

## Microaggressions and “Evidence”: Empirical or Experiential Reality?

**Derald Wing Sue**

Teachers College, Columbia University

*The true tale of the lion hunt will never be told as long as the hunter tells the story (African proverb).*

In his article, “Microaggressions: Strong Claims, Inadequate Evidence,” Lilienfeld (2017, this issue) casts doubt on the veracity of microaggression theory and questions their existence, manifestation, and dynamics. From a selective review of the literature, he finds fault with the current state of the microaggression research program (MRP), lists 18 recommendations that would strengthen such programs, and concludes that the scientific status of the MRP is far too preliminary to warrant its dissemination to real-world contexts. He calls for an end to microaggression initiatives on college campuses until further scientific evidence supports their detrimental impact, and he asserts that not doing so will tarnish the reputation of psychology in the public eye.

From the perspective of psychological science, he presents a compelling case in his article and even strikes a responsive chord to some of my own concerns about the state of MRP. In reading his review, however, I am left with a hollow feeling not so much based upon disagreements with the technical aspects of research, but with the invisibility of how Lilienfeld advocates arriving at the truth and what constitutes evidence. Let me address several major concerns.

First, Lilienfeld fails to realize that there is more than one way to ask and answer questions about the human condition, that what constitutes evidence is often bathed in the values of the dominant society, and that scientific methods we employ often shortchange real-world contexts. It is not that his demand for more scientific rigor is misguided, but his story comes from only the perspective of the hunter and ignores that of the lion. Let me use an example to illustrate this point.

Freshly out of my doctoral program and armed with a strong belief in the principles and practices of psychological science, I met a Nigerian scholar who found my unwavering commitment to empiricism amusing. He shared with me a tale often told to children in his country

about a female elementary school teacher who posed a math problem to her class: “Suppose there are four black-birds sitting on a tree branch. You take a slingshot and shoot one of them. How many are left?” A White student answered quickly, “That’s easy teacher. . . four take away one is three.” An equally eager Nigerian immigrant boy stated with equal certainty that the answer was “zero.” The teacher chuckled at the Nigerian youth, indicated the answer was wrong and suggested he study more math. From that day forth, the young boy seemed to withdraw from class activities and seldom spoke to his classmates or teacher.

This story gets to the heart of the unspoken assumptions of psychological science, the epistemological issues it raises, and how power and privilege determines the nature of reality. If the teacher had pursued the reasons behind the Nigerian student’s answer, she might have heard the following: “If you shoot one bird, the others will fly away.” Herein lays a major worldview difference between that of the teacher and the African youth. From a Western science perspective, the math problem represents a hypothetical (abstract) situation that requires a literal (task) answer. From the perspective of the Nigerian student, however, his answer is based upon lived experience, a known relationship between birds, and an understanding of how the real (not hypothetical) world operates. Seen from the perspective of the hunter and the lion, both answers may be considered correct, but unfortunately, it is the hunter’s tale that determines “truth” and can result in cultural oppression (imposing one reality over another) with devastating consequences. For the Nigerian boy, he is left to feel invalidated, inadequate, and alienated from the curriculum and teacher. His school

---

**Corresponding Author:**

Derald Wing Sue, Teachers College, Columbia University, Department of Counseling and Clinical Psychology, Box 36, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, New York 10027  
E-mail: dw2020@columbia.edu

performance is likely to suffer. This is the invisible world of experiential microaggressions, unseen by the hunter.

Microaggressions are about experiential reality and about listening to the voices of those most oppressed, ignored, and silenced. Those voices tell stories of the many hurts, humiliations, lost opportunities, need for change, and the often unintentional microaggressions endured as they struggle against an unwelcoming, invalidating and even hostile campus climate and society (D. W. Sue, 2013). People of color, for example, often have their lived racial realities about bias and discrimination met with disbelief by our society. They are often told that they are oversensitive, paranoid, and misreading the actions of others. They are asked, "Aren't you mind-reading? Aren't you distorting the truth? Where is your evidence?" In essence, Lilienfeld is applying the accepted scientific principle of *skepticism* to the study of microaggressions, which may unintentionally dilute, dismiss, and negate the lived experience of marginalized groups in our society.

Second, Lilienfeld's critique is problematic, not because the points he makes are invalid, but because he fails to acknowledge the limitations of psychological science to the study of the human condition and uses the inherent values of empiricism to determine truth. The suggestions proposed by Lilienfeld are primarily about achieving internal validity (operational definitions, controlling contaminating variables, obtaining interrater agreements, and statistical sophistication) to enhance causal inferences. Truth seeking in Western science shares several basic assumptions: Empirical reality is valued over experiential reality; the way of knowing is based upon breaking down phenomena into independent and separate units; data, facts, and evidence (truth) exist when they can be observed and measured through the five senses; and the experimental design is considered sacrosanct (D. W. Sue, 2015). The problem is that the more we try to achieve internal validity, take a reductionist approach, and eliminate confounding variables, the greater the possibility that we move away from real-world phenomena, so that our findings have little external validity (S. Sue, 1999).

The study of microaggressions is a complex scientific challenge because it deals with both explicit and implicit bias; explores the lived realities of marginalized groups in our society; frames microaggressive dynamics as an interaction between perpetrator, target, and the external environment; pushes powerful emotional buttons in the actors; and is difficult to separate from the sociopolitical dimensions of oppression, power, and privilege. It is more than quantification, objectification, and logic/rationality. It is a study of powerful emotions, subjective experiences, biases, values, and beliefs, as well as especially the pain and suffering of oppression. It does not lend itself easily to objectivity and control of variables without separating

people from the group, science from spirituality, thoughts from feelings, observer and observed, and man/woman from the universe (Hunsberger, 2007).

That is why a holistic approach to understanding MRP has relied primarily on qualitative studies of participants who have experienced microaggressions. The danger of unwavering adherence to psychological science is that it may render the human condition to an abstract hypothetical level that dilutes, diminishes, and disconnects empirical from experiential reality. In this respect, Lilienfeld is unable to see the forest from the trees.

Third, I am greatly disturbed by Lilienfeld's call for a moratorium on institutional policies and practices aimed at ameliorating the harmful impact of microaggressions until adequate scientific evidence exists. This morning I awoke to sad news that two more Black men had been shot and killed by police officers under apparent conditions that did not warrant lethal force. As in many other cases, the defense will probably argue that the officers "feared for their lives," and, frankly, I don't doubt that they did. But was it real or simply a figment of their biased racial reality?

We know that race plays a role on decisions to shoot (Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2007); police are more likely to shoot at Black suspects than White ones. To me, these actions are the result of implicit bias and microaggressions (ascription of dangerousness/criminality). Microaggressions are not trivial and insignificant but have a continuing and oftentimes harmful macro impact. Those in the majority group, those with power and privilege, and those who do not experience microaggressions are privileged to enjoy the luxury of waiting for proof. Meanwhile, people of color, LGBTQ brothers and sisters, and other socially devalued groups continue to be harmed and oppressed. To ask them to wait for individual, institutional, and societal change is to ask them to continue to suffer in silence and to maintain the status quo of power and privilege.

In closing, it seems ironic to me that when I review the literature on microaggressions, and listen to the anecdotal stories of microaggressive suffering, my conclusion is that they are real, harmful, and need to be addressed immediately. Lilienfeld's conclusion is that there is inadequate evidence to support the harmful impact claims and that microaggression initiatives need to be ended. I can only surmise that he is viewing the issue from the perspective of the hunter and I from that of the lion. Both have validity, but must be tempered with balance (Schneider, 1998). Empirical and experiential reality need not be an either/or choice. Perhaps the teacher in posing the math problem might have welcomed both viewpoints by expanding the perspective of the entire class: "You take a slingshot and shoot one of four blackbirds. How many flew away?"

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

### References

- Correll, J., Park, B., Judd, C. M., & Wittenbrink, B. (2007). The influence of stereotypes on decisions to shoot. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 37*, 1102–1117.
- Hunsberger, P. H. (2007). Reestablishing psychology's subjective core. *American Psychologist, 62*, 614–615.
- Lilienfeld, S. O. (2017). Microaggressions: Strong claims, inadequate evidence. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 12*, 138–169.
- Schneider, K. J. (1998). Toward a science of the heart: Romanticism and the revival of psychology. *American Psychologist, 53*, 277–289.
- Sue, D. W. (2013). Race talk: The psychology of racial dialogues. *American Psychologist, 68*, 663–672.
- Sue, D. W. (2015). *Race talk and the conspiracy of silence: Understanding and facilitating difficult dialogues on race*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Sue, S. (1999). Science, ethnicity and bias: Where have we gone wrong? *American Psychologist, 54*, 1070–1077.