

The Logic of Microaggressions Assumes a Racist Society

Moin Syed 

Department of Psychology, University of Minnesota

Abstract

This commentary draws attention to core assumptions about the nature of society that underlie the current debate on microaggressions. For proponents of microaggression research, the starting assumption is one of a racist society. That is, microaggressions have their source and power within an inequitable, racially stratified society. In contrast, critics of microaggressions begin with the assumption of an equitable society, or at least would not endorse the assumption of a racist society. These two different starting assumptions lead to dramatically different conclusions about the concept of microaggressions. As long as these assumptions are not explicitly recognized, debates on methods, findings, and so on will never be reconciled.

Keywords

microaggressions, racism, passive racism, systemic racism, assumptions, models

The concept of microaggressions has been heavily criticized and debated in recent years. Although controversy and disagreement over concepts and methods have existed since microaggressions entered mainstream psychology¹ and popular culture (Sue et al., 2007; see commentaries by Harris, 2009; Schacht, 2008; Thomas, 2008), the situation hit a fever pitch with Lilienfeld's (2017a) detailed critique and subsequent responses (e.g., Kraus & Park, 2017). Most recently, Williams (2020a, 2020b) and Lilienfeld (2020) engaged in a lengthy back-and-forth concerning concepts and evidence, reaching little agreement on some of the core debates.

The debate about microaggressions has included empirical (Lui & Quezada, 2019; Ong & Burrow, 2017; West, 2019; Williams, 2021), analytic (McClure & Rini, 2020), and ideological (Haidt, 2017; Sue, 2017) responses. Throughout it all, this seemingly intractable debate has focused largely on issues such as construct definition, measurement, interpersonal dynamics, and impacts on mental health—all critical issues that need to be discussed within a healthy science of psychology. At the same time, however, these are the issues that psychologists tend to focus on at the expense of others. In this brief commentary, I draw attention to how much of the debate about microaggressions is rooted in differing starting assumptions about the nature of society—a

level of analysis that psychologists tend not to focus on as heavily.

In particular, the debate about microaggressions reflects differing assumptions about the nature and role of race and racism² in U.S. society.³ On the one hand, proponents of the utility of microaggression research start from the assumption that society is racist and that microaggressions are behaviors that must be understood in that context (see Kraus & Park, 2017). On the other hand, critics of microaggressions assume racism to be an interpersonal act not linked to broader systems of power and privilege (e.g., Schacht, 2008). These opposing views are by no means limited to the context of microaggressions but rather reflect broader differences in views on race and racism in U.S. society (see, e.g., the debate about the “dictionary definition” of racism in McWhorter, 2020). Indeed, the distinction between systemic- and interpersonal-racism frameworks has broad implications and is at the heart of many disagreements about the past, present, and future of race relations in the United States, and thus this commentary is intended to draw attention to how these assumptive frameworks underlie many different contemporary

Corresponding Author:

Moin Syed, Department of Psychology, University of Minnesota
Email: moin@umn.edu

arguments. As I explain further below, this difference in foundational assumptions underlies some of the core contemporary debates in the field. Although my intention is to advance our understanding of microaggressions specifically, this commentary also represents a broader call for psychologists to attend much more closely to the assumptions that underlie their research and scholarly views (see Slife et al., 2005).

As is clear from Williams (2020a, 2020b) and other microaggression researchers (Solórzano, 1998; Sue et al., 2007), the starting assumption is one of a racist society. Indeed, a great deal of research and theorizing on microaggressions that occurred between Pierce (1970) and Sue et al. (2007) was situated within critical race theory, a framework that takes an explicitly structural view to understand the causes and consequences of racism (Solórzano et al., 2000, 2002). From this perspective, microaggressions have their source and power within an inequitable, racially stratified society. This is an assumption within microaggression research because it is never tested empirically and rarely even directly stated; in effect, it serves as a conceptual framework through which race and racism can be understood (Kraus & Park, 2017). To be sure, much of what is discussed in this commentary is fully evident in Williams (2020a). What I am doing here is explicitly calling out the underlying framework to contrast it with the alternative.

Claiming that society is racist is not only a statement about the nature of society but a framework for understanding individual behavioral responses, which I refer to as the *systemic-racism framework*. As described by Tatum (1997), individuals living in a racist society have one of three positions they can take: (a) accept the racist society and be *actively racist* by engaging in intentional, overt acts of racism, which corresponds to what is often referred to as blatant or old-fashioned racism; (b) acknowledge the racist society and be *actively antiracist*, by using accessible forms of privilege to dismantle the racist system; and (c) be largely ignorant of societal racism or acknowledge racism as an individual behavior rather than a system. This position leads to *passive racism* because if individuals live in a racist society and do nothing to counter that racism they will engage in behaviors that maintain the racial system. These responses are not meant to be typologies of individuals but rather describe behavioral responses, and thus individuals can engage in all three responses at different times and in different situations.

This model of individual responses within a racist society underlies all theory and research on microaggressions and helps clarify some of the confusions and debates in the literature (cf. McClure & Rini, 2020). Microaggressions are not viewed within this framework

as purely individual, interpersonal acts or solely systemic forces; rather, individuals mediate societal racism within interpersonal situations (Huber & Solorzano, 2015).

An alternative underlying assumption for understanding racism and microaggressions is that they are products of individual beliefs and thus are best understood as interpersonal acts (Schacht, 2008; Thomas, 2008). I refer to this as the *interpersonal-racism framework*. This assumption is clearly evident in the critiques by Lilienfeld (2017a, 2017b, 2020). Such an assumption may be paired with a belief in an equitable, just society (Kraus & Park, 2017), although people endorsing this assumption might also agree that society is racist or, at least, that racism exists at a societal level in some situations. However, the assumption with respect to microaggressions is not that the individual behavior is mediating societal structures; rather, individual behavior is understood as an interaction between dispositional and situational factors.

As illustrated in Figure 1, these two frameworks differentially locate the source of microaggressions. From a systemic framework, microaggressions can represent both active and passive racist responses depending on the type. For example, the conscious and intentional forms, what Sue et al. (2007) called “microassaults,” are likely a product of active racism. However, most microaggressions—really the heart of the concept—are a product of *passive racism*. Indeed, Williams (2020a) stated that “microaggressions are by definition caused by socially conditioned racial biases and prejudices” (p. 6) and “are invisible to many White people because they are socialized not to see racial inequities” (p. 8). Reading between the lines, both of these statements highlight how microaggressions are largely a manifestation of passive racism. If individuals are not aware of, or are in denial about, the racist nature of society, then they will also have little awareness of how their seemingly innocuous behaviors can be interpreted as racist.

In contrast, because the interpersonal framework does not distinguish between active and passive racism, microaggressions are understood only as manifestations of active racism. Indeed, Lilienfeld (2020) stated:

Williams’s definition of microaggressions as “deniable acts of racism” (p. 4) declares microaggressions to be inherently racist by fiat, thereby placing the critical question of whether microaggressions are statistically associated with racist tendencies (e.g., Kanter et al., 2017) outside the scope of scientific inquiry. (p. 28)

This quote nicely encapsulates the different assumptions. Lilienfeld has maintained that it is a problem for

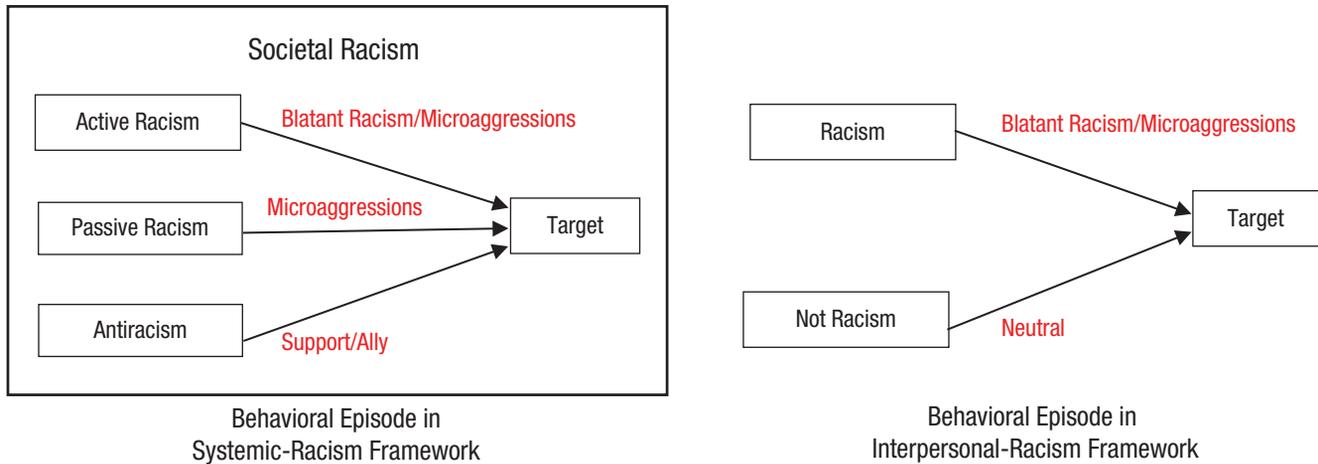


Fig. 1. Schematic representations of racism in systemic (left) and interpersonal (right) frameworks. In the systemic framework, active racism involves engagement in either blatant racism or microaggressions depending on the type; passive racism primarily aligns with microaggressions, and antiracism involves behavior that actively supports or is in allyship with individuals targeted by racism. In the interpersonal framework, racism is the root of all blatant racism and microaggressions, and individuals not engaging in racism behave in a neutral way toward targets, which can have both positive and negative impacts.

research on microaggressions that their enactment is not strongly associated with other manifestations of racism. This view assumes that microaggressions represent only active racism. If they represent both active and passive racism, and predominantly the latter, then trivial-to-small associations with other racist tendencies would be expected. Moreover, the question of associations among constructs is not “outside the scope of scientific inquiry”; rather, it is not as simple and straightforward as portrayed—but only depending on which framework for racism one assumes.

Lilienfeld continued: “Williams’s definition further precludes the possibility that certain microaggressions reflect misstatements or misunderstandings of cultural norms” (p. 28). Indeed, the question of “intent” has loomed large in the debate on microaggressions and has been identified as of central importance among critics (Haidt, 2017; Lilienfeld, 2017a; Thomas, 2008) and mostly irrelevant among defenders (Kraus & Park, 2017; Sue et al., 2008; Williams, 2020a). As alluded to above, intent will vary depending on the type of response in question. Microaggressions rooted in active racism are more likely to be intentional, whereas those rooted in passive racism are more likely to be unintentional. Again, the interpersonal framework makes no distinction between active and passive racism, and therefore any act of racism must be intentional and reflect something about the perpetrator’s character. To be clear, it is not the case that character is irrelevant. Williams (2021) recently found consistent associations among White Americans’ willingness to engage in microaggressions and several measures of aggressive tendencies. However, the study did not make an

empirical distinction between microaggressions that originate from actively racist sources and those that originate from passively racist sources.

Lilienfeld also argued for the need to “assess microaggressions within a multi-informant approach that incorporates self and observer reports” (2017b, p. 179). In contrast, microaggression researchers have maintained that the view of the perceiver/target should be prioritized and that it is unlikely that the perpetrators’ view will align with the views of the target (Kraus & Park, 2017; for a detailed account of these views, see McClure & Rini, 2020). This disagreement can again be understood as being rooted in the different racial frameworks. From the systemic view, active racist behavior may be reliably identified by observers, but passive racism via microaggressions may not. Part of the reason for this is that any single instance of a microaggression may seem totally innocuous to an outside observer (Thomas, 2008), but the repeated instances of the behavior—known only to the target—are what can make the singular experience stressful.

This phenomenon can be illustrated by a personal experience. On at least a weekly basis, *for my entire life*, when introducing myself to others I get a response of “well, that is an interesting/unusual name” or “I have never heard that before” or “what kind of name is that?” From the interpersonal framework such questions would be seen as rooted in curiosity, interest, and perhaps even friendliness on the part of the questioner. An outside observer may agree that there is nothing racist about those questions. However, if you take seriously my reporting of hearing this question weekly for my entire life, that means I have been subject to that

question 2,184 times.⁴ It affects my stress and behavior because I know the question is coming and will choose to not introduce myself to new people to avoid it.

I offer my personal experience not as evidence or proof of any particular point other than to highlight that the question of corroboration of microaggressions is no simple matter of gathering observer reports. Any observer would have no access to the accumulation of my experiences or to my internal reactions to the situation (see Lui et al., 2020). It is common in the debate on microaggressions to focus on the interpretation of a singular event and whether or not it constitutes racism (e.g., Harris, 2008; McClure & Rini, 2020). Conceptually, a singular experience of a microaggression should not have any impact on the target; it is the cumulative experience of microaggressions that can be detrimental. Again, this is not to say that we should not seek to better understand how these experiences might be observable to others but rather that doing so would require a proper acknowledgment of the phenomenon.

The purpose of this commentary is to highlight assumptions that underlie the ongoing debate about microaggressions. As long as these assumptions are not explicitly recognized, debates on methods, findings, and so on will never be reconciled. Endorsement of the systemic and interpersonal frameworks remains an assumption because they cannot be directly subject to empirical testing. Moreover, these are assumptions researchers have not only about microaggressions but also about the world itself. Individuals in the United States—especially those who are White—have historically been socialized to adopt an equality-based, color-blind, individual-focused worldview rather than a worldview that draws attention to systemic forces (Abaied & Perry, 2021; Bonilla-Silva, 2015). In contrast, socialization around the systemic view is much more common among ethnic and racial minorities (Hughes et al., 2006; Loyd & Gaither, 2018). Of course our own socialization and beliefs play a role in how we understand this debate.

As scientists, however, we must examine the available evidence in support of the different frameworks and come to conclusions about which assumption is more plausible given the evidence. Although my intention is to not adjudicate between the systemic and interpersonal frameworks, it should be clear to even mildly attentive readers that I favor the systemic framework. I come to this conclusion in a scientific context not via personal belief⁵ but rather because the accumulated evidence points strongly in that direction. Compelling evidence for the systemic framework has been provided by numerous scholars (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Brave Heart

et al., 2011; Lipsitz, 2006; Roberts & Rizzo, 2020). Very few would deny that the United States has historically been a racist society given its history of slavery, colonization, dehumanization, and restriction of basic rights and freedoms for its ethnic- and racial-minority populations. Thus, the question is when exactly in history did the United States *stop* being a racist society?

The above argument aside, the point of this commentary is not which framework researchers should adopt or the preponderance of evidence. The point is that these assumptive frameworks are lurking in the debate about microaggressions, and if we do not discuss them then we are doomed to make little progress. And, to be clear, progress needs to be made. Defensive responses such as those provided by Sue (2017) do little to move our scientific knowledge forward. Lilienfeld (2017a) and others have made insightful and useful critiques that microaggression researchers should take seriously, as long as they—and the critics—do so while being mindful of their assumptions.

Transparency

Action Editor: Monnica T. Williams

Editor: Laura A. King

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Moin Syed  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4759-3555>

Acknowledgments

I thank Alex Ajayi and Jill Fish for their input on a previous version of this commentary. This essay is no. 12 in the series, “*I Got a Lot of Problems With Psychology.*”

Notes

1. I am aware that the concept of microaggressions goes back to Pierce (1970), but it is inarguably the case that Sue et al. (2007) brought the concept into the mainstream.
2. Microaggressions are not limited to race, but that has been the primary topic of research and debate, so that is the focus of the discussion.
3. The overwhelming majority of research on microaggressions has been conducted in the United States, so this commentary is limited to that context.
4. This may seem like hyperbole, but if anything it is likely an underestimate: The frequency of this experience was greatly heightened during educational and residential transitions. And sure, if you feel compelled, subtract 156 instances to account

for my first 3 years of life when the question was likely directed at my parents, not me.

5. Although yes, I also personally believe this to be the case.

References

- Abaied, J. L., & Perry, S. P. (2021). Socialization of racial ideology by White parents. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 27*(3), 431–440. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000454>
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2015). The structure of racism in color-blind, “post-racial” America. *American Behavioral Scientist, 59*(11), 1358–1376. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764215586826>
- Brave Heart, M. Y. H., Chase, J., Elkins, J., & Altschul, D. B. (2011). Historical trauma among indigenous peoples of the Americas: Concepts, research, and clinical considerations. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs, 43*(4), 282–290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02791072.2011.628913>
- Haidt, J. (2017). The unwise idea on campus: Commentary on Lilienfeld (2017). *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 12*(1), 176–177. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691616667050>
- Harris, R. S. (2008). Racial microaggression? How do you know? *American Psychologist, 63*, 275–276.
- Huber, L. P., & Solorzano, D. G. (2015). Racial microaggressions as a tool for critical race research. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 18*, 297–320.
- Hughes, D., Rodriguez, J., Smith, E. P., Johnson, D. J., Stevenson, H. C., & Spicer, P. (2006). Parents’ ethnic-racial socialization practices: A review of research and directions for future study. *Developmental Psychology, 42*(5), 747–770. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.42.5.747>
- Kanter, J. W., Williams, M. T., Kuczynski, A. M., Manbeck, K. E., Debreaux, M., & Rosen, D. C. (2017). A preliminary report on the relationship between microaggressions against Black people and racism among White college students. *Race and Social Problems, 9*, 291–299.
- Kraus, M. W., & Park, J. W. (2017). *Microaggressions as part of the historical context of stigma and prejudice*. PsyArXiv. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/622ke>
- Lilienfeld, S. O. (2017a). Microaggressions: Strong claims, inadequate evidence. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 12*(1), 138–169. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691616659391>
- Lilienfeld, S. O. (2017b). Through a glass, darkly: Microaggressions and psychological science. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 12*(1), 178–180. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691616669098>
- Lilienfeld, S. O. (2020). Microaggression research and application: Clarifications, corrections, and common ground. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 15*(1), 27–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619867117>
- Lipsitz, G. (2006). *The possessive investment in whiteness: How white people profit from identity politics*. Temple University Press.
- Loyd, A. B., & Gaither, S. E. (2018). Racial/ethnic socialization for White youth: What we know and future directions. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 59*, 54–64. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2018.05.004>
- Lui, P. P., Berkley, S. R., Pham, S., & Sanders, L. (2020). Is microaggression an oxymoron? A mixed methods study on attitudes toward racial microaggressions among United States university students. *PLOS ONE, 15*(12), Article e0243058. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0243058>
- Lui, P. P., & Quezada, L. (2019). Associations between microaggression and adjustment outcomes: A meta-analytic and narrative review. *Psychological Bulletin, 145*(1), 45–78.
- McClure, E., & Rini, R. (2020). Microaggression: Conceptual and scientific issues. *Philosophy Compass, 15*(4), Article 12659. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12659>
- McWhorter, J. (2020, June 22). The dictionary definition of “racism” has to change. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/dictionary-definition-racism-has-change/613324>
- Ong, A. D., & Burrow, A. L. (2017). Microaggressions and daily experience: Depicting life as it is lived. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 12*(1), 173–175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691616664505>
- Pierce, C. (1970). Offensive mechanisms. In F. B. Barbour (Ed.), *The Black seventies* (pp. 265–282). Porter Sargent.
- Roberts, S. O., & Rizzo, M. T. (2021). The psychology of American racism. *American Psychologist, 76*(3), 475–487. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000642>
- Schacht, T. E. (2008). A broader view of racial microaggression in psychotherapy. *American Psychologist, 63*(4), 273. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.63.4.273>
- Slife, B. D., Reber, J. S., & Richardson, F. C. (2005). *Critical thinking about psychology: Hidden assumptions and plausible alternatives*. American Psychological Association.
- Solórzano, D., Carroll, G., Ceja, M., Dinwiddie, G., Guillory, E., & Gonzalez, G. (2002). Keeping race in place: Racial microaggressions and campus racial climate at the University of California, Berkeley. *Chicano-Latino Law Review, 23*, 15–112.
- Solórzano, D., Ceja, M., & Yosso, T. (2000). Critical race theory, racial microaggressions, and campus racial climate: The experiences of African American college students. *The Journal of Negro Education, 69*(1/2), 60–73.
- Solórzano, D. G. (1998). Critical race theory, race and gender microaggressions, and the experience of Chicana and Chicano scholars. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 11*(1), 121–136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/095183998236926>
- Sue, D. W. (2017). Microaggressions and “evidence”: Empirical or experiential reality? *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 12*(1), 170–172. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691616664437>
- Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Nadal, K. L., & Torino, G. C. (2008). Racial microaggressions and the power to define reality. *American Psychologist, 63*(4), 277–279. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.63.4.277>
- Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice. *American Psychologist, 62*(4), 271–286. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.4.271>

- Tatum, B. D. (1997). *“Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?” and other conversations about race*. Basic Books.
- Thomas, K. R. (2008). Macrononsense in multiculturalism. *American Psychologist*, *63*(4), 274–275. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.63.4.274>
- West, K. (2019). Testing hypersensitive responses: Ethnic minorities are not more sensitive to microaggressions, They just experience them more frequently. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *45*(11), 1619–1632. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167219838790>
- Williams, M. T. (2020a). Microaggressions: Clarification, evidence, and impact. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *15*(1), 3–26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619827499>
- Williams, M. T. (2020b). Psychology cannot afford to ignore the many harms caused by microaggressions. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *15*(1), 38–43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691619893362>
- Williams, M. T. (2021). Microaggressions are a form of aggression. *Behavior Therapy*, *52*(3), 709–719. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beth.2020.09.001>