this may not fit the most common social-psychology definitions, the term would apply within many other academic disciplines, including peace and conflict studies, education, feminism, global health, racial/ethnic studies, and sociology. It is not that one discipline has a better definition or is more correct; rather, one discipline has a very specific definition and others are using such terms more broadly. Because the study of microaggressions arose out of African American mental health, it makes sense that the terminology is more closely aligned with some of these other disciplines. The foundations of the aggression versus microaggression literatures are qualitatively different and to equate them because of Pierce’s choice of terminology may be unwarranted. The term microaggression has been used to describe subtle racism for over 5 decades within multicultural psychology and is perhaps equally legitimate as the current definition of *aggression* within social psychology. That being said, the meaning of the term microaggression may be debated or shift over time; if so, that should be because those invested in continuing Pierce’s work (i.e., people of color and diversity researchers) have made that decision on the basis of their research and the utility of the construct (e.g., Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Wong, Derthick, David, Saw, & Okazaki, 2014). Such important decisions are not to be made by detractors who have invested little in the work and may not fully understand the problem or its impact.

Pierce, who invented the term, intended microaggressions to be an umbrella for all types of covert racism. Microaggressions are transactional; as such, both sides of the transaction are important and should be fully appreciated. The language should not be changed simply because offenders object to being considered aggressors without considering the perspectives of the targets as well. Freeman and Stewart (2019) argue that the term microaggression is fair and balanced because the term “micro” reflects the perspective of the offender (small offense) and “aggression” reflects the perspective of the victim (aggressive act). On the other side of the coin, some people object to the term “microaggression” because they feel the prefix “micro” minimizes the experience of harm.

Finally, one must consider the aggression that often results when a target attempts to reject a microaggression, making them afraid to confront offenders. Fear of reprisal may not only perpetuate microaggressions but

also lead to coerced behavior on the part of targets. For example, imagine a situation in which several students are attending office hours for a difficult computer science class. After one of the students shares what a hard time she is having, the professor points to an Asian American student who is waiting for help and suggests they work together, saying, “I bet Kevin can help you out.” Suppose Kevin is also really struggling in the class, feels embarrassed to be doing poorly, and now feels tremendous stress and anxiety having been volunteered as a tutor. Imagine Kevin says to the professor that he is not comfortable helping the other student and also feels a bit stereotyped by the whole thing. The professor could recognize the misstep and apologize, or he could get angry, defensive, and even covertly retaliate against the student. Imagine Kevin has experienced angry retaliation in the past for pointing out a microaggression, so he decides it is just too risky and opts to help the other student rather than risk the possible harms of sharing how this affected him. He might even neglect other academic needs in order to meet the professor’s stereotyped expectations. So, it is not simply that microaggressions are unwanted and offensive, it is also that targets are not truly free to reject them (e.g., Minikel-Lacocque, 2013).

Lilienfeld called for more research to determine whether the commission of microaggressions is correlated to aggressive tendencies in offenders. If we accept that racism is a form of violence, then more research is not necessary to classify microaggressions as a form of aggression. However, to determine whether microaggressions are correlated to conventional psychological conceptualizations of aggression, Lilienfeld suggested that researchers administer measures of aggression along with measures of microaggression likelihood to potential offenders. Given that most people seem to recognize that microaggressive behaviors are unacceptable (Michaels, Gallagher, Crawford, Kanter, & Williams, 2018; Kanter et al., 2017), it would make sense that those who are more temperamentally aggressive would be less likely to suppress urges to microaggress. Mekawi and Todd (2018) examined this issue in their study of the acceptability of microaggressions (microinsults and microinvalidations, specifically), using the 3-item subscales of the short version of the Buss Perry Aggression Questionnaire (BPAQ; Buss & Perry, 1992). They did not find strong or consistent correlations between various types of microaggressions and verbal aggression or hostility. There were, however, some methodological weaknesses, such as mixing White students and students of color in the analyses. Further, it has been noted that tendencies to be aggressive in one context (against out-group members) do not correlate to aggression in other contexts (against in-group members), and in some



cases, love for the in-group actually leads to hate for the out-group (Brewer, 1999). So measures such as the BPAQ may be inadequate for elucidating this link unless they differentiate the targets of the aggressive acts. Clearly, this is an interesting question that requires more focused study.

## **Microaggressions Are Interpreted Negatively by People of Color**

### ***When is an offense offensive?***

In terms of whether microaggressions are interpreted negatively by most people of color, Lilienfeld noted that it is “implausible that this is the case for all microaggressions, as this assertion flies in the face of large bodies of research in social cognition and cognitive-behavioral therapy” (p. 159). This is a straw-man argument: No serious microaggressions researcher would argue that all microaggressions are offensive to all people of color at all times. Recall that microaggressions are context dependent, so even if a behavior looks topographically the same in two different situations, other features of the interaction may be needed to give it meaning and determine whether it is in fact a microaggression. Further, to the extent that some people of color may accept pathological stereotypes and vary in ethnic-identity development, not all will be able to identify all microaggressions when they occur. Finally, because of the stress of confronting offenders directly about microaggressions, targets may make a conscious but effortful choice not to be offended or engage in denial as a coping strategy (Nadal, 2018). And there are certainly some individuals who simply may not be not offended by anything.

More critically, behavior does not have to be offensive to everyone or even most people to be problematic. Consider that if someone threw a party for 10 people, and 1 partygoer was insulted by what the host said and went home angry, it might be plausible that the person was overly sensitive and there was really no wrongdoing. But if 2 people went home offended by the host’s comment, we might start to wonder, and if 3 people went home offended, most would consider that party a bust. If half the people became so offended that they started texting their friends to complain about it, then there is a major problem and we are still talking about only half the guests. So, it is not necessary for everyone to leave the party offended to conclude that something offensive was said by the host. Likewise, if 30% of people of color are offended by a behavior, but 70% are not, then it is reasonable to assume the behavior is problematic. The fact that the majority are unbothered by the behavior does not mean that everything is

fine. Rather, the offense of the 30% is sufficient to conclude that the behavior should be avoided for the sake of maintaining a harmonious, functional environment. (This, of course, assumes that there is no important need to commit the offensive behavior.)

For example, imagine that the president at a Southern university arranged a dinner event to welcome African American students, and cotton stalks were centerpiece decorations on the tables. And then suppose that many—but not all—of the guests were offended, as evidenced by several students posting pictures of the centerpieces on social media and expressing their shock and displeasure to each other. Once this came to the attention of the president, it would be appropriate to solicit student concerns and consider whether a microaggression had in fact occurred. One might argue that nothing is inherently wrong with cotton, because we are all wearing it, but if several guests find the unusual decorations offensive because they are painful reminders of the African American history of slave-powered cotton plantations, then the decision to decorate the tables in such a manner is in fact problematic (Bever, 2017). Correspondingly, we do not need agreement by all or even most targets to classify a microaggression as a problem; we simply need to demonstrate that a sizeable percentage find it racially objectionable.

### ***The Cultural Cognitions and Actions Survey (CCAS)***

In our own study of microaggressions, my research team developed several racially charged scenarios along with a series of microaggressive behaviors that people might commit in these situations (Kanter et al., 2017). The scenarios were created on the basis of reports by Black students who participated in focus groups about their experiences on campus at three different predominantly White institutions. Participants were given the definition of microaggressions from Sue et al. (2007) and asked to discuss incidents in their lives consistent with that definition, but they were not recruited on the basis of prior knowledge of the microaggression construct. Their experiences comprised a range of statements, actions, omissions, and environmental assaults, and these were not unlike experiences reported by students of color who participated in similar focus groups at other institutions (e.g., D. A. Clark et al., 2014; Harwood et al., 2012). This led to the development of six scenarios involving potential Black-White individual or group interactions. For example, Scenario 1 was: “A friend of yours has wanted you to meet a friend, saying they think you will like the person. You meet this person one-on-one. He turns out to

be a tall, fit-looking Black man who says he is a law student. He seems very smart and he has a very sophisticated vocabulary. You like his personality.”

After each scenario, White participants were provided a series of potential actions or statements one might make in that situation, including those that would be considered microaggressive (e.g., “Did you get into school through a minority scholarship?”) and not microaggressive (e.g., invite the Black student to a future social engagement, like a lecture, group lunch, or party). Respondents were asked to rate how likely they would be to do or say each response (or something similar) using a 5-point scale. To explore the degree to which the items would be experienced as microaggressive, we gave Black student observers the same scenarios and items and asked them to rate how racist they would consider each item on a similar scale (for more details on this study and the methodology, see Kanter et al., 2017).

I revisited the data to determine how many items met the 30% cut-off alluded to above in my example of the offensive party. (Nonetheless, I should be clear that this cutoff is arbitrary and illustrative, so I am not conceding that an item that 25% find problematic is not a microaggression.) Of the 51 items remaining after I removed the 15 items that were not intended to be microaggressive, only 2 items were deemed “Not at all racist” by more than 70% of African American respondents (and there were no items for which all White students agreed they would not do/say the microaggression). This means that 96.1% of items that we thought Black people would deem to be microaggressions were in fact considered potentially or definitely racially objectionable by 30% or more. This provides evidence that (a) it is not particularly difficult to identify microaggressions by consensus and (b) many or most people of color (and White people) do interpret them negatively. The issue of consensus surrounding what constitutes a microaggression is discussed further in the “Microaggressions Can Be Validly Assessed Using Subjective Reports” section.

## **Microaggressions Are Caused (at Least in Part) by Racial Biases**

### ***The role of racism***

Lilienfeld (2017b) argued that there is no evidence that the commission of microaggressions is related to racial prejudice. Admittedly, those of us who study microaggressions have not felt a need to prove this because the connection between racism and microaggressions appears evident through our research and

lived experiences. But it does make sense that this connection might not be obvious to those who have not been the target of racism. In our initial efforts to develop our measure of microaggression likelihood, we collected data from White students about racial prejudice using several validated measures, which included color-blind, symbolic, and modern racist attitudes (Kanter et al., 2017). We also collected data on affinity toward out-group members (*allophilia*), which we expected to be negatively correlated to racism. Finally, we appreciated that some measures of racism may be confounded with political views, so we administered a “racial-feelings thermometer,” a more pure measure of racial bias, in which White participants were asked to indicate their attitudes toward Black people on a scale from 0° (*extremely unfavorable*) to 100° (*extremely favorable*). After controlling for social desirability, the likelihood of students engaging in microaggressions across several common contexts was robustly correlated with all five of our measures of racial prejudice ( $r_s = .36-.45$ , all  $p_s < .001$ ; Kanter et al., 2017). Specifically, White students who reported that they were more likely to commit microaggressions were more likely to endorse color-blind, symbolic, and modern racist attitudes, and they held significantly less favorable feelings and attitudes toward Black people. This was especially true for White students who thought that minorities are too sensitive about matters related to racial prejudice, which was the item most strongly correlated to the racial feeling thermometer, our most explicit measure of racial bias ( $r = -.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These data were from a sample of students in Kentucky, but we have since collected data from students in Seattle and New England (for similar findings, see also Mekawi & Todd, 2018).

This study provides important empirical support for something that diversity researchers knew all along—microaggressive acts are rooted in racist beliefs and underlying feelings of hostility that cannot be dismissed as simply subjective perceptions of the target (Kanter et al., 2017). However, even if there were no correlation between racism and microaggressions, the subjective perceptions of targets would nonetheless be crucial; if targets agree on what constitutes a microaggression, the construct remains valid and important.

### ***The role of interracial anxiety: avoidant behavior and racism***

Avoidance, exclusion, and ostracization are all recognized in psychology as forms of aggression (Ren, Wesselmann, & Williams, 2018), and many microaggressions fall into this category. Interracial anxieties on the part of offenders

may play a role in situations in which would-be offenders do not want to appear prejudiced and are motivated by a desire to avoid wrongdoing (i.e., aversive racism; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). As a result, when in the company of people of color, they may stumble over their words, say something they did not intend, say nothing, or leave the situation entirely. Although wanting to avoid wrongdoing could be considered well-intentioned behavior, one must also consider what motivates the offender's discomfort and the consequences to the person of color in that interaction.

One mechanism for this is that offenders have had little contact with people of color because they (a) avoid them as a result of pathological stereotypes (e.g., assumed dangerousness), (b) have had few opportunities at cross-racial interactions (e.g., because of segregated social experiences), and/or (c) think a racial mistake will result in harsh response (e.g., from stereotypes about people from certain groups being hostile). Consequently, a person communicates this discomfort with body language (e.g., physical distancing, looking away, blinking, nervous laughter). The offender's comfort takes precedence over exhibiting courteous behavior, and instead of making the person of color feel welcome, the offender causes the target to feel out of place and unwanted or even feared. The offender does not attempt a genuine social connection but instead endures the presence of the person of color while looking for opportunities to escape (Plant & Butz, 2006). As previously noted, many people of color are keen observers of subtle signs of racism and will realize immediately that their presence is unwanted (Dovidio et al., 2002). This qualifies as microaggressive behavior because it reinforces traditional rules that maintain separation between people of different races, and it reminds the person of color that social interactions outside of one's group are off limits; further, it may also be driven by negative assumptions about the person of color based on pathological stereotypes. We found that this sort of avoidance was significantly correlated with five separate measures of racism (Parigoris, Kuczynski, Carey, Corey, & Williams, 2018).

## **Microaggressions Can Be Validly Assessed Using Subjective Reports**

### ***Self-report measures by targets***

Sue et al.'s (2007) nine original categories of microaggressions were based on the subjective reports of people of color, but in the intervening decade, classifications arising from statistical analyses have emerged as well as sound measures for quantifying experiences. For example, Torres-Harding, Andrade, and Romero Diaz

(2012) developed the Racial Microaggressions Scale (RMAS) to quantify microaggression frequency, which was found to have good psychometric properties. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were used to assess dimensionality, and six factors (categories of microaggressions) were identified and included in the total scale. These partially map onto Sue et al.'s (2007) taxonomy and include items about (a) feeling invisible because of race, (b) being subject to assumptions of criminality by others, (c) being sexually objectified, (d) being low-achieving or part of an undesirable culture, (e) being a foreigner or not belonging, and (f) experiencing environmental omissions.

Another important measure of microaggression frequency is the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (REMS; Nadal, 2011), which was validated with a large sample of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and multiracial participants. It has a six-factor structure that includes (a) assumptions of inferiority, (b) treatment as second-class citizens and assumptions of criminality, (c) microinvalidations, (d) exoticization or assumptions of similarity, (e) environmental microaggressions, and (f) workplace and school microaggressions. This structure was confirmed using exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, and the measure was found to have good psychometric properties.

Other scholars have done similar work, including the development of measures that are specific to particular ethnic groups. These measures have been reviewed elsewhere (see Wong et al., 2014). Collectively, the examples provided illustrate sound psychometric research applied to the microaggressions concept, allowing its study just like any other psychological construct. Contrary to Lilienfeld's concerns about how microaggressions can be validly assessed using self-report measures, they can be assessed and are assessed in this manner all the time.

### ***Addressing high reliability/Cronbach's $\alpha$***

Lilienfeld (2017b) noted that "Microaggressions are posited to comprise an extremely diverse class of slights, insults, and snubs of various sorts emanating from a diverse array of individuals. Thus, it is not at all clear why microaggression measures should be internally consistent" (p. 156). In other words, measures of microaggression frequency (such as those listed above) should not have high internal consistency because these varied behaviors should be inflicted on targets randomly, and therefore items should not be strongly correlated. Lilienfeld conjectured that these random slights subsequently become the subject of hyperfocus by targets, who then mislabel them as microaggressions. Lilienfeld hypothesized that measures of microaggression

frequency tend to have high Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s because they are simply a manifestation of negative personality attributes of high scorers. Lilienfeld's notions about negative personality traits will be deconstructed in the next section. But the important thing to note here is that, again, these acts are not random, and their causes (e.g., pathological stereotypes) provide one important explanation for why certain individuals, but not others, would consistently have the misfortune of being recipients of a variety of microaggressions from multiple individuals across multiple settings.

Here are just a few reasons why some people of color might experience more microaggressions than others:

*Race*—some racialized groups experience more racism than others (Chou, Asnaani, & Hofmann, 2012);

*Regional differences*—some parts of the country are more racist than others (Chae et al., 2015);

*Personal characteristics*—people with darker skin experience more discrimination (Keith et al., 2017);

*Language fluency*—people with limited English proficiency experience more discrimination, and some accents are more devalued than others (Rivera, West-Olatunji, Conwill, Garrett, & Phan, 2008);

*Community differences*—living, working, and/or attending school in primarily White communities as opposed to same-ethnic-group communities will result in more daily experiences of racism (e.g., Winkle-Wagner & McCoy, 2016);

*Interpersonal aptitude*—people with more cognitive complexity are better at discerning subtle racism (Reid & Foels, 2010);

*Training*—people with better racial socialization may be better at identifying microaggressions (Brown & Tylka, 2010); and

*Avoidance*—those who have very bad experiences of racism may avoid interracial interactions and thereby experience fewer microaggressions (e.g., Davis, 1989; Dovidio et al., 2002; Plant & Butz, 2006).

So it is clear from these examples that microaggressions are not randomly distributed, and some people will experience more than others for reasons unrelated to pathological personality characteristics. Further, these characteristics are not uncorrelated, and the intersectionality of identities may make some persons more stigmatized than others (e.g., a low-income Black man vs. an affluent Asian woman; Ching et al., 2018). Thus, individual differences are an important area of future study to determine what factors predispose some more

than others to microaggressions. Finally, in reviewing varied measures of aggression, Carlson, Marcus-Newhall, and Miller (1989) demonstrated high levels of convergence across a wide range of laboratory aggression measures. Microaggressions are correlated because they share common features, such as communicating hostility and being unwanted.

### ***Self-report measures by potential offenders***

Lilienfeld noted that all microaggressions research has been based on the subjective experiences of the targets rather than the offenders. I would point out that we understand many psychological concepts exclusively in terms of subjective states, and so that alone does not invalidate the concept (Elasz & Gaddy, 1998). Several popular and well-validated measures of psychological constructs have been developed on the basis of self-report alone. That being said, even if we did study the microaggressions construct from the point of view of both the offender and the target, there is no reason that they must agree to validate the concept.

Nonetheless, in response to this gap in the literature, we decided to study both potential offenders and targets to determine how we could reliably measure a would-be offender's propensity to microaggress. Using methodology described in the previous section, we administered an expanded version of the CCAS (including 8 scenarios and 88 microaggressions) to 64 students at the University of Connecticut (Michaels et al., 2018). The scenarios presented were as follows:

1. Having a conversation with a Black law student at a social get-together
2. Meeting a young Black female with African-style dress and braided hair
3. A discussion about White privilege at a diversity training
4. A study session talking about various current events and political issues
5. A lost Black man asking for directions in your neighborhood
6. Doing karaoke with friends and a song with the "N-word" comes up
7. Watching the news about police brutality with mixed-race friends at a sports bar
8. Talking to a racially ambiguous lab mate about a science project (Michaels et al., 2018, p. 316)

Items were included if diversity experts agreed they were at least slightly racist. There was a very strong

correlation between the Black student scores on what they considered racist and whether the White student would say or do the microaggression ( $r = .93, p < .001$ ); White students denied that they would commit most microaggressions. That tells us there is some degree of agreement between Black and White students as to what microaggressions are and that they generally recognize one when they see it. The items had good reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s were .97 for Black students, .95 for White students, and .95 for diversity experts), indicating that the items were highly related even though they span a wide range of different types of microaggressions. This is what one would expect when the same underlying construct is present across items (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Finally, we asked White students how likely they would be to think the microaggression, regardless of whether they would actually say or do it. There was a somewhat weaker but still robust correlation between the White students' thoughts and the Black students' ratings of how racist the microaggressions were ( $r = .64, p < .001, \alpha = .93$ ), and White students were significantly less likely to commit the microaggression than think it, indicating that White students may be purposefully suppressing microaggressive tendencies (Michaels et al., 2018).

Listed in Table 2 are examples of the various types of microaggressions that we studied. These are classified on the basis of groupings from the literature and the research from my lab. Also included are the percentage of Black students who found the statement objectionable in the context of the scenarios listed above (rated as "very racist" or "slightly racist"), and the percentage of White students who reported that they were "unlikely" or "very unlikely" to say or do each item. (Environmental microaggressions are not included because we did not include these in our questions to participants.) It is clear that, despite some variability, there is agreement on most items that these microaggressions are generally unacceptable.

## **Microaggressions Exert an Adverse Impact on Mental Health**

### ***Microaggressions are harmful***

Although questioned by Lilienfeld, microaggressions and the largely overlapping construct termed *everyday racial discrimination* are in fact associated with many negative mental-health consequences, including stress (Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010), anxiety (Banks et al., 2006; Blume et al., 2012), depression (Huynh, 2012; Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit, & Rasmus, 2014), symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (Williams, Printz, & DeLapp, 2018), low self-esteem (Nadal, Wong, Griffin,

Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014; Thai et al., 2017), obsessive-compulsive disorder (Williams et al., 2017), substance use (T. T. Clark, Salas-Wright, Vaughn, & Whitfield, 2015; Gerrard et al., 2012), alcohol abuse (Blume, Lovato, Thyken, & Denny, 2012), severe psychological distress (Banks et al., 2006; Hurd, Varner, Caldwell, & Zimmerman, 2014), reduced self-efficacy (Forrest-Bank & Jenson, 2015), and suicide (Hollingsworth et al., 2017; O'Keefe, Wingate, Cole, Hollingsworth, & Tucker, 2015). I should note that I cite only a small sample of the vast literature linking racism and psychopathology to emphasize those studies focused on microaggressions. We would be derelict in our duties as helping professionals to ignore the mounting evidence that microaggressions are harmful and even deadly to our clients of color.

How do microaggressions cause harm? Experiencing a microaggression signals a dangerous environment, resulting in corresponding psychological and physiological stress responses (e.g., R. Clark et al., 1999). Reactions following experiences of microaggressions may include confusion, anger, anxiety, helplessness, hopelessness, frustration, paranoia, and fear. In addition to stress, this may lead to dysfunctional coping strategies, such as denial, withdrawal, and substance abuse. Because microaggressions are so common, they can be conceptualized as a form of chronic stress that may also result in physical problems, such as hypertension and impaired immune response (e.g., Berger & Sarnyai, 2015; R. Clark et al., 1999). Further, microaggressions that interrogate targets about where they are from constitutes a means of "othering"—reminders that people of color are not considered real Americans or a meaningful part of our social tapestry. It communicates lack of belonging and exclusion, which can lead to feeling alienated, which is psychologically damaging, especially for children.

Microaggressions cause harm in other ways, too, in that they contribute to barriers to treatment (e.g., Walls et al., 2015). The commission of microaggressions by clinicians undermines trust among patients of color, who may in turn avoid care (Freeman & Stewart, 2019). As a result, people of color may not visit a doctor or therapist until problems are severe, and if they do initiate treatment, they may drop out early because of microaggressions. A study by Owen, Tao, Imel, Wampold, and Rodolfa (2014) found that among people of color, satisfaction with counseling was directly correlated to their experiences of microaggressions from their therapists. As a result, a person of color with a treatable condition may opt out of mental-health care, be needlessly disabled for years, end up in an emergency room, or be imprisoned or shot when mental dysregulation is misinterpreted as criminality. To this point, national statistics indicate that people from the

**Table 2.** Examples of Black and White Student Assessments of Microaggressions From the Cultural Cognitions and Actions Survey (CCAS)

Category of microaggression	CCAS scenario	Description of microaggression	Black students rating as racist	White students unlikely to say/do
1. Assumption that someone is not a true citizen (Sue et al., 2007)	2	“How long has your family been in the United States?”	72%	86%
	8	“You speak English really well.”	94%	96%
	2	“What is your nationality?”	33%	70%
2. Forcing a racial category and sameness (Huynh, 2012; Nadal, Vigilia Escobar, Prado, David, & Haynes, 2012)	8	“Are you Black or White?”	76%	95%
	8	“What are you?”	83%	94%
	2	“Are you from Africa?”	50%	84%
3. Assumptions about intelligence, competence, or status (Sue et al., 2007)	1	“You are a credit to your race.”	95%	94%
	8	“How did you get so good at science?”	53%	54%
4. Colorblindness or invalidating racial or ethnic identity (Sue et al., 2007)	4	“All lives matter, not just Black lives.”	88%	62%
	4	“I don’t see race . . . I see people for who they really are.”	52%	50%
5. Criminality or dangerousness (Sue et al., 2007)	4	“Statistics show that minorities commit most crimes.”	73%	84%
	5	Checking that one’s wallet/purse is secure [on seeing a lost Black man in one’s neighborhood].	90%	55%
6. Denial of individual racism (Sue et al., 2007)	1	“I have other Black friends.”	80%	95%
	3	“Just because I don’t believe in political correctness doesn’t mean I’m a racist.”	69%	74%
7. Myth of meritocracy, or race is irrelevant for success (Sue et al., 2007)	4	“Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough.”	65%	51%
	3	“White privilege doesn’t really exist.”	93%	88%
8. Reverse racism hostility (Clark et al., 2014; Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000)	3	“Discrimination against White people has gotten as bad as discrimination against Blacks.”	85%	87%
	4	“People of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race.”	88%	85%
9. Pathologizing minority culture or appearance (Sue et al., 2007)	7	“Black kids shouldn’t dress that way.”	98%	93%
	7	“The problem is that too many Black parents don’t take responsibility for their kids.”	98%	91%
10. Second-class citizen treatment, or being ignored and invisible (Sue et al., 2007)	6	Continue singing along, including the N-word.	75%	87%
	4	“The police have a tough job. It is not their fault if they occasionally make a mistake.”	78%	70%
11. Tokenism or representing a whole group (Poolokasingham, Spanierman, Kleiman, & Houshmand, 2014)	2	“Why do Black women wear their hair in these sorts of styles?”	63%	93%
	6	“Why do Black people listen to rap music where they always say the N-word?”	66%	84%
12. Attempting to connect using stereotypes (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013; Nadal et al., 2012)	4	Telling a racial joke to diffuse the tension.	76%	92%
	6	Continue singing but explain that there is a difference between “nigga” and the “N-word.”	83%	89%

*(continued)*

**Table 2.** (Continued)

Category of microaggression	CCAS scenario	Description of microaggression	Black students rating as racist	White students unlikely to say/do
13. Exoticization and eroticization (Torres-Harding et al., 2012; Nadal, 2011)	2	“Black women are so exotic.”	71%	87%
	8	“Do you date White guys or other minorities?”	83%	96%
14. Avoidance and distancing (Parigoris et al., 2018; Poolokasingham et al., 2014)	3	“We shouldn’t talk about race. It makes people uncomfortable.”	73%	88%
	5	Crossing the street to avoid [a Black man asking for directions in one’s neighborhood].	81%	70%

Notes: CCAS scenarios are as follows:

(1) having a conversation with a Black law student at a social get-together, (2) meeting a young Black female with African-style dress and braided hair, (3) a discussion about White privilege at a diversity training, (4) a study session talking about various current events and political issues, (5) a lost Black man asking for directions in your neighborhood, (6) Doing karaoke with friends and a song with the “N-word” comes up, (7) watching the news about police brutality with mixed-race friends at a sports bar, (8) talking to a racially ambiguous lab mate about a science project. (Michaels et al., 2018, p. 316)

most stigmatized ethnic groups are overrepresented among those disabled from mental-health conditions, admitted as inpatients, and serving as inmates (Alexander, 2012; Jackson et al., 2004; Snowden, Hastings, & Alvidrez, 2009).

### ***Negative emotionality: the missing link?***

Lilienfeld dismissed these findings, instead asserting that microaggression researchers have ignored the role of negative emotionality/affectivity, a marker of neuroticism. People with higher negative emotionality experience greater psychological distress and are more likely to feel victimized from interpersonal slights; he advanced negative emotionality as a potential explanation for the relationship between microaggressions and psychopathology. It should be no surprise that negative emotionality is correlated to reports of both racial mistreatment and psychopathology because negative emotionality is correlated to just about all mental-health symptoms, so that in and of itself tells us very little (Watson & Pennbaker, 1989). Further, 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.

Lilienfeld instead employed a cultural-deficit approach to explain the relationship without sufficient evidence to support this approach, coupled with an incomplete examination of alternative explanations. For example, there was no discussion of the possibility that a unique set of talents, abilities, aptitudes, and training in some people may make them better detectors of microaggressions. For example, a study conducted by

Reid and Foels (2010) with a multiethnic sample demonstrated that the ability to identify subtle racism is a sign of greater attributional complexity, which means use of a more sophisticated reasoning process about cause, effect, people, and situations. Attributional complexity is associated with intelligence, so it could be that higher intelligence predicts greater recognition of microaggressions.

In examining the literature, one finds very little research on ethnic differences in personality traits, but what little exists does not support Lilienfeld’s notions about negative emotionality. For example, using the Differential Emotions Scale (DES) with older adults, Consedine, Magai, Cohen, and Gillespie (2002) found that Whites had significantly greater negative emotionality than Blacks. Further, our own research found the same relationship between negative affectivity using the Positive and Negative Affectivity Scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988): White students showed significantly greater trait negative affectivity than did Black students (Williams, Kanter, & Ching, 2018). We then examined the relationships between frequency of experiencing microaggressions using the RMAS and measures of anxiety (Beck Anxiety Inventory; Beck, Epstein, Brown, & Steer, 1988), stress (General Ethnic Discrimination Scale; Landrine, Klonoff, Corral, Fernandez, & Roesch, 2006), and trauma (Trauma Symptoms of Discrimination Scale; Williams, Printz, & DeLapp, 2018). Three hierarchical linear regressions were modeled to predict these symptoms, controlling for the PANAS Negative Affectivity subscale (PANAS-Neg) “in general” (as a trait). For each regression, predictors were entered hierarchically: The PANAS-Neg was entered in Block 1, gender was added in Block 2,

and the RMAS was added in Block 3. We found that trait negative affectivity in African Americans was related to some perceptions of the experience of discrimination but not all.

For example, for the Beck Anxiety Inventory, the PANAS-Neg was a significant predictor at Stage 1,  $F(1, 59) = 36.12, p < .001$ , accounting for 36.4% of the variance; gender was not a significant predictor at Stage 2, and the RMAS was a significant predictor at Stage 3, accounting for an additional 4.2% of the variance. For the Trauma Symptoms of Discrimination Scale, the PANAS-Neg was a significant predictor at Stage 1, accounting for 23.8% of the variance; gender was not a significant predictor at Stage 2, and the RMAS was a significant predictor at Stage 3, accounting for an additional 24.4% of the variance. Finally, for the General Ethnic Discrimination Scale-Stress, neither the PANAS-Neg nor gender was a significant predictor at Stages 1 or 2, collectively accounting for 3% of the variance, but the RMAS was a significant predictor at Stage 3, accounting for an additional 57.2% of the variance. In summary, a strong and significant relationship between racial mistreatment and symptoms of psychopathology was found that cannot be explained simply by negative emotionality. Further, the relationship to negative affectivity was weakest when examining symptoms specifically connected to experiences of discrimination (for further details, see Williams, Kanter, & Ching, 2018).

Prospective studies have provided convergent findings. For example, a research study by Ong et al. (2013) followed Asian American participants over a 2-week period and found that the experience of microaggressions predicted somatic symptoms and state negative affect, even after controlling for trait neuroticism. Asians Americans are typically considered “model minorities,” yet they encountered microaggressions frequently; 78% experienced at least one during the 2-week study period.

### ***Incremental validity***

Although Lilienfeld conceded that major discrimination may be harmful, he rejected the idea that microaggressions may be comparably harmful. He invoked the concept of incremental validity in an attempt to explain research findings connecting microaggressions to harm. Lilienfeld hypothesized that most of the harm attached to microaggressions is actually caused by concomitant major discrimination experienced by the victim. He grounded his argument in practical considerations—why waste resources combatting microaggressions if the real problem is blatant racism?

Several diversity researchers have theorized that microaggressions actually may be more harmful than overt discrimination (e.g., Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso,

2000), and everyday discrimination has been shown to be more detrimental than experiences of major discrimination (e.g., Ayalon & Gum, 2011). I recently examined this issue with a sample of monoracial and biracial African Americans ( $N = 123$ ), focusing on symptoms of trauma (Williams, Printz, & DeLapp, 2018). Participants completed several questionnaires, including a measure of anxious trauma-related symptoms of discrimination, several assessments of racial discrimination, and a broad range of psychopathology measures. Linear regression was used to predict the trauma symptoms of discrimination from frequency of different types of discrimination. I found that all forms of discrimination individually significantly predicted anxiety-related trauma symptoms in two separate subsamples in the data set. In the first analysis, both measures of everyday discrimination and major experiences of discrimination were highly significant, even when including gender, biracial status, and ethnic identity as covariates. This means that everyday discrimination significantly contributes to trauma symptoms, even when controlling for experiences of major discrimination over one’s entire life. This is particularly compelling when considering the overlap ( $r = .519, p < .001$ ) between these two variables. To address the possibility that racial-trauma symptoms were confounded by prior traumatic experiences, I added history of conventional trauma into the regression, but that variable was not significant and the overall model was mostly unchanged.

The second analysis revealed something similar. In predicting trauma symptoms of discrimination from both the frequency of microaggressions and lifetime general ethnic discrimination, both were significant predictors, even when including gender and ethnic identity. This means that the regular experience of racial microaggressions significantly contributed to trauma symptoms, even when controlling for general ethnic discrimination over one’s entire life. Again, this is particularly compelling when considering the overlap ( $r = .469, p < .001$ ) between these two variables. Further, the regressions were conducted in stages to illustrate that adding the more subtle forms of racism made a meaningful contribution to the model even after accounting for more overt lifetime experiences. Thus it seems clear that microaggressions are traumatizing in their own right.

## **Discussion**

### ***Negative emotionality***

This article has addressed the main tenets of Lilienfeld’s (2017b) critique of the microaggressions research program, as shown in Table 1, but there were several other



troublesome facets of his article that should be addressed as well. It would be irresponsible of me as a diversity educator to ignore racist frameworks and approaches embedded in an article about racism. I am not specifically accusing Lilienfeld personally of being racist or having racist motives. By “racist frameworks,” I mean approaches that favor the dominant racial group at the expense of subordinate groups. For example, a systematic tendency to see microaggression harm as deriving from “oversensitivity” of the targets rather than problems with the offenders would reflect a racist lens. A research framework could itself constitute a microaggression.

As an extreme analogy, placing a psychopathology label on people of color who do not want to be mistreated reminds us of the mental-health problem once known as *drapetomania*, a term invented by Dr. Samuel Cartwright in 1851 to explain the seemingly irrational desire of slaves to be free (Suite, La Brill, Primm, & Harrison-Ross, 2007). Just as it would be incorrect to assume that slaves who resist being enslaved are displaying psychopathology, it would be likewise incorrect to assume that people of color who complain of microaggressions are simply exhibiting personality pathology. The more parsimonious explanation is that they just do not want to be mistreated. So, on the basis of our original definition, we can classify the negative emotionality/neuroticism argument as a microaggression because oppressed people of color are being pathologized simply for resisting oppression (Suite et al., 2007).

### ***Is ignorance bliss?***

As an educator, I find the most troubling aspect of Lilienfeld’s article in the end section on pragmatic and policy implications, where he opposed efforts to educate people about microaggressions, calling for a “moratorium” on training. Jonathan Haidt (2017) echoes this sentiment in a related commentary, stating,

An essential first step that every college should take is to renounce the microaggression program and discourage faculty and administrators from even using the term. Instead, colleges that care about fostering diversity and inclusion should ask themselves: How can we teach students to give each other the benefit of the doubt? How can we cultivate generosity of spirit? (p. 177)

This exhortation may sound fair and even compelling at first blush, but there are several problematic messages that must be critically examined. We can consider the recommendations objectively (without passing judgment on the recommenders) and determine whether these result in outcomes that maintain racial

in-group (White) dominance while disproportionately harming the out-group (people of color), which would therefore make them racist recommendations. If Lilienfeld’s review were complete and compelling, his policy implications would be less objectionable, but good policy demands good science, and with the broader view provided here, we can see that his policy implications are unjustified.

Consider that these two scholars are saying we should stop educating people about the findings of microaggressions research and silence the recommendations made by leaders in the field (see Note).<sup>2,3</sup> The assertion that microaggression science should not be taught has tentacles that stretch back centuries. Recall that during the era of slavery, slaves were forbidden to learn to read or write in order to prevent them from becoming a threat to White superiority, and state-enforced disparities lasted until the civil rights era, when the equal education of people of color had to be implemented by force of law. Even today, many racial and ethnic groups face societal barriers to education (Williams, 2019), and so it is unconscionable that any member of the academy would advocate for ignorance, especially around matters of race and oppression. Failing to educate people about microaggressions helps to ensure that people will keep committing them and people of color will continue to suffer from them.

Perhaps the most puzzling of Lilienfeld’s assertions is the idea that teaching people of color about microaggressions might “sensitize” them to seeing slights everywhere, leading to psychological harm as they “become more likely to perceive themselves as emotionally fragile” (p. 162). He compared the potential harms of educating people about microaggressions to symptoms of dissociative identity disorder or posttraumatic stress disorder, the victims in mental torment and suffering from personality fragmentation. The only sensible recourse, he seemed to conclude, is to withhold the information, suggesting that people of color might not have the mental constitution to withstand it. Consider that one historical rationale for failing to properly educate many people of color was the notion that they were incapable of handling the same amount of information as the White man. There is no empirical evidence that people of color as a group are too emotionally fragile to digest troubling information, so again a deficit model is being invoked, perhaps on the basis of pathological stereotypes about certain ethnic groups having disordered personality characteristics. Information about microaggressions must not be suppressed. The greater harm comes when young people of color realize through these subtle mechanisms they are not favored by teachers or peers, and, sensing ubiquitous slights with no forthcoming explanation, they come to

conclude they are inherently defective (Nadal, Wong, et al., 2014; Thai et al., 2017). It is much more honest, empowering, and psychologically healthy to put the blame where it belongs—on the offender and our social psychopathology—rather than on stigmatized individuals who have endured a lifetime of unacknowledged racism.

In line with the idea that microaggressions are no more than “ever-smaller specks,” (p. 176), Haidt (2017) emphasizes giving offenders the benefit of the doubt, but neither Lilienfeld nor Haidt discussed the major dangers of ignoring microaggressions. Beyond the physical chronic stress response and mental-health issues linked to these pervasive experiences, microaggressions are indicative of racial prejudice in offenders (Kanter et al., 2017; Mekawi & Todd, 2018); consequently, there could be damaging consequences for ignoring these subtle warning signs. A person of color might decide to trust someone who has microaggressed only to find that person subsequently behaves in a way that is hurtful, untrustworthy, or deceitful. Given that empirical data show that microaggressions are correlated with racism, this is not an unreasonable expectation. Therefore targets cannot simply assume everyone means well because misinterpreting microaggressions can lead to real-life problems. For example, as a Black female academic, I experience so many microaggressions that assault my intelligence, worthiness, work ethic, priorities, intentions, and abilities, that if I had chosen to give all offenders the “benefit of the doubt,” I would have arrived at some very unhelpful conclusions about myself and my work, and quit the academy a long time ago. And sadly many people of color do just that (e.g., Chambers, 2012; Williams, 2019). This is why potential targets must learn to identify all forms of microaggressions—because they signal danger and, taken at face value, can lead to harmful consequences.

### ***Education is helpful, not harmful***

In a related online article, Lilienfeld (2017a) warned that “The microaggression culture prevalent on many campuses and in many businesses makes just about everyone feel threatened, and could amp up already simmering racial tensions” (para. 44). No doubt some microaggression trainings are unhelpful. Educating people about racism is hard, and if done by unqualified instructors without proper training, it can do more harm than good. That being said, we do not simply decide to stop educating people about important issues just because some people do it poorly.

In Haidt’s (2017) commentary, praised by Lilienfeld, he worried about the future of democracy should we all be well-informed about microaggressions, arguing

that “microaggression training is—by definition—instruction in how to detect ever smaller specks in your neighbor’s eye” (p. 176). Haidt profoundly misunderstood the point of microaggressions training. The idea is not simply to help people of color identify that they have been insulted (usually they know). The idea is to raise awareness, understanding, and consciousness in would-be offenders to enable them to understand the implicit errors in their beliefs about those who are different, how these errors are communicated to others through their words and actions, and to cultivate compassion for those they have harmed. It is not about teaching those who have been victimized to become victims, but it is about giving language and voice to those who are routinely dismissed in their suffering and empowering them with meaningful and accurate explanatory models. It is about helping people understand each other better across stereotypes and stigma. We need more of this, not less.

To address the need for empirically supported interventions to reduce racism in the form of microaggressions, I and my colleagues brought our years of experience and research to bear in the development the Racial Harmony Workshop (RHW). This workshop was designed to reduce the commission of microaggressions through education, discussion, and experiential intergroup contact exercises, with an emphasis on promoting intimacy through reciprocal vulnerability (Kanter, Williams, & Masuda, 2018; Williams, in press). We simultaneously conducted a control intervention to compare a standard education and discussion-based protocol with the RHW protocol. The main difference between these two interventions is that the RHW addresses microaggressions directly and emphasizes actual social connection between participants of different races. We found positive benefits for both Black and White participants, including improved mood and positive feelings toward Black people for the White students. The Black students did not become weaker, as Lilienfeld predicted; rather, we saw an increase in positive racial identity, meaning they got emotionally stronger (Williams, Chapman, Wong, & Turkheimer, 2012). White students in both groups showed a decrease in microaggressive behaviors, and those in the RHW condition also reported a decrease in biased thoughts (Kanter et al., 2018).

The workshop was not punishing for participants; the White students demonstrated a significant increase in positive affect at the end, and all the participants reported high satisfaction with the workshop. These results show that it is possible to deliver a nonaversive diversity training that actually puts participants in a more positive mood. Modified versions of this training have been used to educate graduate student therapists,

licensed mental-health professionals, and others. For example, in a randomized controlled trial with medical students, we found measurable improvements in their ability to communicate with standardized patients of color compared with medical students in a control condition who did not receive the training (Rosen et al., 2018). Altogether, the evidence weighs in favor of training over ignorance (Williams, in press).

### ***Social connection is the solution***

As illustrated above, cross-racial social connections are key for multicultural development. Such relationships are necessary for the cultivation of cultural humility and to learn and grow as a human beings in our increasingly diverse society (McKinney, 2006; Okech & Champe, 2008). Pathological stereotypes about people of color flourish in the absence of social connections across race. Writing about ethnic and racial groups that one was not born into inevitably means working with blind spots. Others' perspectives are needed to challenge and correct the writer, especially if the writer wades into controversial waters. A diversity researcher colleague could have checked Lilienfeld, in terms of the many errors, stereotypes, insults, biases, dated terms, and microaggressions, woven into the manuscript before the article was submitted (one concrete example is the use of the dated term "transgendered"). Likewise, any reviewers competent in the subject matter could have addressed these issues before the article was published, preventing the many scholars and students of color who read his article from being unnecessarily hurt and offended. I ask myself, "Who sits on the editorial board of *Perspectives on Psychological Science*?" and I see no one like myself. Perhaps this is part of the problem as well—a lack of diversity in our networks.

In his 18 recommendations for the microaggression research program, Lilienfeld advised enlisting collaborators who do not agree with one's research agenda, but in this context his proposal is problematic and potentially unscientific. This is not a political debate with several legitimate differing opinions that need to be moderated. This is about empirically testing ideas and theories in a way that minimizes confirmation bias and allows for us to reject information that does not support our hypotheses. The scientific reality is that subtle racism is pervasive in American society, and this has been demonstrated through decades of systematic research and is not simply an opinion (e.g., Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). Further, the 18 recommendations seem to imply that microaggressions are not very important, but the literature and experiences of people

of color are compelling in showing very important negative consequences. Although a single microaggression may not produce great harm (although some single instances have done just that), their chronic nature is a significant deleterious stressor.

I would advise scholars who are challenged by the microaggressions research agenda, or those who would like to better understand the phenomena, to consider the following points for adoption:

1. Try not to commit microaggressions because doing so is offensive and hurtful to many. This includes refraining from giving unsolicited advice outside your scope of expertise, given that this could be considered patronizing. Ask someone with expertise on microaggressions to proof papers as necessary.
2. Enlist collaborators who understand and appreciate the published literature on race and racism, including both subtle and overt forms of racism and individual versus structural racism.
3. Cultivate close professional and personal connections across race to help broaden your cultural perspective. Learn about their racialized experiences and share information about yours.
4. Ask independent observers to point out when microaggressions occur in real time to increase awareness and better understand their ubiquity.
5. Educate yourself on the serious problem of subtle prejudice in American society and develop an appreciation for how people may have very different life experiences because of racialization.
6. Acknowledge your unearned power and privilege in your perspective, research, and writings.
7. Develop an understanding of how racist messages are differentially embedded in both left- and right-wing political beliefs and how political messages often propagate microaggressions.
8. Adopt a broader perspective on psychological topics that includes a multicultural framework.
9. When someone says they have experienced a microaggression, practice showing care and concern. Do not interrogate them about whether it really happened.
10. Study the personality characteristics of people who commit microaggressions and those who deny their existence.
11. Examine the racial and ethnic diversity of those in scholarly positions of power, such as editorial boards and organizational governance. Advocate for more inclusion and examine any internal and external resistance you encounter.

## Conclusion

We have more than enough empirical evidence to conclude that microaggressions are real, harmful, and demand action. It is the duty of those in our field to acknowledge the mental-health consequences of racism in all its forms, no matter how covert or subtle. We must continue to advocate for quality diversity education, where we can teach every person how to identify, defend against, and stop microaggressions even before they occur. We are obliged as mental-health professionals to help those who have been injured by microaggressions, because in an ethical and compassionate society, we invest in the development of interventions to reduce suffering. This means believing victims rather than pathologizing their character. It means conducting clinical treatment research and urging sponsors and our professional organizations to fund this work.

I close with a quote from Chester Pierce (1970) who, when reflecting on the plight of the oppressed African American community, wrote


It is my fondest hope that the day is not far remote when every black child will recognize and defend promptly and adequately against every offensive microaggression. In this way, the toll that is registered after accumulation of such insults should be markedly reduced. What this is saying is that the final clinical application of the knowledge of offensive mechanisms should be to help make each black child an expert in propaganda. (p. 280)

Let us all become experts in recognizing racism, whether it be a blatant hate crime, junk race science, covert discrimination, and/or microaggressions. There is much to do as we work to create a society where our all of our words and actions communicate inclusion and care by design.

## Action Editor

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## Notes

1. "I call for a moratorium on microaggression training programmes and publicly distributed microaggression lists now widespread in the college and business worlds" (Lilienfeld, 2017a, para. 1).
2. "I ... call for a moratorium on microaggression training programmes and publicly distributed microaggression lists pending research to address the MRP's scientific limitations" (Lilienfeld, 2017b, p. 138, abstract).
3. "An essential first step that every college should take is to renounce the microaggression program and discourage faculty and administrators from even using the term" (Haidt 2017, p. 177).

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