▼ Scott O. Lilienfeld (1960–) is a professor of psychology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Throughout his career, he has been a strong supporter of evidence-based methods and treatment practices in his field. With colleagues, he has often sought to call into question claims about psychological phenomena that have not been rigorously tested, which is something we see in this selection. Aeon, a British online magazine, published a longer version of this essay, which was in turn adapted from Lilienfeld's academic journal article, "Microaggressions: Strong Claims, Inadequate Evidence." As you read, pay careful attention to the ways in which Lilienfeld repeatedly seeks to make clear the limits of the claims he is making, focusing on the challenges of rigorously investigating microaggressions from the perspective of social psychology.

Why a Moratorium on Microaggressions Is Needed

SCOTT O. LILIENFELD

Prejudice remains a huge social evil but evidence for harm caused by microaggression is incoherent, unscientific, and weak.

Across college campuses, a big idea has taken hold: the notion that microaggressions—subtle but offensive comments or actions directed at minorities or other powerless people—can lower performance, lead to ostracism, increase anxiety, and sometimes cause so much psychological pain that the recipient might even commit suicide. Yet despite the good intentions and

passionate embrace of this idea, there is scant real-world evidence that microaggression is a legitimate psychological concept, that it represents unconscious (or **implicit) prejudice**, that intervention for it works, or even that alleged victims are seriously damaged by these under-the-radar acts. It is entirely possible that future research will alter some of these verdicts. Until the evidence is in, though, I recommend abandoning the term microaggression, which is potentially misleading. In addition, I call for a **moratorium** on microaggression training programs and publicly distributed microaggression lists now widespread in the college world.

implicit prejudice
prejudice—that is, negative beliefs or feelings about a group—that individuals are not aware that they have.

moratorium
pause, freeze.

Context is all-important here. Despite impressive societal strides, racial prejudice remains an inescapable and deeply troubling reality of modern life. As recently as 2008, 4 to 6 percent of Americans acknowledged in a national poll that they would be unwilling to vote for any African-American candidate as president. And this deeply troubling figure might be an underestimate given the **social undesirability** attached to admissions of racism. Indeed, a growing number of scholars contend that prejudice often manifests in subtler forms than it did decades ago. From this perspective, prejudice has not genuinely declined—it has merely become more indirect and

insidious.

social desirability
a form of bias that sometimes occurs in social science research when participants respond in ways they believe will be viewed positively by others, especially the researchers. Social desirability bias leads subjects to overreport "positive" behaviors and underreport "negative" ones.

insidious
deceptive, sneaky.

Enter the concept of microaggressions, those subtle snubs, slights and insults directed at minorities, as well as women and other historically stigmatized groups. Compared with overtly prejudicial comments and acts, they are commonly understood to reflect less direct, although no less **pernicious**, forms of racial bias. Last year, Shaun R. Harper, founder of the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education at the University of Pennsylvania, told an Intelligence Squared debate about meeting an African-American student whose engineering professor had expressed incredulity that he'd received a perfect score on an exam. Few would dispute that such remarks, even if not **malicious**, are almost certainly **callous**. Prejudice undoubtedly manifests itself in subtle and indirect ways that have until recently received **short shrift** in psychological research.

pernicious
damaging, harmful.

malicious
spiteful, nasty, cruel.

callous

unfeeling, insensitive, uncaring.

short shrift
little consideration.

Over the past few years, the concept of microaggression has made its way into public discussions at dozens, if not hundreds, of colleges and universities, with many institutions offering workshops to faculty members on identifying and avoiding microaggressions and disseminating lists of microaggressions to caution faculty and students against expressing statements that might cause offense.

All of these applications hinge on one overarching assumption: that the microaggression research program aimed at documenting the phenomenon is sound and that the concept itself has withstood rigorous scientific scrutiny. This is not the case. Microaggressions have not been defined with nearly enough clarity to allow rigorous scientific investigation. No one has shown that they are interpreted negatively by all or even most minority groups. No one has demonstrated that they reflect implicit prejudice or aggression. And no one has shown that microaggressions exert an **adverse** impact on mental health.

adverse
hostile.

I am hardly the first to raise questions regarding this body of research. Over the past few years in particular, the microaggression concept has been the target of withering

attacks from social critics, especially—although not exclusively—on the right side of the political spectrum. These writers have raised legitimate concerns that concepts such as microaggression can at times discourage controversial speech and inadvertently perpetuate a victim culture among aggrieved individuals.

My major concern is the rigor of the psychological science itself. In no way do I deny that subtle forms of prejudice exist and are becoming more prevalent in some sectors of society. Nor do I wish to discourage, let alone reject, research into implicit prejudice. Nor do I contend that microaggressions don't exist. Instead, I contend only that microaggressions must be studied properly before we can claim to know their impact or the best ways of reducing the pain that they might cause. Good intentions are a start but are not sufficient.

The term microaggression was coined by psychiatrist Chester Pierce at Harvard in 1970 to describe seemingly minor but damaging put-downs and indignities experienced by African Americans. Pierce wrote: "Every Black must recognize the offensive mechanisms used by the collective White society, usually by means of cumulative proracist microaggressions, which keep him [sic] psychologically accepting of the **disenfranchised** state."

disenfranchised
literally, deprived of being able to vote; more often, as here, used in the broader sense of marginalized.

But it was not until 2007 that the microaggression concept began to filter into the academic mainstream. In an influential article in American Psychologist, the psychologist Derald Wing Sue defined microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color." Microaggressions can be verbal comments, for instance subtle racial slights; behaviors, such as ignoring minority individuals; or environmental decisions, including naming all buildings on a college campus after white individuals, or even former slave owners. Sue and his team have called microaggressors "perpetrators," but I prefer the somewhat ungainly term "deliverers" to avoid any connotation of intentionality or malevolence.

To Sue and his colleagues, microaggressions are pernicious precisely because they are usually ambiguous. Victims are typically trapped in a **catch-22**. Because they are uncertain of whether prejudice has actually been expressed, recipients frequently find themselves in a no-win situation. If they say nothing, they risk becoming resentful. Furthermore, they might inadvertently encourage further microaggressions from the same person. In contrast, if they say something, the deliverer might deny having engaged in prejudice and accuse minority-group members of being hypersensitive or paranoid.

catch-22
a dilemma or double bind; a situation in which any possible solutions cancel each other

out.

Scott O. Lilienfeld builds his argument around operational definitions of *microaggressions* and its three subcategories, *microassaults*, *microinsults*, and *microinvalidations*. See Chapter 9 for more on definitional arguments.

LINK TO Chapter 9, Kinds of Definitions

Sue and his team differentiated among three subtypes of microaggressions, based on observation. Microassaults, which are the most blatant of the three, are explicit racial derogations "characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions." They might include using racial slurs, drawing a swastika on someone's door, or referring to an African American as "colored." In contrast to other microaggressions, microassaults are often intentional.

Microinsults are barbs and put-downs that impart negative or even humiliating messages to victims; they "convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity." For example, an employer who says: "I believe that the most qualified person should get the job, regardless of race" is delivering a microinsult.

Finally, microinvalidations "exclude, negate, or nullify the

psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color." According to Sue, a microinvalidation could be a white person informing an African American that "I don't see color"; it might also be an African-American couple receiving poor restaurant service and being told by white friends that they were oversensitive in interpreting this poor service as race-related.

Intriguing as they are, Sue's conclusions are really just theoretical conjectures based on information gleaned largely from **focus groups** and are in no way backed up by rigorous data or experimental techniques. Despite this limitation, the past decade has witnessed the extension of the microaggression concept to other groups who historically have been the targets of prejudice and discrimination, including women; gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals; Asian Americans; Latinos; Muslim Americans; and the obese. Virtually all of these extensions presume that the microaggression concept has already been validated and is well-established in African Americans—despite the fact that, by any standard of psychological science, this concept does not pass scientific scrutiny.

focus group
a small group of people, often diverse in nature, interviewed to get their beliefs, opinions, or attitudes about a specific topic, issue, or possible product as a way of understanding and predicting how the larger population might respond. This qualitative technique is widely used in market research, political analysis, and certain kinds of social psychological research.

In the case of the microaggression concept, it is dubious

whether its definition is sufficiently clear to permit adequate scientific progress. For example, it is not evident which kinds of actions constitute a verbal, behavioral or environmental indignity, nor what severity of indignity is necessary for an action to constitute a microaggression.

All this vagueness and ambiguity can lead to outright contradictions in what is or is not a slight. For example, both ignoring and attending to minority students in classrooms have been deemed to be microaggressions by some authors: one researcher called out "teachers ignoring the raised hands of Asian-American students in classrooms" as a microaggression. Another regarded complimenting the student with a remark such as "That was a most articulate, intelligent, and insightful analysis" as a microaggression. In still other cases, they have regarded both praising and criticizing minority individuals as microaggressions.

Compounding this problem, microaggressions necessarily lie in the eye of the beholder. It is doubtful whether an action that is largely or exclusively subjective can legitimately be deemed "aggressive." The "eye of the beholder" assumption generates other logical quandaries. In particular, it is unclear whether any verbal or nonverbal action that a certain proportion of minority individuals perceives as offensive would constitute a microaggression. Would a discussion of race differences in personality, intelligence or mental illness in an undergraduate psychology course count? What about news coverage of higher

crime rates among certain minority populations than among majority populations? It is likely that some or all of these admittedly uncomfortable topics would elicit pronounced negative emotional reactions among at least some minority group members.

The boundaries of the microaggression concept appear so indistinct as to invite misuse or abuse. One major scholar in the field even regarded the statement "I don't usually do this, but I can waive your fees if you can't afford to pay for counselling" as a microaggression. At least one research team has even classified saying "God bless you" following another person's sneeze as a microaggression, presumably because it could offend nonreligious individuals. According to some expansive definitions of microaggressions, this article itself could presumably constitute a microaggression, as it challenges the subjective experience of certain minority-group individuals. Given the fluid boundaries of the concept, in hindsight even statements that might appear to be explicitly anti-prejudiced have been interpreted as microaggressions. Sue's team, for instance, analyzed what the Arizona senator and then-presidential candidate John McCain said in response to an elderly white woman during a 2008 campaign stop. The woman said: "I can't trust Obama. . . . He's an Arab," and McCain immediately grabbed the microphone to correct her. "No ma'am," McCain retorted, "he's a decent family man [and] citizen that I just happen to have disagreements with. . . . He's not [an Arab]!"

While acknowledging that McCain's defense of Obama was "well-intentioned," the researchers dubbed it a "major microaggression." According to Sue, McCain's assertion that Obama is "a decent family man" implicitly communicated the message that most Arab or Muslim males are not decent family men, as well as the message that were Obama in fact a Muslim (which he is not), it would have implied that he was somehow dangerous or at least unworthy of admiration.

Although these post-hoc interpretations of McCain's comments might be defensible, they are concerning. In particular, they raise the possibility that a vast number of statements can be retrospectively labelled microaggressions. For example, had McCain responded: "No ma'am, he's not an Arab—but what would be wrong if he were?"—which is the response that Sue said McCain should have given—some advocates could have contended that McCain was subtly intending to insinuate that Obama might indeed be a Muslim. Furthermore, Sue's interpretation overlooks the possibility that McCain was merely responding to the affective gist of the woman's comment—namely, that Obama is a bad and untrustworthy person—rather than to its literal content. In doing so, he effectively communicated his central point—namely, that although he disagreed with Obama on many things, he did not believe that Obama was trying to conceal or lie about his ancestry or that Obama was a bad person.

The microaggression field, like much of psychology, lacks

diversity of thought, and it shows. For instance, “Attaining a racially color-blind society is unattainable and only reinforces racism and societal inequality,” wrote Sue in his book Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence (2015). Although this position might be defensible, it is hardly the only legitimate perspective on racial color-blindness. For example, many non-prejudiced participants might view the goal of a racially color-blind society as achievable in principle, if not fully in practice. Ironically, conceptualizing such statements as microaggressions runs counter to the crux of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.’s eloquent affirmation: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” A compelling argument could be advanced that many **putative** microaggressions, especially microinvalidations, lend themselves to a **myriad** of potential interpretations, some of them largely malignant, others largely benign. . . .

putative
presumed but not (fully) demonstrated to be the case.

myriad (of)
numerous or even innumerable.

Some microaggression researchers—and the people reporting so much pain from these comments and acts—might be themselves committing a similar error. For example, Sue regarded the question “Where were you born?” directed at Asian Americans as a microaggression because it reflects the

assumption that recipients are "different, less than, and could not possibly be, 'real' Americans." Yet most **cognitive-behavioral therapists** would maintain that leaping to this inference without attempting to check it out constitutes mind-reading. Instead of prejudice, it might in many cases reflect genuine and sincere curiosity regarding an individual's culture of origin.

cognitive-behavioral therapy
a form of psycho-social therapy whose goal is helping individuals develop coping strategies for overcoming unhealthy patterns of emotional self-regulation or unhealthy thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

Even the word "microaggression" can lead us astray. It implies that statements are aggressive in nature. Yet, confusingly, microaggression advocates posit that such behaviors are typically unintentional. As a result, the root word "aggression" in "microaggression" is conceptually confusing and misleading. Essentially, all contemporary definitions of aggression in the social-psychological and personality literatures propose or at least strongly imply that the actions comprising this construct are intentional. From this perspective, the concept of an unintentional microaggression is an **oxymoron**.

oxymoron
a phrase or concept made up of contradictory elements or ideas, often with the connotation, as here, of self-contradiction. Some examples of oxymorons could include *deafening silence, alone together,* and *the living dead*, all of which are used figuratively but would present logical contradictions if taken literally.

Does it matter? Research suggests that it might, because the

perception of intent is a critical correlate of, and perhaps contributor to, aggression. Specifically, **social-cognitive research** on **hostile attribution of intent** suggests that if individuals perceive aggressive intent, they are more likely to respond aggressively in turn. Hence, labelling ambiguous statements or actions as "aggressive" might inadvertently foster aggression in recipients. And labelling certain statements or acts as "microaggressions" could fuel anger and even overt aggression in recipients: this possibility should be examined in the lab.

social-cognitive research
psychological research on how individuals process and apply information about social situations and other people. The research begins with the claim that how we think about other people has important consequences for how we construct our understanding of the social world, including interacting with others.

hostile attribution of intent
the tendency to assume the behavior of others is, in fact, hostile even though it may be ambiguous or even positive.

Even the prefix "micro" sometimes gets things wrong—implying that these transgressions are barely visible or at least challenging to detect. Yet for a number of purported microaggressions, especially microassaults, this assumption is dubious. In particular, many or most microassaults appear to be emblematic of traditional, "old-fashioned" racism. Sue and his team include in their list of microassaults the act of using racial epithets—but, really, is that kind of verbal attack "micro" in the least? Such statements and behaviors are grossly offensive, and subsuming them under the broad

microaggression umbrella could inadvertently trivialize patently racist acts. Moreover, if investigators find that total scores on microaggression are associated with minority psychopathology, might this not merely reflect already-established statistical associations between overt racism and mental health?

The terrain is **fraught**. Numerous items identified as microaggressive in the literature appear fairly common in everyday life, and not necessarily driven by hostile intent. For example, being passed over by a taxi driver for a white person has been listed as a microaggression. In a study of microaggressions experienced by African-American faculty members in counselling and psychology programs, the researchers identified a student calling a professor by his or her first name as a microaggression.

fraught
burdened and, here, politically charged in numerous ways.

Yet it is likely that virtually all individuals who have lived in a major city, regardless of their race, have at least once been passed over by a taxi driver for a white person, and that virtually all faculty members, regardless of their race, have at least once had a student address them by their first name. Without at least some information concerning the frequency of the events, it's difficult to exclude the possibility that many microaggressions merely reflect everyday occurrences in the lives of both majority and minority individuals.

All this requires a hard and careful look. Numerous studies have revealed robust correlations between microaggressions and adverse mental-health outcomes, such as psychological distress, anxiety and depression, among minorities. Researchers have argued that the cumulative effects of microaggressions shorten life expectancy and even foster suicidal ideation, but where is the solid proof?

Let's be clear: prejudice and discrimination remain part and parcel of the daily landscape of many minority individuals. In a recent survey by the American Psychological Association, more than three-fourths of African Americans reported encountering at least some instances of discrimination on a day-to-day basis, and almost two in five African-American males said that they had been mistreated by the police. Given these sobering statistics, it is essential that psychological science continues to elucidate the sources and consequences of acts of prejudice and discrimination, both subtle and overt.

The study of microaggressions is a potentially fruitful step in this direction, but it leaves a daunting number of critical scientific questions, both conceptual and methodological, unaddressed and unanswered. In this regard, the microaggression research program (MRP) might be little different from other **nascent** psychological constructs that await refinement in light of additional scientific knowledge. Given the numerous unresolved questions surrounding microaggression, MRP scholars must be circumspect in

advocating for the application of this **fledgling** concept to colleges until more science has been conducted. In the interim, humility should be the watchword.

nascent
emerging, often with the connotation of promising.

fledgling
fairly new, untried.

So, what to do? Although the MRP is presently highly problematic, we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Subtle prejudice undeniably exists, and a certain proportion of what are now misleadingly termed "microaggressions" probably reflect such prejudice. If we could reconceptualize most microaggressions as inadvertent cultural and racial slights, we'd all be better off. The microaggression culture prevalent on many campuses makes just about everyone feel threatened, and could **amp up** already **simmering** racial tensions. Distributing lists of "forbidden" phrases to campus administrators or faculty members or mandating microaggression training for employees are unlikely to be helpful. A time-out on these ill-advised programs is long overdue.

amp up
amplify, increase, or magnify.

simmering
on the verge of boiling over.

Yes, many majority individuals say unintentionally offensive

things to minority individuals from time to time, often because they are careless or oblivious or because they are simply unaware of these individuals' past racial and cultural experiences. Microaggressions should be the start of an open dialogue, not the end. Telling someone: "What you just said is a microaggression. You offended me and you have to stop" is unlikely to be conducive to a productive two-way conversation. In contrast, it could be a fruitful entry point into a difficult but mutually enlightening discussion to say: "You probably didn't mean this, but what you said bothered me. Maybe we're both misunderstanding each other. I realize that we're coming from different places. Let's talk."

RESPOND●

1. In this selection, what specifically is Lilienfeld critiquing? Why? How does he seek to limit the scope of his critique? In other words, what does he do as a writer to help readers understand what he is and is not claiming? Consider specific statements he makes as well as where and how often he makes them.
2. How does Lilienfeld use the three categories of microaggressions as grounds for critique of the general concept? (The simplest way to answer this question will be to read carefully the relevant paragraphs, making a list of Lilienfeld's claims so that you can see the progression of his argument as well as the distinctions made among the categories.) As a psychologist, Lilienfeld is understandably concerned with operational definitions—definitions that are explicit enough to permit us, first, to determine clearly whether

or not some phenomenon is present and, second, to count it so that we may analyze it quantitatively. What does Lilienfeld's critique teach about the need for appropriately detailed definitions of terms, especially in research contexts? (See Chapter 9 on definitional arguments.)

3. Lilienfeld is obviously concerned with precision in language use. How does each of the following passages illustrate his concern with precise language?
    a. "Every Black must recognize the offensive mechanisms used by the collective White society, usually by means of cumulative proracist microaggressions, which keep him [sic] psychologically accepting of the disenfranchised state" [when quoting a text from 1970, before writers commonly used inclusive language].
    b. Sue and his team have called microaggressors "perpetrators," but I prefer the somewhat ungainly term "deliverers" to avoid any connotation of intentionality or malevolence.
    c. Even the word "microaggression" can lead us astray. It implies that statements are aggressive in nature. Yet, confusingly, microaggression advocates posit that such behaviors are typically unintentional. As a result, the root word "aggression" in "microaggression" is conceptually confusing and misleading. Essentially, all contemporary definitions of aggression in the social-psychological and personality literatures propose or at least strongly imply that the actions comprising this construct are intentional. From this perspective, the concept of an unintentional microaggression is an oxymoron.

    How do these statements contribute to Lilienfeld's ethos for

social science readers who link precision in language with careful analysis? How do they serve to call into question at least some claims about microaggressions? (Chapter 13 discusses word choice and precision.)

4. **THINKING CRITICALLY** To what extent can Lilienfeld's critique be seen as minimizing or undermining his own acknowledgment of the fact that racism and other sorts of harmful or malicious comments in fact exist and are part of the daily life of members of certain groups? Consider, for example, the comments reported in this video from 2016 about the sorts of comments made to Asian Americans: <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000004706646/thisis2016-asian-americans-respond.html> OR <http://nyti.ms/2iTViTr>. (Please be aware that this video from the *New York Times* contains explicit language and that watching it may prove challenging for some individuals.) Should these comments be considered microaggressions? If so, of which type? (See Question 2 above.) Do any of them rise to a category that we might want or need to term *macroaggressions?* And how does Lilienfeld's suggestion in the final paragraph of the selection shift the burden of responsibility for the situation from the person who made the comment to the person who was the target? Does such a suggestion seem fair in contexts like those represented in the video? Why or why not?
5. Building on your responses to Questions 2 and 4, **write a three-part evaluative essay**. First, seek to use the evaluative distinctions given for microinsults, microassaults, and microinvalidations in paragraphs 11–13 of the selection. Categorize three of the comments made in the video discussed

in Question 4. Second, use what you learn in trying to use these categories as the basis for evaluating Lilienfeld's critiques of the concept of microaggressions. Finally, address what is likely the important question to be considered: how might arguing about terminology—or even using the term *microaggression* as a label for the comments reported in the video—deflect attention from the real issues that many would argue need to be dealt with?