

# Microaggressions: Strong Claims, Inadequate Evidence

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## Abstract

The microaggression concept has recently galvanized public discussion and spread to numerous college campuses and businesses. I argue that the microaggression research program (MRP) rests on five core premises, namely, that microaggressions (1) are operationalized with sufficient clarity and consensus to afford rigorous scientific investigation; (2) are interpreted negatively by most or all minority group members; (3) reflect implicitly prejudicial and implicitly aggressive motives; (4) can be validly assessed using only respondents' subjective reports; and (5) exert an adverse impact on recipients' mental health. A review of the literature reveals negligible support for all five suppositions. More broadly, the MRP has been marked by an absence of connectivity to key domains of psychological science, including psychometrics, social cognition, cognitive-behavioral therapy, behavior genetics, and personality, health, and industrial-organizational psychology. Although the MRP has been fruitful in drawing the field's attention to subtle forms of prejudice, it is far too underdeveloped on the conceptual and methodological fronts to warrant real-world application. I conclude with 18 suggestions for advancing the scientific status of the MRP, recommend abandonment of the term "microaggression," and call for a moratorium on microaggression training programs and publicly distributed microaggression lists pending research to address the MRP's scientific limitations.

## Keywords

individual differences, culture, diversity, personality, anthropology

Despite impressive societal strides, racial prejudice remains an inescapable and deeply troubling reality of modern life. Although most survey data suggest that the levels of overt ("old-fashioned") prejudice toward minorities in the United States have declined over the past several decades (Blanton & Jaccard, 2008; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000; but see Pasek, Stark, Krosnick, Tompson, & Payne, 2014, for indications that this trend may have slowed or reversed since 2008), pockets of such prejudice remain deeply entrenched. As recently as 2008, 4% to 6% of Americans acknowledged in a national poll that they would be unwilling to vote for any African American candidate as president, and this figure may be an underestimate given the social undesirability attached to admissions of racism (Payne et al., 2010).

Moreover, a growing cadre of scholars contends that in contemporary Western culture, 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. Such "underground" incarnations of prejudice have gone by various names, each carrying somewhat different denotations and

connotations that need not concern us here, including "modern racism" (McConahay, 1986), "color-blind racism" (Forman & Lewis, 2015), "aversive racism" (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986), "symbolic racism" (Sears, 1988), and "new racism" (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Research and theorizing on these covert variants of prejudice have spawned interest in the development of implicit-prejudice measures, which are ostensibly more sensitive to subtle racial bias compared with traditional, explicit measures of prejudice. Nevertheless, the scientific status of implicit-prejudice measures, such as the Implicit Association Test (IAT), is controversial, with some scholars maintaining that they detect subtle forms of prejudice (e.g., Banaji & Greenwald, 2013; Greenwald, Banaji, & Nosek, 2015) but others contending that their validity is dubious (Blanton et al., 2009; Mitchell & Tetlock, in press).

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## Microaggressions: The Contemporary Context

Enter microaggressions. Microaggressions are typically defined as subtle snubs, slights, and insults directed toward minorities, as well as to women and other historically stigmatized groups, that implicitly communicate or at least engender hostility (Sue et al., 2007). Compared with overtly prejudicial comments and acts, they are commonly understood to reflect less direct, although no less pernicious, forms of racial bias. For example, in attempting to compliment an African American college student, a White professor might exclaim with surprise, “Wow, you are so articulate!”, presumably communicating implicitly that most African American undergraduates are not in fact well-spoken. Recently, Shaun R. Harper, founder of the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education, described meeting an African American student whose professor in a large engineering course expressed incredulity that he had received a perfect score on an exam (Intelligence Squared U.S., 2016).

Few would dispute that these remarks, even if not malicious, are almost certainly callous. At the outset, one point should not be in contention: Racial and cultural insensitivities persist in contemporary America, including college campuses. Nor should there be any doubt that prejudice at times manifests itself in subtle and indirect ways that have until recently received short shrift in psychological research.

The microaggression concept has acquired considerable traction within this cultural backdrop. The *Global Language Monitor* deemed “microaggression” the word of the year in 2015 (Brown, 2015) in recognition of its skyrocketing prevalence in everyday language. In fact, the microaggression concept has begun to alter the landscape of popular culture. For example, a Facebook page, The Microaggressions Project, was launched in 2010 to document instances of microaggressions and to demonstrate “how these comments create and enforce uncomfortable, violent, and unsafe realities onto people’s workplace, home, school, childhood/adolescence/adulthood, and public transportation/space environments” ([https://www.facebook.com/microaggressions/info/?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/microaggressions/info/?tab=page_info)). As of November 2016, a Google search for “microaggression” and its close variants returned approximately 511,000 hits. The concept has also received considerable recent attention in research circles: A Google Scholar search from 2007 (when the initial seminal article on microaggressions appeared in print; see “History of the Microaggression Concept”) to the present reveals 3,090 manuscripts containing the term “microaggression,” 2,030 of them since 2012 alone.

Over the past few years, the microaggression concept has also made its way into public discussions at dozens,

if not hundreds, of colleges and universities, with many institutions offering workshops or seminars for faculty members on how to identify and avoid engaging in microaggressions. In other cases, colleges and universities, such as the University of California, Berkeley, have disseminated lists of microaggressions to caution faculty and students against expressing statements that might cause offense to minorities (Barbash, 2015; Elder, 2015; Mehrotra, 2014).

On many campuses, calls—and, in some cases, demands—from college students to formally address faculty member and fellow-student microaggressions are mounting. For example, in late 2015 at Emory University, a large student group demanded that administrators add two items assessing student-perceived instructor microaggressions to all undergraduate course evaluations. According to the students, “these questions on the faculty evaluations would help to ensure that there are repercussions or sanctions for racist actions performed by professors” (Soave, 2015). As of this writing, Occidental College is considering the implementation of a formal system to allow students to report faculty microaggressions (Schmidt, 2015), and the University of Wisconsin–Madison is planning on requiring 1,000 freshmen to undergo “cultural competency training,” which incorporates the identification of microaggressions (Gunn, 2016). At Missouri State University, an instructor in the theater and dance department trained a team of actors to educate the campus community and neighboring communities about the hazards of microaggressions (Caplan & Ford, 2014). Perhaps not surprisingly, these and other actions have generated a backlash, both within and outside the academy. In May 2016, in a widely publicized and controversial commencement address to students at the University of Michigan, former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg criticized the undue focus on microaggressions on campuses around the country: “A microaggression,” he said, “is exactly that: micro” (Siagler, 2016).

Microaggressions have captured the interest of the business industry, too. One estimate has placed the cost of microaggressions to U.S. workplace productivity at between \$450 to \$500 billion per year (Gates, 2015). In response to these figures and to broader concerns regarding the impact of microaggressions on workplace satisfaction, a number of major companies, including Coca-Cola and Facebook, have recently provided training to employees to detect and avoid implicitly prejudicial comments and actions, including microaggressions (Fisher, 2015).

All of these practical applications of the microaggression concept hinge on one overarching assumption that has gone largely unchallenged. Specifically, they presume that the microaggression research program (MRP) has been subjected to, and withstood, rigorous scientific scrutiny. In this review, I raise a variety of challenges to this presupposition and demonstrate that the scientific status of the MRP is far too preliminary to warrant its

dissemination to real-world contexts. At the same time, I argue that further scientific investigation of microaggressions is warranted, although such study will necessitate large-scale modifications to the MRP.

In this review, I refer to the MRP as the broad line of research focused on microaggressions and their potential impact on the behavior of recipients. As I delineate in greater detail later, the MRP appears to rest on five core assumptions:

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.

I am hardly the first to raise questions regarding the uses and misuses of the microaggression concept. Over the past few years in particular, this 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 regarding the societal and cultural implications of the microaggression construct, as well as of related concepts, such as “trigger warnings” and “safe spaces,” on college and university campuses. In particular, critics have voiced apprehensions that an undue emphasis on microaggressions (a) discourages or suppresses controversial or unpopular speech (e.g., Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; Powers, 2015), (b) fosters a culture of political correctness (e.g., Sunstein, 2015), (c) perpetuates a victim culture among aggrieved individuals (e.g., Thomas, 2008), and (d) contributes to, rather than ameliorates, racial tensions (Haidt & Jussim, 2016; McWhorter, 2014). Important as these concerns are, they must be distinguished from the MRP's scientific status. Conflating these two issues would constitute committing what logicians term the *argument from adverse consequences* fallacy—the error of concluding that an idea is erroneous merely because it can produce negative real-world outcomes (see Sagan, 1995). One can in principle maintain that the microaggression concept is scientifically sound while acknowledging that it may engender certain negative real-world consequences.

Despite its increasing incursion into the popular landscape and its growing influence in scholarly circles, the conceptual and methodological status of the MRP has received scant scientific attention. Only three published reviews, two of them book chapters, have canvassed the

state of the literature on the microaggression concept. All three reviews were broadly favorable to the MRP. In a brief review of the literature, Lau and Williams (2010) focused primarily on qualitative research concerning microaggressions and offered useful suggestions for improving the methodology of such research, such as asking majority individuals to generate examples of potential microaggressions and extending the assessment of microaggressions beyond self-report indices. Nadal (2013) offered a brief summary of the history of the microaggression concept and examined the relevance of microaggressions to gay, lesbian, and transgendered individuals. In the most comprehensive review, Wong, Derthick, David, Saw, and Okazaki (2014) examined 73 scholarly works on microaggressions, including qualitative and quantitative studies. They concluded that the microaggression literature has borne witness to considerable scientific progress but that further elaboration of the nature and scope of the microaggression concept is required. Wong et al. argued that microaggression research should move beyond self-report measures and conduct more rigorous examinations of the potential effects of microaggressions on minority mental health.

Nevertheless, none of these reviews challenged the central assumption that microaggressions, as currently conceptualized (see “History of the Microaggression Concept”), comprise a psychologically meaningful construct, nor did they examine in depth the empirical underpinnings of the MRP's forceful claims regarding a causal linkage between microaggressions and minority mental health. In this review, I draw in part on these previous reviews, especially that of Wong et al. (2014), but go well beyond them in providing a critical analysis of the conceptual coherence of the microaggression concept and empirical support for its ostensible psychological implications. In addition, I offer constructive recommendations for advancing the MRP and caveats regarding its application to real-world contexts, especially microaggression training programs.

## Goals of This Review

With this background in mind, the principal goal of this manuscript is to provide a conceptual and methodological analysis of the MRP, with a particular focus on the extent to which scientific evidence supports its key presuppositions. In doing so, I draw on broader literatures in psychometrics, as well as philosophy of science, social cognition, cognitive-behavioral therapy, behavior genetics, and personality, health, and industrial-organizational psychology, that bear on the validity of the MRP. I contend that these pertinent, well-developed bodies of knowledge have received short shrift in previous discussions of the microaggression concept. As a consequence, the MRP has largely neglected the critical scientific

principle of *connectivity*: Novel research programs must accord—connect—with well-established scientific principles (Stanovich, 2012). If the findings of a research program run counter to these principles, the onus of proof falls squarely on its proponents to demonstrate that these principles are erroneous or do not apply in the case of their research program.

My intent is not to provide a comprehensive narrative or meta-analytic synthesis of all articles and chapters on microaggressions. Instead, I aim to analyze the conceptual and empirical foundations of the MRP, with a particular emphasis on its compatibility with well-replicated findings and principles drawn from other domains of psychological science. In contrast to almost all previous critics, my focus is squarely on evaluating the scientific support for the MRP, including the construct validity of the microaggression concept and microaggression measures, and the assertion that microaggressions are tied causally to poor mental health. I do not accord much space to the potentially detrimental societal implications of the microaggression concept, although I revisit this issue briefly in my concluding comments.

In my review, I place particular emphasis on the extent to which the MRP fulfills several basic scientific criteria. Specifically, I focus on the (a) logical clarity and coherence of the microaggression construct, (b) reliability of microaggression measures, (c) criterion-related validity of microaggression measures, (d) incremental validity of microaggression measures above and beyond measures of overt prejudice, and (e) extent to which microaggression findings have been replicated across diverse information sources, especially independent observers.

Before proceeding, I should be explicit about what I am *not* saying. A few disclaimers are crucial at the outset given that discussions of microaggressions lend themselves to potent emotions and that an overreliance on the affect heuristic (Slovic, Finucane, Peters, & MacGregor, 2007) can readily lead to misunderstandings.

First, I do not contend that the MRP is devoid of scientific value or that it should be abandoned. Nor do I contend that microaggressions do not exist, if by microaggressions one means subtle slights and insults directed toward minorities. The existence of such indignities is undeniable. I argue that the microaggression concept is probably worth retaining in some form, although conjectures regarding its scientific future would be premature. Indeed, by drawing attention to indirect forms of prejudice that may have been largely overlooked, the MRP may point to fruitful directions for research on subtle expressions of prejudice. Second, I do not deny that subtle forms of prejudice exist and may be becoming more prevalent in American society. Third, my evaluation of the MRP should not be interpreted as a criticism of research on implicit prejudice, or of the construct validity of implicit measures of prejudice. The scientific

status of research on implicit prejudice must be evaluated in its own right; I do not intend to undertake this complex and ambitious task here.

## History of the Microaggression Concept

The term *microaggression* was coined by Harvard University psychiatrist Chester Pierce in 1970 to describe seemingly minor but damaging put-downs and indignities experienced by African Americans. Pierce wrote that “every Black must recognize the offensive mechanisms used by the collective White society, usually by means of cumulative pro racist microaggressions, which keep him psychologically accepting of the disenfranchised state” (Pierce, 1970, p. 472). Over the next 37 years, a few scattered publications referred to microaggressions, especially in the context of race relations between Whites and African Americans (Nadal, 2013).

It was not until 2007, however, that the microaggression concept began to filter into the academic mainstream. In an influential article (cited 1,617 times according to the Google Scholar database as of November 2016) published in the American Psychological Association’s flagship journal, *American Psychologist*, Columbia University counseling psychologist Derald Wing Sue and his coauthors introduced the notion of microaggressions to the broader psychological community (Sue et al., 2007). They 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” (p. 271). Microaggressions can be verbal comments (e.g., subtle racial slights), behaviors (e.g., ignoring minority individuals), or environmental decisions (e.g., naming all buildings on a college campus after White individuals). According to Sue et al., microaggressions necessarily lie in the eye of the beholder: “First, the person must determine whether a microaggression has occurred” (p. 279). Microaggressions are usually, although not invariably, emitted unconsciously by individuals, termed “perpetrators” (p. 272) by Sue and colleagues. In this article, I adopt the somewhat ungainly term “deliverers” in lieu of the pejorative term “perpetrators” to avoid any connotation of intentionality or malevolence.

According to Sue et al. (2007), microaggressions are pernicious precisely because they are usually ambiguous (see also Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). Victims of microaggressions 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 may inadvertently encourage further microaggressions from the same

person. In contrast, if they say something, the deliverer may deny having engaged in prejudice and accuse them of being hypersensitive or paranoid. As a consequence, recipients may become understandably reluctant to call out deliverers on future microaggressions.

Sue et al. (2007) differentiated among three subtypes of microaggressions. The derivation of these microaggression subtypes was based not on systematic data but on observation and consultation with the descriptive literature on prejudice.

*Microassaults*, which tend to be the most blatant of the three, are “explicit racial derogation(s) characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 277). 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” (p. 277). For example, according to Sue et al., an employer’s saying “I believe the most qualified person should get the job, regardless of race” (p. 274) is a microinsult, as is a teacher’s failing to call on a minority student who raises her hand in class. Finally, *microinvalidations* “exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color” (p. 274). According to Sue et al., a microinvalidation could be a White person’s informing an African American that “I don’t see race”; 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. Sue et al. maintained that microinsults and microinvalidations are more detrimental to mental health than are microassaults given their greater ambiguity and hence their heightened potential to place recipients in a catch-22 (see also Sue, 2010b). This hypothesis will probably strike many readers as counterintuitive given that microassaults are almost always more overtly severe than are microinsults and microinvalidations; I revisit this assertion in a later section (see “Situational Strength”).

Sue and colleagues (2007; pp. 276–277) presented a detailed table delineating examples of microaggressions (see Table 1 in Sue et al., 2007), which has since been adopted or adapted by numerous colleges and universities in training programs to warn faculty members and students against potential microaggressions. In this table, Sue et al. distinguished among nine lower-order categories of microaggressions: Alien in Own Land, Ascription of Intelligence, Color-blindness, Assumption of Criminal

Status, Denial of Individual Racism, Myth of Meritocracy, Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles, Second-Class Citizen, and Environmental Microaggressions. Again, these categories were deduced rationally/theoretically rather than from systematic data. This table also lists the implicit “message” (p. 276) associated with each microaggression (see also Sue, 2010b). For example, the microaggression “America is a melting pot” (p. 276), which falls under the category of Color-blindness, ostensibly communicates the message that minority individuals should conform to majority culture; the microaggression “I believe the most qualified person should get the job” (p. 276), which falls under the category of Myth of Meritocracy, ostensibly communicates the message that minorities are often accorded an unfair advantage when applying for employment; and the microaggression of ignoring a minority individual at a store counter, which falls under the category of Second-Class Citizen, ostensibly communicates the message that Whites are inherently more valuable than are minorities.

In the intervening years, the MRP has focused largely on developing measures of microaggressions and on examining the detrimental implications of microaggressions for minority mental health, especially the psychological adjustment of African Americans. Much of this research has been qualitative, soliciting candidate examples of microaggressions from focus groups of minority individuals (Lau & Williams, 2010), although more recently some of it has been quantitative. Many studies emanating from the MRP have reported positive correlations between microaggressions and psychological disturbances, such as depression and anxiety, which have been widely interpreted by authors as implying a causal impact of microaggressions on mental health (e.g., Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). A number of authors have gone further, proposing that repeated microaggressions are frequently more harmful than macroaggressions: “The invisibility of racial microaggressions may be more harmful to people of color than hate crimes or the covert and deliberate acts of White supremacists such as the Klan and Skinheads” (Sue, 2010b, p. 1).

In addition, 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 (J. Owen, Tao, & Rodolfa, 2010); gay, lesbian, and transgendered individuals (Nadal, 2013); Asian Americans (Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja, & Sue, 2013; Wang, Leu, & Shoda, 2011); Latinos (Huynh, 2012); Muslim Americans (Nadal et al., 2012); and obese individuals (L. Owen, 2012). Virtually all of these extensions presume that the construct validity of the microaggression concept with African Americans has already been well established. As we will discover, this assumption is doubtful.

## The Conceptualization of Microaggressions

The scientific basis of the MRP hinges on the coherence and soundness of the microaggression concept. Nevertheless, this concept has received little critical scrutiny.

### Open concepts

“Microaggression,” like most and perhaps virtually all psychological constructs, such as intelligence, extraversion, and schizophrenia, is an *open concept* (Pap, 1953). Open concepts are characterized by (a) intrinsically fuzzy boundaries, (b) an indefinitely extendable list of indicators, and (c) an unclear inner nature (Meehl, 1977, 1989).

Open concepts are by no means inherently problematic. To the contrary, they often possess heuristic value in the early phases of a research program. As scientific knowledge progresses, the concept may become less “open” as information accrues regarding its etiology and essence. For example, the concept of the gene was initially a “wide open” concept that was understood only as a hypothesized unit of transmission of heritable traits. With the seminal discovery of the structure of DNA by Watson and Crick (1953) and later elaborations of the functioning of DNA by other pioneers (e.g., Meselson & Stahl, 1958), the open concept of the gene became considerably more closed (Meehl, 1989). Yet even with these monumental discoveries, the concept of the gene retains a certain degree of ambiguity (Portin, 1993).

At the same time, there is the risk of an open concept's being so imprecisely defined and porous in its boundaries that it is not at all apparent where it begins or ends. Open concepts are most likely to bear scientific fruit when tethered to a reasonably clear-cut implicit or contextual—but not a rigid or “operational” (see Green, 1992, for a thoughtful discussion)—definition, one that specifies a concept's place within a nomological network of convergent and discriminant correlates (Cronbach & Meehl, 1955). Absent such a floating anchor, the boundaries of an open concept can contract or expand radically at the whim of investigators, clinicians, or policymakers (see Meehl, 1978, 1989). In an early critique of potential misuses of the concept of construct validity, Bechtoldt (1959) articulated similar concerns:

Dissatisfaction expressed by investigators with an initial “rough” incomplete definition is a reaction against ignorance and error rather than against a strategy of investigation. To admit ignorance as a temporary state of science is one thing. To raise vagueness or lack of definition to the central status of a methodological principle is another. (p. 622)

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

Compounding this problem is that according to Sue et al. (2007; Sue, 2010a), microaggressions lie in the eye of the beholder. It is doubtful whether an action that lies largely or exclusively in the eye of a beholder can legitimately be deemed “aggressive.” After all, referring to an action as aggressive implies at least some degree of consensus, ideally across independent observers, regarding its nature and intent. In addition, the subjectification of microaggressions leads to potential logical contradictions. If Minority Group Member A interprets an ambiguous statement directed toward her—such as “I realize that you didn't have the same educational opportunities as most Whites, so I can understand why the first year of college has been challenging for you”—as patronizing or indirectly hostile, whereas Minority Group Member B interprets it as supportive or helpful, should it be classified as a microaggression? The MRP literature offers scant guidance in this regard.

The “eye of the beholder” assumption implicit in the MRP generates other logical quandaries. In particular, it is unclear whether any verbal or nonverbal action that a certain proportion of minority individuals perceive as upsetting or offensive would constitute a microaggression. Nor is it apparent what level of agreement among minority group members would be needed to regard a given act as a microaggression. As a consequence, one is left to wonder which actions might fall under the capacious microaggression umbrella. Would a discussion of race differences in personality, intelligence, or mental illness in an undergraduate psychology course count? Or a dinner-table conversation regarding the societal pros and cons of affirmative action? 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.

Indeed, the boundaries of the microaggression concept at times appear to be so indistinct as to invite misuse or abuse. For example, according to Sue et al. (2007), “the fact that psychological research has continued to inadequately address race and ethnicity (Delgado-Romero, Galván, Maschino, & Rowland, 2005) is in itself a microaggression” (p. 283). Although few would dispute that the field of psychology should accord greater emphasis to certain scientific questions bearing on prejudice and discrimination, the rationale for conceptualizing this

insufficient attention as a microaggression appears flimsy. One major scholar in the MRP even regarded the statement “I don’t usually do this, but I can waive your fees if you can’t afford to pay for counseling” (Constantine, 2007, p. 5) as a microaggression, classifying it within a category of microaggressions termed “Dysfunctional Helping/Patronization” (p. 4). 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. For example, according to Constantine’s (2007, pp. 4–5) microaggression taxonomy, portions of this article could easily fall under the category of Minimization of Racial/Cultural Issues, Accused Hypersensitivity Regarding Racial or Cultural Issues, or both. At some colleges and universities, the conceptualization of microaggressions has become so sweeping as to invite satire. For example, the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee recently deemed the term “politically correct” (along with several other terms, such as “lame” and “trash”) as a microaggression (Watson, 2015). And the University of California system now informs faculty members that referring to America as a “land of opportunity” constitutes a microaggression (Hedtke, 2015), presumably because many minority individuals are not afforded the same opportunities for success as are majority individuals.

Fueling concerns regarding the fluid boundaries of the microaggression concept is the fact that in hindsight, even statements that might appear to be explicitly anti-prejudiced have been interpreted by some MRP advocates as microaggressions. A telling example comes from Sue (2010b), who analyzed Arizona Senator and then-presidential candidate John McCain’s response to an elderly White woman during a 2008 campaign stop. The woman stated, “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!” While acknowledging that McCain’s defense of Obama was “well intentioned,” Sue dubbed it a “major microaggression” (p. 5). According to Sue, McCain’s assertion that Obama is “a decent family man” implicitly communicated the message that most 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 are interesting and might be defensible, they are concerning. In particular, they raise the possibility that a vast number of statements can be labeled retrospectively as 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

(2010b) insisted McCain should have given (p. 6)—some MRP proponents could have contended that McCain was subtly intending to insinuate that Obama might indeed be a Muslim. Furthermore, Sue’s interpretation overlooks the more parsimonious possibility that McCain was 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 Gricean maxim of quantity (Grice, 1975) implies that in everyday conversation, we strive to make our statements as informative as necessary, but not more so.

In further research, it will be essential to shore up the microaggression concept considerably by better delineating its boundaries. It will be especially crucial for scholars to explicate not merely what constitutes a microaggression, but what does *not*. Although one can purport to identify a microaggression in hindsight, it is often unclear how one would do so on an a priori basis. Without reasonably clear criteria for doing so, “retrofitting” of any number of ambiguous statements into the microaggression rubric is possible, as the Sue (2010b) Obama-McCain example demonstrates. In this regard, I concur with Wong et al. (2014) that the fundamental question “*What* are racial microaggressions?” (p. 91, emphasis in original) has yet to be answered satisfactorily.

## Ambiguity

Most proponents of the MRP acknowledge that microaggressions, especially microinsults and microinvalidations, are often or usually extremely ambiguous in nature, rendering it difficult or even impossible to ascertain whether they have actually occurred. A few citations from the literature should suffice to illustrate this point:

For the recipient of a microaggression, however, there is always the nagging question of whether it really happened (Crocker & Major, 1989). It is difficult to identify a microaggression, especially when other explanations seem plausible. (Sue et al., 2007, p. 275)

The person is thrown into a very confusing and ambiguous situation, making it difficult to conclude whether an offense has occurred. (Sue, 2010a, p. 17)

Many racial microaggressions are so subtle that neither target nor perpetrator may entirely understand what is happening. (Sue, 2010c)

Because microaggressions are subtle and somewhat automatic, both the perpetrator and the victim may

be oblivious to their effects. (Nadal, Issa, Griffin, Hamit, & Lyons, 2010, p. 289)

First, the individual might be unable to establish if a microaggression has occurred. They are often ambiguous and thus harder to identify and categorize than overt, obvious acts of racism. (Burdsey, 2011, p. 276)

It is the subtle and unintentional aspects of microaggressions that make them difficult to identify because the interpersonal interactions in which they occur are often not perceived as biased or discriminatory. (Gunter & Peters, 2014, p. 2)

Such ambiguity is not by itself reason to jettison the microaggression construct. Projective techniques, whatever their notable scientific shortcomings (Lilienfeld, Wood, & Garb, 2000), rest on the reasonable assumption that item ambiguity can sometimes be a source of validity (see also Meehl, 1945). Indeed, a few projective techniques, such as the Washington University Sentence Completion Test (Loevinger, 1979), a measure of ego development, display promising or even impressive construct validity (Lilienfeld et al., 2000). Nevertheless, in the case of projective techniques, the rationale for item ambiguity is the projective hypothesis (Rapaport, 1942). According to this hypothesis, ambiguous stimuli allow for multiple interpretations, and the choice of these interpretations affords insights into respondents' personality traits, attitudes, and learning history. In the process of disambiguating multivocal stimuli, the hypothesis goes, respondents inevitably draw on their personality dispositions and other attributes.

Hence, in the case of microaggressions, stimulus ambiguity may, paradoxically, open the floodgates for respondents' personality traits, such as negative emotionality (Watson & Clark, 1984), to color their interpretation of items. Surprisingly, this vexing possibility has received little or no attention in the microaggression literature. Given the importance of this issue for evaluating the construct validity of microaggression measures, I revisit it later (see "The Largely Neglected Role of Personality Traits").

In fairness, proponents of the MRP have at times acknowledged that the context of a statement or action is critical in determining whether it is a microaggression (e.g., Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). Nevertheless, they have offered scant guidance regarding whether or how to weigh contextual considerations in this regard. Furthermore, without evidence that external observers can agree on the presence or absence of microaggressions, item ambiguity raises concerns regarding the extent to which microaggressions can be independently verified. How can we know whether a given microaggression occurred or was merely imagined?

Only one published study has evaluated the interrater reliability of participants' judgments of microaggressions. In a study of 40 African American clients and their 19 White counselors, Constantine (2007) found reasonably high agreement (intraclass  $r = .76$ ) regarding whether counselors had engaged in behaviors earlier deemed by a focus group to be microaggressive, such as "My counselor avoided discussing or addressing cultural issues in our session(s)" and "My counselor may have thought at times that I was overly sensitive about cultural issues" (p. 16).

Although this study is a helpful step toward establishing the interrater reliability of microaggressions, it demonstrates only that clients can agree on whether their counselors engaged in the specific behavior(s) in question. It does not address the more relevant question of whether clients agree on whether the counselors engaged in behavior that was (a) prejudicial and (b) aggressive in content, which are ostensibly key features of microaggressions. Hence, these findings tell us only that clients agree on whether their therapists performed certain behaviors deemed by MRP proponents to be microaggressions, not on whether they agree that their therapists engaged in microaggressions. As an analogy, imagine that a researcher were interested in collecting data on politicians' "insults" toward their opponents. With the aid of a focus group, she develops a provisional list of such insults, many of which are open to dispute as insults (e.g., "My opponent simply hasn't done his homework on this issue"; "My opponent doesn't know what he is talking about"). The researcher asks raters to code statements drawn from a series of debates involving political candidates, and reports that they agreed at high levels on whether candidates had engaged in the verbal behaviors she had classified as insults. Although a useful step toward establishing interrater reliability, this finding would not address the central question of whether raters agree on whether and when candidates are hurling insults.

### ***Embedded political values***

As Duarte et al. (2015) observed in a widely discussed article, large swaths of contemporary social psychology are characterized by *embedded values*, typically of a politically progressive slant. The problem of embedded values arises when researchers are largely unaware of the extent to which their sociopolitical perspectives infiltrate their assumptions regarding scientific phenomena: "Values become embedded when value statements or ideological claims are wrongly treated as objective truth, and observed deviation from that truth is treated as error" (Duarte et al., 2015, p. 4). The literature on the bias blind spot (Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002) is a reminder that virtually all of us, researchers included, are oblivious to many of our biases, and that the best means of combatting such



biases is to collaborate with, or least seek the input of, colleagues holding differing and ideally offsetting biases. The cross-cultural psychology literature offers similar caveats in this regard. Among Stuart's (2004) 12 suggestions for achieving multicultural competence was the following: "Acknowledge and control personal biases by articulating your worldview and evaluating its sources and validity" (p. 6).

To illustrate the problem of unarticulated embedded political values, Duarte et al. (2015) offered the example of a team of researchers (Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010) who attempted to explain some individuals' "denial" of "environmental realities" (e.g., limits on population growth, the possibility of an impending environmental disaster) in terms of system-justifying ideologies. As Duarte et al. noted, participants who were skeptical of these environmental hypotheses were automatically regarded by the investigators as erroneous and therefore in denial. In the case of these and other embedded political values, researchers overlook the distinct possibility that their assumptions are guided by sociopolitical values that they have neglected to explicate.

At times, the MRP similarly seems to fall prey to the pitfall of embedded political values. For example, across various studies, microaggression items reflecting the "myth of meritocracy" (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Sue et al., 2007; Torres-Harding, Andrade, & Romero Diaz, 2012; see also Mercer, Zeigler-Hill, Wallace, & Hayes, 2011) include "Someone told me that everyone can get ahead if they work hard when I described a difficulty related to my racial/ethnic background" (Mercer et al., 2011, p. 462), "Everyone can succeed in this society, if they work hard enough" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 276), and, as noted earlier, "I believe the most qualified person should get the job" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 276).

There are at least three problems here. First, research on culture-dependent cognition (Douglas, 1982; Kahan, Braman, Gastil, Slovic, & Mertz, 2007) suggests that individuals vary along a dimension of individualism-communitarianism, with highly individualistic people believing that people should generally look out for themselves and strive for independence. Hence, respondents holding a highly individualistic worldview may endorse many of these items without necessarily doing so out of prejudice. In fact, some may endorse such items equally for majority and minority individuals. Second, it is not at all evident that the "myth of meritocracy" is genuinely a "myth," especially if one regards it as an aspirational goal. For example, many nonprejudiced participants may believe that in an ideal world, the most qualified persons should always receive job offers, even as they recognize that socioeconomic deprivation and ingrained prejudices make it difficult or impossible to realize this goal in all cases. Third, although it would be implausible to insist that everyone in society has an equal opportunity to

succeed, the microaggressions in question do not hinge on this assumption; instead, they refer only to getting ahead or succeeding in life. Depending on participants' definitions of getting ahead or succeeding, both of which are open to interpretation, it may indeed be realistic to believe that most people can achieve these goals given substantial effort.

As another example, purported microaggressions reflecting "color-blindness" include "Someone made a statement to me such as 'I am color-blind' or 'We are all humans' that seemed to devalue my racial/ethnic background," (Mercer et al., 2011, p. 461), "I don't see you as Black; I just see you as a regular person" (Constantine, 2007, p. 5; see also Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2001), "There is only one race, the human race" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 272), and, as noted earlier, "America is a melting pot" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 272). The MRP assumes that such statements are inherently fallacious. The embedded values inherent in this assumption are apparent in this assertion by Sue (2016): "Attaining a racially color-blind society is unattainable and only reinforces racism and societal inequality" (p. 80). Although this position may be defensible, it is hardly the only legitimate perspective on racial color-blindness. For example, many nonprejudiced participants may view the goal of a racially color-blind society as achievable in principle, if not fully in practice. Moreover, participants who strongly value equality regardless of race may endorse racial color-blindness items without being prejudiced, either implicitly or explicitly. Ironically, conceptualizing most or all of these statements as microaggressions appears to run counter to the crux of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.'s (1963) eloquent affirmation that "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."

### ***The link between microaggressions and implicit messages***

As noted earlier, the influential article by Sue et al. (2007) provided a list of common microaggressions, along with the implicit "message" ostensibly communicated to minorities by each microaggression. Nevertheless, there is no research evidence that the microaggressions identified by Sue et al. are linked, either probabilistically or inexorably, to these negative messages, as there are no data on what proportions of minority individuals interpret each microaggression in accord with the purported message. For example, in the Obama-McCain example discussed earlier, it is unknown how many respondents would have perceived the same microaggression in McCain's comments as did Sue (2010b). As a consequence, the association between microaggressions and specific implicit messages remains conjectural.

Indeed, a compelling argument could be advanced that many putative microaggressions, especially microinsults and microinvalidations, lend themselves to a myriad of potential interpretations (messages), some of them largely malignant, others largely benign (see also Friedersdorf, 2015). The MRP appears to adopt a *stimulus-response model* to prejudice, in which certain stimuli, such as racially tinged statements, directly trigger negative psychological reactions (Major, McCoy, Kaiser, & Quinton, 2003). Nevertheless, the stimulus-response approach is now widely recognized as outmoded and as inconsistent with large bodies of literature in social and health psychology. Instead, the experimental literature better accords with a *transactional model*, in which individuals vary in their responses to racially tinged statements as a function of their traits and states, including their personality dispositions and strength of minority group identification (Major et al., 2003). More broadly, large bodies of research in health psychology and allied domains have increasingly appreciated the need to move away from simple stimulus-response models toward more multifactorial *cognitive-transactional models* of coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), in which individual differences shape people's subjective reactions to potentially stressful events. From this perspective, the notion that certain microaggressions usually or always impart specific implicit messages to respondents (e.g., Sue et al., 2007, Sue, 2010a), which is a core presumption of the MRP, is exceedingly doubtful.

Moreover, many of the implicit messages posited by Sue and colleagues appear to reflect quintessential examples of what cognitive-behavioral therapists (Burns & Beck, 1978; Freeman, 1983) term the cognitive distortion of *mind-reading*, in which individuals assume—without attempts at verification—that others are reacting negatively to them. Cognitive-behavioral therapists typically regard mind reading as a subtype of the broader tendency of individuals to jump to premature conclusions. For example, Sue et al. (2007, p. 276) 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” (p. 76). Yet most cognitive-behavioral therapists would maintain that leaping to this inference without attempting to check it out constitutes mind reading, as the intent of this question is compatible with a host of interpretations. Although it may indeed reflect the aforementioned assumption in certain cases, in many others it may reflect genuine and sincere curiosity regarding an individual's culture of origin.

### **What's in a name?**

The very name “microaggression” implies that the statements or actions that fall under this label are aggressive in

nature. Yet, confusingly, MRP advocates posit that such behaviors are typically unintentional. For example, according to Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder (2008), microinsults and microinvalidations (two of the three classes of microaggressions) are “expressed unconsciously by the perpetrator” (p. 329) and, according to Nadal (2011), racial microaggressions are “subtle statements and behaviors that unconsciously communicate denigrating messages to people of color” (p. 410).

In this respect, the use of 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. For example, one influential text on aggression avers from the outset that “one construct that most people would probably consider necessary to an adequate definition of aggression is *intent* to harm the victim” (Geen, 2001, p. 2, emphasis in original). Another text defines aggression as “any form of behavior directed toward the goal of harming or injuring another living being who is motivated to avoid such treatment” (Baron & Richardson, 1994, p. 7; see also Berkowitz, 1981, and Klama, 1988, for similar definitions). From these perspectives, the concept of an unintentional microaggression is an oxymoron.

Does it matter? Research suggests that it may, because the perception of intent is a critical correlate of, and perhaps contributor to, aggression. Specifically, social cognitive research on *hostile attribution of intent* (also termed “hostile attribution bias”; Orobio de Castro, Veerman, Koops, Bosch, & Monshouwer, 2002; Dodge & Frame, 1982) suggests that if individuals perceive aggressive intent, they are more likely to respond aggressively in turn. This finding has emerged in both correlational (Waldman, 1996) and laboratory (Epstein & Taylor, 1967) studies, the latter involving provocation to aggression in adults via delivery of electric shock by an ostensible competitor. Hence, labeling ambiguous statements or actions as “aggressive” may inadvertently foster aggression in recipients. Referring routinely to deliverers of microaggressions as “perpetrators” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 272) may only exacerbate this tendency. The possibility that labeling deliverer statements “microaggressions” may fuel anger and even overt aggression in recipients should be examined in laboratory paradigms. For example, researchers may wish to conduct studies in which racially or culturally laden statements from “perpetrators” are given the name “microaggressions” in one experimental condition but given a more neutral name (e.g., “inadvertent racial slights”; see “What's in a Name Redux”) in another experimental condition, and in which recipients are allowed to retaliate against their deliverers.

The difficulties with the microaggression terminology do not end there. Proponents of the MRP have not conducted correlational or factor-analytic research to buttress the assertion that microaggressions cohere with other indicators of aggression in deliverers, such as indices of instrumental aggression, reactive aggression, or both. For example, factor analyses of the most widely used self-report aggression measure, the Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992), are consistent with the presence of a higher-order aggression dimension coexisting with four lower-order dimensions (Bryant & Smith, 2001). If research demonstrates that ostensible microaggressions are not statistically associated with well-established indicators of aggression in the individuals who deliver them, this finding would require proponents of the MRP to confront a knotty question: Where is the aggression in microaggressions?

Just as important, advocates of the MRP have not conducted correlational or factor-analytic work to demonstrate that microaggressions cohere with other indicators of deliverer prejudice, whether they be implicit, explicit, or both. Most research has revealed only small or at best moderate correlations between indices of implicit prejudice, such as the IAT, and those of explicit prejudice (Hofmann, Gawronski, Gschwendner, Le, & Schmitt, 2005), so it may be unrealistic to anticipate correlations of high magnitude, at least with measures of explicit prejudice. Still, at a minimum it is incumbent on MRP proponents to demonstrate that ostensible microaggressions are statistically associated with at least some other well-validated indicators of deliverer prejudice. If they cannot do so, it would raise questions regarding the interpretation of many, let alone all, purported microaggressions as prejudicial in nature and challenge a bedrock presupposition undergirding the MRP.

### **Micro or macro?**

The prefix “micro” in “microaggression” implies that the transgressions in microaggressive actions are barely visible or at least challenging to detect. This indeed seems to be the case for many microassaults and microinvalidations. 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” (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000) racism. For example, according to one author team, a “microassault may include calling a woman a ‘bitch’ or a ‘whore’” (Capodilupo, Nadal, Corman, Hamit, & Weinberg, 2010, p. 195). Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, and Torino (2009) regarded referring to an Asian American as a “Jap” or a “Chink,” explicitly discouraging one’s child from dating an Asian American, or publicly displaying blatant caricatures of Asians, such as pictures of individuals with slanted eyes, as *microassaults* (p. 73; emphasis added).

Virtually all of us can agree that such statements and behaviors are grossly offensive, if not patently racist. Hence, the rationale for their inclusion within the microaggression construct is questionable (see also Garcia & Johnston-Guerrero, 2016; Minikel-Lacocque, 2013). This inclusion risks trivializing overt acts of racism by labeling them as “micro” rather than as “macro” and by combining them in the same overarching class as microinsults and microinvalidations, which tend to be considerably subtler in content. In this respect, proponents of the MRP may have committed a *category mistake* (Ryle, 1949), in which a member of one category is erroneously classified as falling into a different category. Furthermore, the inclusion of microassaults within the microaggression construct poses a dilemma for the interpretation of research examining the implications of microaggressions for minority mental health. If investigators find that total scores on microaggression measures are associated with minority psychopathology, it is unclear whether this finding would merely reflect statistical associations between overt racism and mental health, which have already been well established in the literature (Chakraborty & McKenzie, 2002). To circumvent these interpretative problems, one author team (Donovan, Galban, Grace, Bennett, & Felicié, 2013) classified microassaults as “macroaggressions” and microinsults and microinvalidations as microaggressions. Other investigators may wish to consider following their lead.

### **Summary**

There is scant dispute that some individuals engage in subtle slights, insults, and snubs against minorities. Nevertheless, the boundaries of the microaggression concept require substantial clarification. At present, they appear to be sufficiently fluid and porous to allow a vast number of potential behaviors, many of which hinge on highly subjective retrospective judgments, to be classified as microaggressions. In addition, the decision about which behaviors to include under the vast microaggression umbrella has in some cases been influenced substantially by embedded political values that have not been adequately explicated. The MRP presumption that certain microaggressions are invariably or usually associated with widely shared implicit messages has yet to be investigated empirically; moreover, this presumption is at variance with large bodies of research and theorizing in social cognition and cognitive-behavioral therapy. The concept of unintentional microaggressions is oxymoronic, as it runs counter to traditional definitions of aggression. Furthermore, there is no evidence that microaggressions are statistically associated with aggression or prejudice in deliverers. Finally, the inclusion of microassaults within the expansive microaggression

construct is conceptually dubious and requires further justification.

## **The Operationalization of Microaggressions**

While the conceptualization of microaggressions raises several important questions regarding the coherence of this construct, the development of microaggression items raises further questions concerning the construct validity of many microaggression measures used in research.

### ***Generation of microaggression items***

As Loevinger (1957) observed in her classic monograph, the ideal approach to generating items in the early phase of construct and test development is to begin with an overinclusive item pool (see also Clark & Watson, 1995). That is, one should include not only items that “hit the bull’s-eye” of one’s intended construct but also those intended to assess constructs that fall slightly outside of its hypothesized scope. By doing so, one can better ascertain the boundaries of one’s intended construct and thereby build discriminant validation into the test construction process itself rather than being forced to examine it only following test development. In the process of test construction, factor analyses and other item-analytic methods may reveal that one’s construct is either broader or narrower than initially posited and thereby in need of reconceptualization.

Therefore, it is crucial that an overinclusive item pool be only a starting point in the test development program, with refinements to be made to this pool over the course of test construction. Ideally, factor analyses and other item-analytic approaches should inform the revision of constructs and items in an iterative and self-correcting fashion, with the results of these analyses progressively shaping one’s constructs and selection of candidate items to detect these constructs (Clark & Watson, 1995; Loevinger, 1957; Tellegen & Waller, 2008). In this regard, it is troubling that the original Sue et al. (2007) threefold taxonomy of microaggressions, which was generated in an armchair fashion, has been used as a template in virtually all research articles in the MRP literature (see Wong et al., 2014, for a review). Furthermore, Sue et al.’s original list of microaggressions, which was similarly not informed by systematic data, continues to be distributed in verbatim form by numerous colleges and universities, such as those within the University of California system (Hedtke, 2015) and the University of Wisconsin–Stephens Point (Hoft, 2015), for the purpose of microaggression training. In fairness, several authors (e.g., Mercer et al., 2011; Nadal, 2011) have used factor-analytic techniques to refine provisional lists of microaggressions, such as those generated by focus groups

(see “Focus-Group Methodology”). As discussed later, however, these studies should be only a starting point for test construction given that they rely exclusively on one measurement source, namely, self-report (see “Mono-Source Bias”). Hence, these studies may be insufficient for culling and honing lists of potential microaggression items into more scientifically supported scales.

### ***Focus-group methodology***

Following Sue et al.’s (2007) article, a number of authors have generated alternative lists of microaggression items by consulting focus groups of minority individuals. A potentially serious concern with this methodology is that most focus groups have been drawn from highly selected samples, many or all of whom are already predisposed to endorse the concept of microaggressions (Lau & Williams, 2010). For example, Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder (2008) used purposive sampling methods to select minority focus-group participants who “had to . . . agree that subtle racism and discrimination exist in the United States” (p. 330). To generate microaggression items, Constantine, Smith, Redington, and Owens (2008) selected African American faculty in counseling psychology and counseling programs who “acknowledge(d) that subtle racism continues to exist in U.S. society” and reported “personal experiences with subtle forms of racism in America” (p. 349). Similar inclusion criteria for focus groups have been used in studies of microaggressions among Asian Americans (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008).

Moreover, given that leaders of these focus groups were aware that their goal was to elicit examples of microaggressions, group participants may have experienced pronounced demand characteristics to interpret ambiguous racial statements as microaggressive. In some studies, these demand characteristics may have even been made explicit; for example, in Constantine et al. (2008), interviewers provided participants with a definition of racial microaggressions and “confirmed that the interviews were intended to focus on subtle experiences of subtle racism, such as racial microaggressions, in their faculty positions” (p. 350). Potentially exacerbating this problem is that in most or all studies, team leaders have been selected on the basis of their acceptance of the core premises of the MRP. For example, Sue et al. (2009) acknowledged that “team members believe . . . that subtle racism exists, that it occurs against Asian Americans, that it possesses detrimental psychological consequences, and that it may be ethnic group specific” (p. 74).

In future research in the MRP, it will be essential to ensure that individuals generating candidate microaggression items are drawn from a diverse pool of participants, including those who possess few or no marked *a priori* beliefs regarding the existence and nature of subtle racism,

including microaggressions (see also Lau & Williams, 2010). Otherwise, provisional pools of microaggression items may be unrepresentative of minority group experiences and may be biased toward the interpretation of innocuous majority group behaviors as microaggressive. In addition, in constituting focus groups, it will be crucial to ensure that group members are shielded from marked demand characteristics from group leaders so that they can feel free to express the view that certain ambiguous majority group behaviors are *not* microaggressive in nature.

### ***The contradictory nature of microaggression items***

One likely consequence of the pronounced lack of clarity in the definition of microaggressions, as discussed earlier (see “Ambiguity”), is that some microaggression items proposed by prominent authors seem to be largely contradictory. For example, both (a) ignoring and (b) attending to minority students in classrooms have been deemed to be microaggressions by some authors: One researcher regarded “teachers ignoring the raised hands of Asian American students in classrooms” (Lin, 2010, p. 89) as a microaggression, whereas another regarded “compliment[ing] the student with a remark such as ‘That was a most articulate, intelligent, and insightful analysis’” (Sue, 2010a, p. 13) as a microaggression. Classifying both actions as microaggressions potentially places teachers in a double bind: If they ignore minority students’ raised hands, they risk being accused of implicit prejudice; conversely, if they call on students and compliment them, they risk the same accusation.

Furthermore, whereas authors in certain cases regard complimenting minority individuals as microaggressions, in other cases they regard criticizing minority individuals as microaggressions. In one striking example, Constantine and Sue (2007) solicited reports of psychotherapy supervisor microaggressions from 10 African American graduate students in clinical and counseling psychology programs. The authors identified both withholding criticism from supervisees and providing with them with tough criticism as microaggressions. Specifically, the authors classified both (a) refraining from criticizing one’s supervisee’s clinical skills out of fear of being deemed racist (e.g., “I had the feeling that my White supervisor just didn’t want to challenge some of my [areas for growth] because he didn’t want to seem racist. He only brought up my strengths”; p. 147) and (b) being perceived as focusing unduly on supervisees’ deficits in clinical skills (e.g., “My supervisor kept giving me books to read about how therapy should be done and how I should take a more ‘neutral’ stance with clients”; p. 147) as microaggressions. Again, the decision to categorize both items as microaggressions places clinical supervisors in a potential double bind: If they refrain from

criticizing their supervisees, they risk being accused of microaggressing against them, whereas if they criticize their supervisees, they risk the identical accusation.

Still other microaggression items are “double-headed” (Hines, 2003), allowing respondents to identify either of two markedly different or even opposing items as microaggressions. For example, in a questionnaire generated by asking focus-group members to identify microaggressions, Constantine (2007) included the following item: “My counselor may have at times either overestimated or underestimated my capabilities or strengths based on my cultural group membership” (p. 16). Hence, certain microaggression items, at least those designed for the treatment context, may encompass diametrically opposed behaviors on the part of therapists.

In principle, some of the apparent contradictions between microaggression items could dissolve once situational context is taken into account. For example, in the study by Constantine (2007), a clinical supervisor might implicitly communicate condescension while both overestimating (e.g., “Yes, I know that you didn’t learn how to administer this technique in your previous training, but most students learn how to do it and I’ll assume you can too”) and underestimating (e.g., “Based on what I’ve observed thus far, I’ll try to give you some more time to learn how to administer this technique”) a student’s strengths. Nevertheless, most items on microaggression measures are decontextualized, with little or no explicit reference to when, where, and how the communication was delivered. Hence, moving forward, it will be incumbent on MRP researchers to develop items whose context is sufficiently clear to minimize ambiguity. Furthermore, it will be necessary to demonstrate that observers can agree on whether items constitute microaggressions when situational context is considered.

In fairness, the conceptual and psychometric dilemmas concerning contradictory items are not unique to the MRP and extend to other domains of the implicit-prejudice literature. For example, Oswald, Mitchell, Blanton, Jaccard, and Tetlock (2015) observed that inconsistent predictions by different research teams pose a challenge to the evaluation of the construct validity of the IAT. For example, they noted that McConnell and Leibold (2001) predicted that higher scores on the IAT (with higher scores reflecting preference for Whites as opposed to African Americans) would be associated with fewer positive interactions with an African American confederate; in contrast, Shelton, Richeson, Salvatore, and Trawalter (2005) predicted that higher scores on the IAT would be associated with *more* positive interactions with an African American confederate. Hence, in future research it will be necessary for MRP advocates, and implicit-prejudice researchers more generally, to better explicate their a priori assumptions regarding which behaviors do and do not reflect racial bias.

### ***Lack of knowledge of event base rates***

Numerous microaggression items in the literature describe actions that would appear to be fairly common in everyday life and not necessarily driven by hostile intent. For example, Sue et al. (2007) regarded a taxi driver's passing by a minority individual to pick up a White passenger as a microaggression. In addition, a measure developed to detect microaggressions against Latino and Asian American adolescents includes such items as "Someone tells you that you are too loud and should talk less" and "You are ignored at a store counter as attention is given to a customer (who is of a different ethnic group than you) behind you" (Huynh, 2012, p. 836). A microaggression measure by Ong et al. (2013) includes such items as "A White person failed to apologize after stepping on my foot or bumping into me" and "At a restaurant, I noticed that I was ignored, overlooked, or not given the same service as Whites" (p. 191; see also Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Sue et al., 2007). And, in a study of microaggressions experienced by African American faculty members in counseling programs and counseling psychology programs, Constantine et al. (2008) identified a student's calling a professor by his or her first name and a professor's receiving inadequate mentoring from senior colleagues as microaggressions.

The classification of such acts as microaggressions presumes that (a) the base rates of these actions are known, at least to a first approximation, and (b) the respondent has experienced the microaggressive act at a frequency that clearly exceeds each relevant base rate. In the case of microaggression questionnaires, however, these presumptions are untested. Moreover, because many microaggression items that describe discrete events do not even reference a time frame, acts can be counted as microaggressions even if they have occurred only once during respondents' lifetimes. For example, 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 approximate event base rates, the possibility that many microaggression items merely reflect occurrences that are prevalent in the everyday lives of both majority and minority individuals is difficult to exclude.

### ***Summary***

Although there has been progress in the development of microaggression measures, such measures have yet to be constructed with the benefit of an iterative, self-correcting research program. The original Sue et al. (2007) threefold

armchair taxonomy of microaggressions remains intact in many or most studies, and their list of microaggressions continues to be distributed verbatim in many colleges and universities despite its virtually wholesale absence of construct validation. The focus groups used to generate candidate microaggression items for subsequent measures have consistently been self-selected to include group leaders and participants who are strongly predisposed to believe in microaggressions, potentially engendering serious biases in item selection. Furthermore, many microaggression items refer to experiences that are likely to be normative in everyday life; without knowledge of the approximate base rates of these events, a number of microaggression items may yield a nontrivial proportion of false-positive identifications.

### **The Assessment of Microaggressions: The Problem of Mono-Source Bias**

As noted earlier, the MRP presumes that microaggressions lie in the eye of the beholder. As a consequence, in virtually all of the literature conducted thus far, microaggressions have been assessed exclusively by self-report. As I argue in the following section, this methodological limitation leads to a number of vexing interpretational challenges for the MRP.

### ***Mono-source bias***

Perhaps the most conspicuous limitation of the virtually exclusive reliance on self-report indices in the MRP is *mono-source bias* (see Barling, Slater, & Kelloway, 2000), a term derived from the industrial-organizational psychology literature. Arguably, one of the most enduring lessons learned in psychology over the past several decades is the importance of *critical multiplism*: By examining a research question from diverse methodological vantage points, one can obtain a more complete picture of the robustness of one's research program, including its boundary conditions (Figueredo, 1993; Shadish, 1995). In psychological research, one crucial instantiation of critical multiplism is the technique of multiple operationalism: operationalizing constructs in multiple ways, by using different measures and modes of assessment. As Block (1977) observed, self-report, observer, and laboratory test data each have their inferential strengths and limitations. To the extent that comparable results emerge across operationalizations with largely offsetting biases—the principle of the heterogeneity of irrelevancies (Cook, 1990)—the greater the confidence that one can place in one's research program.

These methodological considerations have been largely overlooked by MRP proponents (see also Okazaki, 2009, for a discussion of this limitation in the broader literature

on perceived prejudice). Mono-source bias renders it difficult or impossible to evaluate the extent to which MRP findings are robust across different informants, including observers (see also Lau & Williams, 2010). As a consequence, the generalizability and boundary conditions, if any, of the MRP across multiple operationalizations of microaggressions are unknown.

Mono-source bias also raises the specter of inflated associations between microaggressions and psychological adjustment stemming from shared method variance. Although one research team (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015) avoided mono-source bias by asking trained observers to measure the frequency of teacher and fellow-student microaggressions in racially diverse community college classrooms, they did not assess participants' mental health outcomes. Hence, their study does not exclude the possibility that reported associations between microaggressions and adverse mental health outcomes are attributable to mono-source bias.

### ***Causal assertions***

Numerous studies have revealed robust correlations between microaggressions and adverse mental health outcomes, such as psychological distress, anxiety, and depression, among minorities (e.g., Mercer et al., 2011; Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit, & Rasmus, 2014; Torres-Harding & Turner, 2015). Many MRP advocates have invoked these findings to advance forceful, if not definitive, claims concerning the causal impact of microaggressions on psychological disturbance (but see Donovan et al., 2013, for more tempered assertions). Selected quotations from the mainstream MRP literature again help to illustrate this point; readers should note the liberal use of explicitly causal terms, such as "result," "effects," "consequences," "detrimental," and "impact":

These unique forms of aggression result in the perpetuation of various injustices that have major consequences not only on the mental health of the recipients, but also in creating and maintaining racial inequities in health care, employment, and education. (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008, p. 331)

The harmful and detrimental effects of microaggressions and other subtle forms of discrimination on the health and psychological well-being of individuals is undeniable. (Lau & Williams, 2010, p. 328)

Studies reveal that racial microaggressions have powerful detrimental consequences to people of color. (Sue, 2010c)

The cumulative nature of these innocuous expressions is detrimental to racial minorities because they sap the

energy of recipients, which impairs performance in a multitude of settings. (Wong et al., 2014, p. 182)

There has been an increase in research focusing specifically on racial microaggressions, with results showing that these subtle forms of discrimination have a detrimental impact on the mental health of people of color. (Nadal et al., 2014, p. 57)

These assertions are hardly isolated; Sue (2010b) elsewhere argued that the cumulative effects of microaggressions "shorten life expectancy" (p. 6), and Nadal (2013) argued that they foster suicidal ideation. Such unqualified causal inferences are surprising given the inherently correlational nature of the data linking microaggressions to mental and physical health outcomes and the dearth of longitudinal data linking microaggressions to such outcomes. Although longitudinal data cannot prove causality, they would be helpful in affording more stringent tests of causal models, or at least of temporal ordering. With two exceptions (Ong et al., 2013; Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010), all of the published research linking microaggressions to negative mental health outcomes has been cross-sectional; I address the study by Ong et al. in the following section.

### ***The largely neglected role of personality traits***

Dating back at least to the classic critiques of interpersonal perception by Cronbach and his colleagues (Cronbach, 1955; Gage & Cronbach, 1955), psychologists have recognized that the complex process of interpersonal perception is often at least as much a function of the perceiver as of the perceived. As Gage and Cronbach (1955) observed, "in the bulk of research to date, social perception as measured is a process dominated far more by what the judge brings to it than what he takes in during it" (p. 420). These seminal insights appear to have been largely overlooked in the MRP.

This neglect of individual differences in the perception of interpersonal stimuli may be especially problematic given that nontrivial proportions of participants in MRP studies report having experienced no microaggressions. For example, Ong et al. (2013) found that approximately 22% of Asian Americans reported no daily microaggressions across a 2-week period, and J. Owen, Tao, Imel, Wampold, and Rodolfa (2014) and Hook et al. (2016) reported that approximately 47% and 18% of minority clients, respectively, reported encountering no microaggressions in psychotherapy (see also Constantine, 2007, for evidence that the absolute levels of microaggression endorsement among therapy clients are low). Although these percentages display substantial variation,

they suggest that a number of minority individuals report few or no microaggressions. These individual differences in microaggression endorsement frequency may in turn stem in part from individual differences in personality (although they are likely to partly reflect situational variation as well).

In particular, the MRP has all but ignored the potentially crucial role of negative emotionality (NE; formerly called "negative affectivity"; Watson & Clark, 1984) in shaping perceivers' judgments of microaggressions. In this respect, the MRP has substantially underemphasized discriminant validity (Campbell & Fiske, 1959), especially discriminant validity from NE, at the expense of convergent validity. As conceptualized by Tellegen and his colleagues (e.g., Tellegen & Waller, 2008), NE is a pervasive temperamental disposition to experience aversive emotions of many kinds, including anxiety, worry, moodiness, guilt, shame, hostility, irritability, and perceived victimization. Individuals with elevated levels of NE tend to be critical and judgmental of both themselves and others, vulnerable to distress and emotional maladjustment, and inclined to focus on the negative aspects of life (Watson & Clark, 1984). They also tend to be vigilant and overreactive to potential stressors (Lahey, 2009) and, of particular relevance to the MRP given the open-ended nature of many microaggressions, prone to interpreting ambiguous stimuli in a negative light (Brief, Burke, George, Robinson, & Webster, 1988). Although NE is a broad higher-order dimension, it is factorially coherent and marked by moderate to high correlations among its lower-order dimensions, such as stress reactivity, hostility/irritability, and alienation/perceived victimization (e.g., Rushton & Irwing, 2009; Tellegen & Waller, 2008).

NE is conceptually and empirically related to, but broader than, the Eysenckian (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1987) trait of neuroticism, which encompasses stress reactivity and moodiness but does not explicitly include other key features of NE, including perceived victimization. At least some evidence points to an association between microaggression and NE indicators. In a sample of African American students, for example, Mercer et al. (2011) found a small to medium association ( $r = .21, p = .01$ ) between a microaggression scale and the trait version of the Negative Affect Scale of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule.

NE courses through virtually all measures of distress-related psychopathology (Watson & Clark, 1984) and is thus a potential nuisance factor in studies of the relation between life stressors and maladjustment. Finney (1985) went so far as to remark that one of the foremost challenges in the construction of psychopathology measures is to develop self-report indices that are uncontaminated by NE (see also Tellegen, 1985).

The trait of perceived victimization, which corresponds closely to the lower-order trait of "alienation" in

Tellegen's (in press) Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (see also Lilienfeld & Andrews, 1996), is especially relevant to evaluating the MRP's scientific status. The potential importance of this trait was recognized in the perceived-prejudice literature nearly two decades ago by Crocker and Major (1989): "Chronic tendencies to perceive oneself as a victim, to be sensitive to rejection, or to blame others for one's misfortune may be associated with increased attributions to discrimination in weak or ambiguous situations" (p. 307). For example, the Negative Emotionality scale (Waller, Tellegen, McDonald, & Lykken, 1996), which consists of the strongest NE markers drawn from the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (Tellegen, in press), contains numerous items that appear to capture an enduring sense of victimization, such as "My feelings are rather easily hurt," "People often say mean things about me," "Many people try to push me around," "I feel that life has handed me a raw deal," "Some people oppose me for no good reason," and "People rarely try to take advantage of me" (the lattermost item keyed false; Waller et al., 1996, p. 571).

A seemingly allied trait that has been examined in the prejudice literature but that has been largely neglected by the MRP is race-based rejection sensitivity (RBRS; Mendoza-Denton, Downey, Purdie, Davis, & Pietrzak, 2002), which is a tendency to "anxiously expect, readily perceive, and intensely react to status-based rejection" (p. 896) specific to one's racial group. Research indicates that RBRS is associated with a tendency to report higher levels of perceived racism and to perceive race-based negativity in ambiguous scenarios (Mendoza-Denton et al., 2002). In what appears to be the lone published study examining the link between RBRS and microaggressions per se, Mercer et al. (2011) reported that the two variables were positively correlated ( $r = .27, p < .001$ ) in a sample of African American undergraduates; they did not report, however, whether the significant association they found between microaggressions and adverse mental health outcomes (e.g., global psychopathology, distress) remained statistically significant after controlling for RBRS scores. Because RBRS may partly reflect repeated exposure to experiences of genuine prejudice and discrimination, however, it is unlikely to be a "purely" dispositional measure of NE.

More broadly, the potential contaminating influence of NE and other personality traits on the linkage between life events and adverse psychological outcomes has long been recognized in the behavior genetics literature. Although measures of stressful life events are often presumed to be pure measures of the environment, in fact, scores on such measures tend to be moderately heritable, with some of this heritability probably stemming from genetic influences on the subjective perception of such events (Kendler & Baker, 2007). Hence, life events indices



are not “pure” indicators of environmental influence (Plomin, DeFries, Knopik, & Neiderhiser, 2016).

The potential confounding influence of NE on important life outcomes has also been increasingly acknowledged in the health psychology and industrial-organizational psychology literatures (Kohn, Lafreniere, & Gurevich, 1990). In a series of analyses, Watson and Pennebaker (1989) found that NE scores were associated with perceived but not objective physical health, and they concluded that individuals with elevated NE levels were especially likely to perceive subtle and ambiguous somatic symptoms as distressing. Brief et al. (1988) found that after controlling statistically for NE in a sample of managers and professionals, the well-established association between job stress and work-related outcomes, such as job satisfaction, was markedly reduced, often to statistical nonsignificance. The magnitude of this reduction in the industrial-organizational literature has been a flashpoint of contention (Judge, Erez, & Thoresen, 2000; Spector, Zapf, Chen, & Frese, 2000), although there is little dispute that NE can sometimes create criterion contamination, inflating the association between potentially stressful life events and negative outcomes.

In light of the virtually wholesale neglect of NE in the MRP, it seems especially premature to advance strong causal assertions regarding the ties between microaggressions and mental health outcomes. In what appears to be the lone empirical examination of the potentially contaminating role of NE in the relation between microaggressions and maladjustment, Ong et al. (2013) conducted sophisticated multilevel analyses of the relations between microaggressions and both negative affect and somatic complaints in a sample of 152 Asian Americans. They found that increases in daily microaggressions predicted increases in both outcomes over a 2-week period even after controlling statistically for scores on a measure of neuroticism. Ong et al.’s study, which is a significant advance in the MRP, offers some reassurance that the relation between microaggressions and negative psychological outcomes is not attributable entirely to NE (which, as noted earlier, overlaps with neuroticism). At the same time, Ong et al.’s measure of neuroticism was suboptimal; it consisted of a 4-item scale that demonstrated marginal internal consistency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .69$ ). Perhaps more importantly, this scale contained no items assessing perceived victimization or alienation, which are key components of NE that are especially pertinent to perceiving largely innocuous slights as malevolent (see Crocker & Major, 1989). Further longitudinal research along the lines of Ong et al., using more content-valid measures of NE (e.g., Waller et al., 1996) as covariates, should help to subject the MRP to “riskier” (Meehl, 1978) scientific tests, those that place a theory at graver risk of falsification.

As Clark and Watson (1995) observed with respect to the challenge of constructing measures that are not contaminated by NE, “Over the years, it has been demonstrated repeatedly that attempts to assess a specific construct (such as hardiness or pessimism) have yielded instead yet another measure that is strongly saturated with this pervasive dimension” (p. 312). They further noted that questionnaire items containing negative-mood words (e.g., “I am often disturbed by . . .,” “I am upset by . . .”) frequently end up with a pronounced NE loading in factor analyses merely as a result of their inclusion of distress-related content.

Ironically, in developing microaggression scales for use in research, numerous investigators may have inadvertently exacerbated the contaminating influence of NE by presenting participants with response options that go beyond merely asking them to rate the occurrences of microaggressions by additionally asking them to rate the subjective impact of these microaggressions. For example, the Racial Microaggressions in Counseling Scale, developed by Constantine (2007), asks psychotherapy clients to rate microaggressions on a 3-point Likert-type scale, in which 0 equals “this never happened,” 1 equals “this happened,” and 2 equals “this happened and I was bothered by it” (p. 6). The Ethnic Microaggressions scale, developed by Huynh (2012) for application to Latino and Asian American adolescents, asks respondents to indicate whether an event occurred and then whether it “bothered” or “upset” them (p. 835), with both ratings contributing to the final score. Because individuals with elevated NE tend to be more distressed than other individuals by potentially aversive events (Watson & Pennebaker, 1989), response options including the words “bothered” and “upset” boost the likelihood that ratings will be contaminated by NE. As a consequence, the findings of these and several other MRP studies (see also Mercer et al., 2011; Torres-Harding & Turner, 2015), which have revealed that microaggressions are associated with lower satisfaction with one’s counselor (Constantine, 2007), anxiety, anger, and depression (Huynh, 2012), and other negative psychological outcomes (Mercer et al., 2011), are susceptible to personality confounds. In contrast, the total scores on several other microaggression measures, such as the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale (Nadal, 2011), do not include ratings of the subjective impact of each item and are not subject to this methodological criticism. We encourage MRP researchers to make more consistent use of the Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale and other scales that do not confound the frequency of microaggressions with their subjective impact on respondents.

To be certain, it is unlikely that NE accounts for all of the statistical relation between microaggression indices and adverse mental health outcomes. Mirroring the literature on

stressful life events and psychopathology, it is more plausible that microaggressions genuinely contribute to adverse psychological outcomes but that the magnitude of this association has been overestimated as a result of contamination by NE (e.g., Saudino, Pedersen, Lichtenstein, McClearn, & Plomin, 1997). In this regard, research suggests that widely used measures of perceived discrimination are also partly confounded with NE. Huebner, Nemeroff, and Davis (2005) found that indices of neuroticism and hostility, both of which are well-established markers of NE (Watson & Clark, 1984), accounted for 42% of the association between self-reported discrimination and depressive symptoms. At the same time, self-reported discrimination still accounted for significant variance in depressive symptoms after controlling for these NE markers. It seems reasonable to posit a similar state of affairs for microaggression indices, with NE accounting for some, but not all, of the covariance between these indices of adverse mental health outcomes.

Hence, in future research in the MRP, it will be crucial for investigators to examine the role of NE as a potential source of contamination. One noteworthy caveat to such analyses is that statistical adjustment for NE may constitute “overcontrol” (Becker et al., 2015; see Meehl, 1971, for a more general discussion). Specifically, if some of the variance in trait measures of NE reflects recurrent distress arising from cumulative exposure to microaggressions, controlling statistically for NE may inadvertently remove some of the variance intrinsic to the microaggression construct. For example, some authors have posited that repeated exposure to racism may engender an enduring hypersensitivity to racially tinged stimuli among victims (Okazaki, 2009). Nonetheless, without statistical adjustment for NE, it will be difficult to exclude the possibility that some of the association between microaggressions and mental health outcomes is spurious. I therefore recommend that investigators report findings in both raw (unadjusted for NE) and controlled (adjusted for NE) form so that readers can evaluate the extent to which the pattern of associations changes following statistical adjustment for NE (see Becker et al., 2015). Neither set of findings is more “correct” than the other, but each imparts a different story.

One potential solution to the dilemma posed by NE within microaggression research is a dramatically reconceptualized version of the MRP. In what one might term a “recipient-only” version of the MRP, the focus would be exclusively on the psychological impact of statements and actions on minority individuals, with no assumption that microaggressions reflect objective acts of implicit prejudice on the part of deliverers. In this reenvisioned form of the MRP, research would be restricted to the question of why certain minority individuals are especially vulnerable to the perceived slights and snubs of

majority individuals, and to the variables, such as personality traits, attitudes, and exposure to prejudice and discrimination, that predict individual differences in the interpretation of majority group acts and statements as hostile. Nevertheless, a recipient-only research approach to the MRP would at present be ill-advised given that it is plausible, if not probable, that certain majority group individuals consistently emit racial and cultural slights and snubs at high levels. Ultimately, the MRP will benefit from a fuller understanding of the psychological characteristics of both deliverers and recipients, ideally within a cognitive-transactional framework of coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) that recognizes the importance of both triggering stimuli and responses to them.

### ***The paradox of high internal consistency***

One anomalous—and replicable—finding that has received little or no discussion in the MRP literature is that the internal consistencies of microaggression measures tend to be high. For example, the Cronbach's alpha of the 10-item Racial Microaggressions in Counseling Scale among a sample of minority clients was .73 (Constantine, 2007); the Cronbach's alpha of the 20-item Daily Life Experience-Frequency Subscale of the Racism and Life Experience scale in an African American sample was .90 (Torres et al., 2010); the Cronbach's alpha of the 45-item Racial and Ethnic Microaggressions Scale in a mixed minority sample was .88 (Nadal, 2011); and the Cronbach's alpha of the 18-item LGBT People of Color Microaggressions Scale in a sample of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual adults was .92 (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011).

Although Cronbach's alpha is not a pure index of scale homogeneity (see Sijtsma, 2009) given that it is affected by test length, a high Cronbach's alpha value in the case of a relatively brief (e.g., 10- or 20-item) scale, as holds true for several of the microaggression scales discussed here, necessarily implies fairly high mean inter-item correlations. For example, using a derivation of the Spearman-Brown prophecy formula that allows one to calculate the mean inter-item correlations on a scale given both its length and Cronbach's alpha (Kenny, 2011), one can demonstrate that the mean inter-item correlations for the four microaggression scales presented in the previous paragraph (in order of their appearance) were .21, .31, .14, and .39, respectively. With the possible exception of the Racial and Ethnic Microaggression Scale (Nadal, 2011), these values are within the range recommended for the construction of reasonably homogeneous scales (Clark & Watson, 1995).

At first blush, these moderate to high internal-consistency values would appear to be encouraging. After all, according to classical test theory, validity is limited by the square

root of reliability (Meehl, 1986), so—all things being equal—higher reliability affords higher levels of construct validity. Upon reflection, however, these reliability values actually give cause for concern. Microaggressions are posited to comprise an extremely diverse class of slights, insults, and snubs of various sorts emanating from a diverse array of individuals (Sue et al., 2007). Thus, it is not at all clear why microaggression measures should be internally consistent. This point was acknowledged by Ong et al. (2013), who wrote that “internal-consistency reliability of the daily racial microaggression items was not computed, because the experience of one microaggression does not necessarily increase the likelihood of another” (p. 190).

In a helpful analysis of the interpretation of Cronbach's alpha values, Streiner (2003; see also Bollen & Lennox, 1991) distinguished *effect* from *causal* indicators. Effect indicators are ostensibly overt manifestations of a construct (which is by definition a latent entity), such as anxiety, depression, or extraversion: They are presumed to be produced, at least in part, by this construct. As a consequence, effect indicators, such as items on a measure of trait impulsivity, would be expected to display high internal consistency. In contrast, causal indicators are posited to contribute to scores on other constructs; they do not reflect the influence of the constructs themselves. For example, scores on a measure of stressful life events would not be expected to be caused by constructs. As a consequence, this measure would not be expected to display high internal consistency.

Hence, we are left to confront a paradox. Because microaggression items are presumed to be causal, but not effect, indicators, moderate to high correlations among them raise questions concerning the construct validity of microaggression scales. It is not immediately apparent why certain minority individuals, but not others, would consistently have the misfortune of being recipients of microaggressions of diverse kinds, often from multiple individuals across multiple settings. On the one hand, one might contend that only some individuals (e.g., African American professors in overwhelmingly White academic institutions) consistently find themselves in hostile environments that generate high levels of microaggressions. On the other hand, these high Cronbach's alpha values lend themselves to another, arguably more plausible, interpretation: At least some of the high internal consistency among microaggression items may reflect the contaminating influence of personality traits, such as NE. We strongly encourage investigators to incorporate alternative modes of assessment, such as observer ratings of microaggressions, to examine this possibility. If microaggression scales display high internal consistencies only when they are self-reported, but not when they are completed by informants, this finding might suggest that

these scales are confounded with construct-irrelevant variance (Messick, 1995) stemming from NE.

Should we expect any microaggression measures to display high levels of internal consistency? The answer would appear to be a qualified yes. At least some writings by prominent MRP authors imply that certain majority group members are especially consistent emitters of microaggressions. For example, Sue (2010a) posed the question, “how and why do people become microaggressive perpetrators with oppressive attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors?” (p.111). If there are indeed stable individual differences in the propensity to emit microaggressions of various kinds, both self-report and other-report microaggression indices administered to microaggression deliverers would be expected to display relatively high levels of homogeneity and internal consistency. I say “relatively” given that the microaggression concept itself is broad and somewhat heterogeneous. Hence, consistent with standard psychometric recommendations, one might anticipate well-constructed microaggression measures administered to deliverers to consist of items with low to moderate, but not extremely high, intercorrelations (Epstein, 1984; Loevinger, 1957). To investigate this possibility, the MRP should begin to examine the behavioral and personality characteristics of microaggression deliverers in addition to microaggression recipients.

### ***Situational strength***

As observed earlier, advocates of the MRP typically posit that microaggressions are more highly associated with detrimental mental health outcomes than are overtly prejudicial actions. They further posit that microinsults and microinvalidations are more highly associated with detrimental mental health outcomes than are microassaults (Sue et al., 2007). According to MRP advocates, microinvalidations are especially ambiguous and are therefore presumably the most likely of the three microaggression subtypes to contribute to poor adjustment.

In all cases, the hypothesis for the differential relation with adjustment indicators is identical: Stimuli characterized by greater ambiguity are more likely to place recipients in a catch-22, in which they are uncertain about whether and how to respond.<sup>1</sup> The research support for this hypothesis is preliminary. Mercer et al. (2011) found that a measure of microaggressions comprising microinsults and microinvalidations was more related to an index of perceived stress than was a measure of race-related stress, although they did not directly compare the microaggression measure with a measure of overt prejudice.

Nevertheless, even if MRP advocates are correct that greater stimulus ambiguity is associated with poorer mental health outcomes, such findings would lend themselves to an alternative explanation that appears to have received

scant consideration in the MRP literature (but see Crocker & Major, 1989). This rival hypothesis harkens back to the distinction between *strong* and *weak* situations (Monson & Snyder, 1977). These two broad classes of situations almost surely fall along a continuum, but for the purpose of exposition, I describe each pole of the dimension in bold relief. Strong situations, such as a funeral, are those in which the situational constraints on and expectations for behavior are pronounced; during a funeral, one is expected to behave solemnly. In contrast, weak situations, such as a trip on a large commercial airliner, are those in which the situational constraints on and expectations for behavior are unclear; as a passenger on a crowded flight, one can be gregarious or silent, cooperative or unhelpful. Most research suggests that the relations between personality traits and behavior are more pronounced in weak than in strong situations (Meyer, Dalal, & Bonaccio, 2009; see also Lissek, Pine, & Grillon, 2006), probably because the former situations allow for a fuller manifestation of personality dispositions. In contrast, the latter situations impose marked constraints on such manifestations: A funeral would be a spectacularly bad research setting for detecting individual differences in extraversion.

As advocates of projective techniques are well aware, the strong versus weak situation distinction applies not only to the expression of overt behavior in response to stimuli but also to their interpretation (“apperception”; Morgan & Murray, 1935). Presenting a video of Person A pistol-whipping Person B during a bank robbery, followed by the question “Did Person A intend to hurt Person B?”, would almost surely be an ineffective means of detecting individual differences in hostile attribution bias, as the intention to harm is unambiguous. In contrast, presenting a video of Person A’s car rear-ending Person’s B’s car on the highway (immediately after Person B had cut into Person A’s lane), followed by the same question, might well be effective.

The distinction between strong and weak situations is relevant to the MRP because many microaggression items, especially those assessing microinsults and microinvalidations, refer to relatively weak situations. As a consequence, they may allow for different interpretations colored by respondents’ personality dispositions. Hence, the literature on weak situations lends itself to a rival hypothesis for the (still provisional) finding that microaggressions are more closely linked than are indicators of overt prejudice to adverse mental health outcomes. Specifically, microaggressions may be more closely tied to mental health outcomes because they reflect weak situations, thereby increasing their contamination with NE and allied personality traits.

For example, some minority individuals might indeed take the microinsult of “You are so articulate” (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008, p. 331) as an insult, whereas others might take it as a compliment. Or, some minority individuals

might take the microinvalidation of “Where were you born?” (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008, p. 331) to imply that the questioner perceives them as foreigners in their home country, whereas others might take it to mean that the questioner is taking a sincere interest in their cultural background. In both cases, personality dispositions such as NE—especially hostile attributional bias and an enduring perception of oneself as a victim—may shape whether individuals select the malevolent or benign interpretation. In this regard, it would be ironic if the seeming construct validity of microaggression measures were in part spurious and stemmed as much from their inadvertent assessment of hostile attribution bias as from their assessment of microaggressions.

### ***Incremental validity***

Finally, a key desideratum for any new psychological measure is *incremental validity*: the extent to which it contributes meaningful information above and beyond extant measures (Meehl, 1959; Sechrest, 1963). The scientific question of the incremental validity of microaggression measures, although important in its own right, may inform policy debates concerning the allocation of resources to combat prejudice and discrimination. If microaggressions confer substantial risk for psychopathology above and beyond overtly prejudicial acts, formal efforts to combat them may be justified, with the caveat that the relation between microaggressions and psychopathology may not be directly causal. Conversely, if microaggressions contribute little or nothing to the statistical prediction of psychopathology above and beyond overtly prejudicial acts, this finding might suggest that time, energy, and effort instead be expended primarily on countering blatant forms of prejudice. Nevertheless, few investigators have examined whether microaggressions afford predictive power above and beyond overtly prejudicial statements and actions. This issue is critical for evaluating the assertion that the MRP offers a unique conceptual and statistical contribution to risk for psychological adjustment and other negative outcomes.

In what appears to be the only published investigation of the incremental validity of microaggressions, Donovan et al. (2013) used hierarchical multiple regression to examine the contribution of a measure of racial microaggressions (comprising microinsults and microinvalidations) above and beyond a measure of racial *macroaggressions* (consisting of exposure to blatantly racist statements, such as being called by the “n word”) in 187 African American undergraduate women. They found that microaggressions contributed significant unique variance above and beyond macroaggressions in the statistical prediction of concurrent anxiety, but not concurrent depression. For both outcomes, the unique statistical contribution of macroaggressions

was more pronounced relative to that of microaggressions. Nevertheless, because Donovan et al. did not report the  $R^2$  changes in the model following the entry of each variable, the magnitude of the incremental effect of microaggressions above and beyond macroaggressions, and vice versa, is unknown. Further work along the lines of Donovan et al., especially research using NE as a covariate, is warranted.

## Summary

Mono-source bias, specifically the exclusive reliance on self-report in microaggression research, is a serious limitation of the MRP, as it impedes efforts to ascertain its scientific robustness and boundary conditions. The potential contaminating influence of personality traits, especially NE, on the relation between microaggressions and adverse mental health outcomes has received scant attention (but see Ong et al., 2013, for a noteworthy preliminary effort). More broadly, the MRP has placed insufficient emphasis on the discriminant validity of microaggressions from NE and other personality traits. As a consequence, it is unknown whether the magnitudes of associations between microaggressions and these outcomes have been spuriously inflated by construct-irrelevant variance (Messick, 1995) stemming from NE and other personality traits. The well-replicated finding that microaggression measures exhibit moderate to high levels of internal consistency is actually a cause for concern, as it suggests that these indices may be contaminated by pervasive personality trait variance. The assertion that highly ambiguous microaggressions are more closely linked to detrimental mental health than are blatant instances of prejudice may be open to an alternative explanation not considered by MRP advocates. Specifically, more ambiguous microaggression items allow more room for subjective interpretation and hence greater opportunity for personality dispositions, such as NE, to influence item responses. Finally, preliminary evidence points to at least some incremental validity for microaggression measures above and beyond measures of overt prejudice, but substantially more research is needed in this regard.

## Discussion

Prejudice and discrimination remain part and parcel of the daily landscape of many minority individuals. In a recent survey by the American Psychological Association (see Welch, 2016), 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 continue 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.

The MRP has brought much-needed attention to relatively mild manifestations of prejudice that have far too often been overlooked. Moreover, the MRP has stimulated discussion regarding the potential dangers of statements and actions that have sometimes been dismissed as innocuous. In this respect, it would be an error to toss out the baby with the bathwater. Racial and cultural snubs, both intentional and unintentional, undeniably occur, and their potential impact on the mental health of minority group individuals merits further investigation. Hence, it would be unwise to call for a halt to the MRP, and that is not my intention.

At the same time, the MRP leaves a daunting number of critical scientific questions, both conceptual and methodological, unaddressed and unanswered. Furthermore, the MRP has been largely insulated from substantial bodies of well-replicated research in psychological science. As a program of research, the MRP appears to be in a relatively embryonic stage of development. Although several of its central hypotheses are plausible and worthy of further inquiry, they have yet to be subjected to adequate scientific scrutiny. In this regard, the MRP may be little different from other nascent psychological constructs that await refinement in light of additional scientific knowledge. Over time, many open concepts become more closed, as well as more theoretically elaborated, with the emergence of new data (Hempel, 1965; Meehl, 1989). Nevertheless, given the numerous unresolved questions surrounding the microaggression construct and its correlates, it behooves MRP scholars to be circumspect in advocating for the application of this fledgling concept to colleges, businesses, and other real-world settings.

The MRP also highlights the hazards of *questionable interpretive practices* (Jussim, Crawford, Anglin, Stevens, & Duarte, 2016). In contrast to questionable research practices, which bear on how psychological scientists analyze data, questionable interpretive practices bear on how psychological scientists evaluate data. Questionable interpretive practices can contribute to an undue neglect of “masked interpretations” (Jussim et al., 2016), namely, interpretations of findings that are plausible yet not considered by authors. Although much of the microaggression literature lends itself to multiple interpretations, MRP proponents have typically homed in on only those that support the views that (a) purported microaggressions reflect implicitly prejudicial statements and actions and (b) these statements and actions contribute to psychological maladjustment. MRP researchers have not sufficiently considered other interpretations, such as the possibility that certain microaggression items reflect innocuous statements or actions that do not stem from

implicit racial biases, or that other microaggression items reflect high-base-rate events (e.g., being passed over by a taxi driver for a person of a different race) that do not stem from such biases. Nor have MRP investigators accorded sufficient attention to the possibility that the statistical association between reported microaggressions and mental health derives in part from the contaminating influence of NE, especially enduring individual differences in perceived victimization and hostile attribution bias.

### ***Taking stock of the scientific status of the MRP***

As noted earlier, the MRP appears to hinge on five key premises; these premises are worth revisiting of light of the research I have reviewed.

1. Microaggressions are operationalized with sufficient clarity and consensus to afford rigorous scientific investigation.

The support for this assertion is at best murky. The boundaries of the microaggression concept are at present so amorphous that an enormous array of behaviors on the part of majority group individuals, many of them innocuous, can be subsumed under the expansive microaggression umbrella. As a consequence, the false-positive rates of current microaggression lists may be substantial and remain unknown. Moreover, some microaggressions identified in the MRP literature are largely contradictory. Because there are no interrater reliability data on whether recipients of microaggressions agree on which individuals are engaging in subtle prejudice, the extent to which microaggressions reflect consensually agreed-on acts of prejudice is also unknown.

In sum, the presumed microaggressions that are widely accepted in the MRP literature (e.g., Sue et al., 2007) may be an undetermined mix of (a) intentional statements reflecting actual prejudice, (b) well-intentioned but implicitly prejudicial statements, (c) culturally insensitive faux pas that do not reflect implicit prejudice, and (d) entirely innocuous statements that are misinterpreted by recipients. The MRP must make more concerted efforts to parse this potential heterogeneity using multimethod approaches and multivariate analyses.

2. Microaggressions are interpreted negatively by most or all minority group members.

There is no systematic research support for this hypothesis. Furthermore, it is *prima facie* 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. It also runs against the grain of contemporary transactional models

of coping, which posit that reactions to potential stressors are influenced by individual differences. Specifically, the MRP largely overlooks the possibility—indeed, the probability—that individual differences color recipients' interpretations of, and reactions to, microaggressions.

3. Microaggressions reflect implicitly prejudicial and implicitly aggressive motives.

There is no research support for this assertion. Specifically, there is no evidence that microaggressions are correlated with indicators of either prejudice or aggression in deliverers.

4. Microaggressions can be validly assessed using only respondents' subjective reports.

The mono-source bias that has characterized the MRP has hampered the field's evaluation of the robustness of the MRP and its generalizability across multiple respondents. The MRP's virtually exclusive reliance on self-reported microaggressions (but see Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015) also makes it impossible to exclude the possibility that individual differences in the subjective appraisal of microaggressions in part reflect stable individual differences in personality.

5. Microaggressions exert an adverse impact on the mental health of recipients.

There is minimal research evidence for this assertion, and the unqualified causal claims of MRP proponents are insufficiently justified. Furthermore, the MRP's nearly wholesale neglect of personality traits, especially NE (but see Ong et al., 2013, for a partial exception), renders it difficult or impossible to rule out the possibility that some of the association between microaggressions and mental health outcomes is attributable to the contaminating influence of personality. The marked ambiguity of microaggressions leaves considerable room for interpretations of and reactions to them to be shaped by recipients' personality traits. These same traits may also boost individuals' risk for adverse mental health outcomes. As it presently stands, the MRP demonstrates only that certain individuals report consistently experiencing a high frequency of prejudicial comments and actions, and that these same individuals also consistently report psychological distress.

Returning to the scientific criteria delineated toward the beginning of the article, the MRP would appear to raise more questions than answers. Specifically, my review indicates that (a) the microaggression concept remains in need of clarification with respect to its content

and boundaries; (b) the interrater agreement of microaggression measures across self and observers is unknown; (c) microaggression measures display consistent criterion-related validity with indices of mental health, although the extent to which their convergent correlations are attributable to NE and other personality traits is unknown; (d) the incremental validity of microaggression measures above and beyond measures of overt prejudice requires considerably more investigation; and (e) the MRP has yielded a number of consistently replicated findings regarding the relation between microaggressions and psychological adjustment, but these replications have not been extended to independent observers and have instead been limited to self-reported predictors and criteria. In fairness, the evidentiary weaknesses of the MRP are more matters of absence of evidence than of evidence of absence. Few of the core premises of the MRP have been subjected to adequate research scrutiny, and it is possible that some or even all of them will be corroborated in future research. To advance as a scientific endeavor, however, the MRP will need to address a large number of scientific questions that it has heretofore accorded insufficient attention.

In Table 1, I offer 18 summary recommendations that should place the MRP on firmer scientific footing and subject the core tenets of this research program to “riskier” scientific tests (Meehl, 1978). All of these suggestions flow from the research literature already discussed. Cutting across most or all of them is one overarching recommendation: The MRP must establish considerably stronger ties to well-established domains of basic and applied psychological science. The intellectual insularity of the MRP has impeded its ability to shield its research from embedded sociopolitical biases and to address rival explanations for findings. To redress this shortcoming, MRP advocates will need to forge linkages with researchers holding offsetting sociopolitical biases and whose expertise derives from different intellectual traditions within psychological science. In this respect, the methodological and conceptual limitations of the MRP may impart broader lessons for research in other politically contentious domains in social and personality psychology (see Jussim et al., 2016). The MRP, like many other contentious scientific domains, may benefit from adversarial collaborations (Koole & Lakens, 2012) between advocates and skeptics. Such collaborations could enhance the quality of MRP research by boosting the odds that investigations are planned, conducted, and analyzed by researchers with differing viewpoints. Nevertheless, forging this approach to MRP research may be easier said than done given the dearth of sociopolitical diversity in a number of domains of psychology, including social psychology (Duarte et al., 2015). Looking to the future, MRP proponents and skeptics alike will

benefit from journal and conference forums that encourage respectful exchanges of divergent perspectives on microaggressions.

The list of recommendations outlined here should also help to allay concerns that critics of the MRP are inadvertently “playing into the hands” of those who condone prejudice and discrimination. My goal is not to discourage research on microaggressions but to elevate the quality of the MRP and to ensure that the strength of scientific assertions regarding microaggressions is roughly proportional to the strength of the scientific evidence.

### ***Blaming the victim?***

Some prominent MRP proponents have responded to attacks on the microaggression concept on the grounds that critics are guilty of “blaming the victim” (e.g., Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, & Torino, 2008, p. 278). The heart of the blaming-the-victim thesis appears to be that calling into question the objective reality of some microaggressions denies the reality of racism, the devastating impact of racism on victims, or both. Framed in different terms, the concern seems to be that MRP critics have committed the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977) or even the ultimate attribution error (Pettigrew, 1979), erroneously attributing the negative reactions of minority individuals to personal defects of minority individuals or of minority races as a whole rather than to their understandable reactions to prejudice.

In evaluating the blaming-the-victim argument, one must distinguish *blame* from *cause* (Felson, 1991). To propose that certain purported microaggressions may be misinterpreted by their recipients is no way places moral blame or responsibility on them; it merely advances a testable scientific hypothesis. Furthermore, the blaming-the-victim argument carries little force in the case of the present review, because my critique of the MRP gainsays neither the existence nor the potency of overt racism, nor the undeniable truth that racism is at times manifested in insidious ways. Nor do I contend that individual differences in NE account for all of the association between microaggressions and mental health, only that they may account for part of it.

In addition, the assertion that critics are blaming the victim risks becoming a rhetorical ploy rather than a substantive scientific rebuttal. Ultimately, the onus of proof falls squarely on advocates of the MRP to demonstrate that their central assertions can bear the hefty evidentiary weight assigned to them. Moreover, these advocates must be careful not to commit fundamental attribution errors of their own, such as reflexively attributing well-meaning attempts on the part of majority individuals to learn more about foreign individuals’ background and culture of origin (“Where were you born?”) to implicit prejudice. One

**Table 1.** Eighteen Recommendations for the Microaggression Research Program

1. Provide a clearer operationalization of microaggressions, with a particular focus on which actions and statements do *not* fall under the microaggression umbrella.
2. Examine the interrater reliability of judgments of microaggressions, especially the extent to which recipients and independent observers agree on which actions and statements reflect implicitly prejudicial actions on the part of deliverers.
3. Examine the interrater reliability of implicit “messages” associated with microaggressions among minority individuals.
4. To avoid the problem of embedded political values, enlist collaborators who do not necessarily share the core assumptions of the microaggression research program, such as that subtle racism is pervasive in U.S. society.
5. Examine the statistical relations between deliverer microaggressions and indices of deliverer prejudice and aggression.
6. Abandon the term “microaggression” and substitute an alternative term that does not imply that deliverer statements and actions are necessarily (a) aggressive and (b) extremely subtle.
7. When developing microaggression measures, adopt a self-correcting, iterative approach to test construction.
8. When generating microaggression items, use focus-group members and other individuals drawn from a wide variety of ideological perspectives, including individuals who do not necessarily perceive subtle prejudice as a serious problem in U.S. society.
9. Ensure that microaggression items contain sufficient situational context to minimize ambiguity in their interpretation.
10. Ascertain the approximate base rates of events (e.g., receiving poor service at restaurants) that are referenced in many microaggression items.
11. Expand the microaggression research program to include alternative sources of assessment in addition to self-report, especially reports from independent observers.
12. Avoid strong assertions regarding the causal relation between microaggressions and adverse mental health outcomes.
13. Conduct further longitudinal studies concerning the relation between microaggressions and adverse mental health outcomes.
14. Include measures of negative emotionality, especially those that assess the perception of oneself as a victim and hostile attribution bias, in studies of microaggressions.
15. Use microaggression measures that do not confound the frequency of experience of microaggression experiences with the subjective distress associated with these experiences.
16. Report findings examining the correlations between microaggressions and adverse mental health outcomes after both controlling, and not controlling, for measures of negative emotionality.
17. Examine the behaviors and personality characteristics of microaggression deliverers as well as microaggression recipients.
18. Examine the incremental validity of microaggressions above and beyond overtly prejudicial statements and actions for statistically predicting adverse mental outcomes.

serious risk of the MRP as presently conceptualized is that it frequently attributes malign intent to individuals without sufficient scientific justification.

### ***What's in a name redux***

My literature review also raises serious questions concerning the use of the word “microaggression.” Over 45 years ago, Pierce (1970) coined this term to refer to subtle insults and indignities that can collectively create a hostile atmosphere for minority individuals. There can be little doubt that some microaggressions, especially when repeated, can foment such an atmosphere. Nevertheless, the term “microaggression” conflates the outcome of a behavior with its intent. The very idea of an unintentional act of aggression is almost certainly oxymoronic and misleading, as aggressive actions are virtually by definition intended to produce harm (e.g., Geen, 2001).

In addition, as we have discovered, there is no research evidence that microaggressions correlate with indices of either aggression or prejudice in deliverers. Further muddying the waters, some microaggressions, especially

many microassaults, are blatantly prejudicial and anything but subtle. There is no reason why the prefix “micro” should be affixed to such actions. Doing so blurs the potentially important conceptual distinction between overt and subtle prejudice, risks trivializing severe acts of prejudice, and renders it difficult to exclude the possibility that some of the association between global scores on microaggression measures and adverse outcomes is due to overt prejudice.

With these considerations in mind, a name change appears to be overdue. I propose that “microaggression” be replaced by a term that is free of its problematic conceptual and empirical baggage, especially its unsubstantiated presumption of hostile content. I further propose that microassaults and other overt forms of prejudice and discrimination be dropped from the microaggression concept. Specifically, I provisionally suggest that microaggressions instead be termed “inadvertent racial slights” to (a) highlight the unintentional nature of most or virtually all microaggressions, especially microinsults and microinvalidations (see Sue et al., 2007), and (b) shed the unmerited implication that microaggressions are



aggressive in nature and perhaps intent, a presumption that may engender unjustified hostile attributions in recipients. From there, research can proceed to identify and better understand the sources, correlates, and potential consequences of inadvertent racial slights from a multi-informant perspective, incorporating self-reports and reports of multiple observers.

### ***Pragmatic and policy implications***

Although the focus of this review has been on the scientific evidence for the MRP, it is worth briefly considering the potential hazards posed by the premature importation of the MRP into real-world contexts, such as the worlds of higher education and business. These issues bear on the potential consequences (Messick, 1995) of microaggression instruments, and the MRP more broadly, for real-world settings. As observed earlier, microaggression training programs, as well as standardized lists of microaggressions, have been widely adopted on college and university campuses across the United States (Barbash, 2015).

To be certain, these applications of the MRP are well intentioned, and it is certainly possible that they assist in prejudice reduction. Such programs also serve a potentially useful communicative function. By informing students and members of organizations that prejudice and discrimination, even when subtle, are unacceptable, they may play a constructive role in shaping societal norms concerning the need to demonstrate respect for minority individuals. These programs may also help to assure minority individuals and other victims of racial and cultural oppression that their frequently neglected voices have been heard.

These potential benefits notwithstanding, it is concerning that these training programs have yet to be subjected to controlled trials. The histories of clinical and educational psychology remind us that well-meaning but insufficiently tested interventions can sometimes be harmful (Wilson, 2011). This “law of unintended consequences” certainly holds for psychotherapy. For example, Scared Straight interventions for adolescents at risk for delinquency and critical incident stress (crisis) debriefing programs for people exposed to potentially traumatizing events have been associated with negative effect sizes in some randomized controlled trials (Lilienfeld, 2007, *in press*), although the reasons for these apparent iatrogenic effects are actively debated.

In the case of microaggression training programs, there are similarly at least some grounds for concern. On the one hand, although the corpus of systematic research on diversity training programs is preliminary (Paluck & Green, 2009), meta-analytic evidence suggests that these programs may exert small to medium beneficial effects on prejudice (Kalinowski et al., 2013). On the other hand,

attempts to reduce prejudice come with risks. At least in laboratory settings, antiprejudice campaigns that exert strong pressure on people to be nonprejudiced appear to backfire, yielding heightened levels of prejudice (Legault, Gutsell, & Inzlicht, 2011). These results, if replicable and generalizable to real-world settings, may bear implications for microaggression training programs, some of which urge recipients of microaggressions to inform deliverers that their comments are offensive (Neff, 2015), and microaggression websites, some of which urge professors to interrupt and correct students who have engaged in microaggressions toward classmates (University of Denver Center for Multicultural Excellence, 2016). If performed in a heavy-handed fashion, microaggression programs may risk engendering reactance (Brehm, 1966) in some individuals, boosting the risk of backfire effects in real-world settings.

More speculatively, a heightened attention to microaggressions may sensitize minority individuals to subtle signs of potential prejudice, leading them to become hypervigilant to trivial potential slights. Such hypersensitivity might engender confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998), predisposing minority individuals to perceive subtle signals of prejudice in their absence. In turn, these individuals may become more likely to experience negative psychological reactions following minor perceived provocations; they may also become more likely to perceive themselves as emotionally fragile. More broadly, institutional efforts to encourage individuals to attend to and identify purported microaggressions could lower the threshold for what is considered hostile or offensive (see Haslam, 2015, for a discussion of “concept creep”), thereby generating high rates of false-positive identifications of innocuous behaviors as microaggressions. If so, microaggression training programs could run the risk of exacerbating racial tensions on campuses and other organizations (Haidt & Jussim, 2016), although this conjecture awaits research scrutiny.

This potential self-reinforcing process accords broadly with Gergen’s (1973) social constructivist view of social psychology (but see Schlenker, 1974, for a critique), in which people’s awareness of the fruits of psychological research can affect their behavior, both for better and for worse. This possibility also dovetails with Hacking’s (1995a) model of “looping effects,” in which our ways of classifying human behaviors in turn influence these behaviors themselves, as well as with various versions of labeling theory, which imply that pejorative names attached to ambiguous behaviors can create self-fulfilling prophecies (Link & Phelan, 2013; but see Gove, 1979, for an alternative perspective). For example, according to Hacking, once the concept of dissociative identity disorder (DID; formerly called multiple personality disorder) took root in popular culture, it began to alter how certain people viewed themselves: Rather than perceive

themselves as merely moody, unpredictable, or confused, some of them began to conceptualize themselves as harboring multiple indwelling selves and to interpret their previously inexplicable thoughts, feelings, and actions in light of this newfound schema. Furthermore, the DID concept spawned a “semantic contagion” (Hacking, 1995b, p. 238) in which many individuals now possessed a novel vocabulary for describing and understanding themselves. Once this terminology became entrenched in the minds of laypersons, some of them began to perceive the world and themselves differently. The MRP could be fueling a comparable semantic contagion, in which statements and actions that were previously regarded as innocuous are now widely interpreted as baleful.

This sensitization hypothesis is not without precedent. Some authors have posited that the enhanced risk for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms among some trauma-exposed clients who have received crisis debriefing stems from this intervention’s prescription of the PTSD signs and symptoms that clients are likely to experience in the wake of trauma (Bootzin & Bailey, 2005). After receiving this information, clients may become more open to suggestion, in turn developing some of the very PTSD features, such as sleep difficulties, hyperarousal, and hypervigilance, discussed during the intervention (Deville, Gist, & Cotton, 2006). In one randomized controlled trial, investigators provided participants who had experienced trauma in the context of a serious physical injury or assault with a self-help pamphlet that described modal psychological reactions to the trauma; control participants received no information. Outcome data across several time points revealed nonsignificant trends for *worse* PTSD and depression outcomes in the pamphlet condition. In the case of microaggression training, MRP proponents should conduct controlled studies to determine whether workshop participants who receive information regarding the expected psychological sequelae of microaggressions later experience adverse psychological side effects in everyday life.

Based on the literature reviewed here, it seems more than prudent to call for a moratorium on microaggression training, the widespread distribution of microaggression lists on college campuses, and other practical implementations of the MRP (e.g., the insertion of microaggression questions on student course evaluations), at least until the MRP can take heed of many or most of the research recommendations listed here (see Table 1). Not only is the MRP still in a premature state of scientific development, but there is insufficient justification for concluding that the potential benefits of microaggression training programs outweigh their potential risks, including a substantial increase in the number of false-positive identifications of statements as microaggressions. To be clear,

this proposed moratorium does not extend to the MRP itself, which should continue without interruption, albeit in substantially modified form.

Finally, the MRP risks inflicting further damage to the already tarnished image of psychology in the public eye. One likely reason for the less than stellar impression of psychology as a science among many laypersons has been our field’s troubling propensity to advance premature assertions in the absence of adequate evidence (Benjamin, 1986; Lilienfeld, 2012). Indeed, the MRP has already triggered something of a counterreaction in many quarters, with numerous authors in the public sphere parodying publicized microaggression lists (e.g., World Snews, 2015), and others decrying them as psychobabble or worse (e.g., Hausam, 2015; Rosen, 2014).

As in all domains of psychological science, humility should be the watchword (McFall, 1997; see also Ioannidis, 2016). I encourage microaggression researchers to continue their scholarly inquiries while substantially tempering their assertions, especially those concerning (a) the causal association between microaggressions and adverse mental health and (b) the presumed effectiveness of microaggression intervention efforts. The MRP has generated a plethora of theoretically and socially significant questions that merit thoughtful examination in coming decades. But it is not close to being ready for widespread real-world application.

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### Note

1. Another explanation for this differential relation is attributional ambiguity (Major et al., 2003): Minority group members may at times protect their self-esteem by attributing negative feedback from a majority group person to prejudice. When such negative feedback is blatant, it can be readily attributed to prejudice; in contrast, when it is subtle, it is typically more difficult to explain away as being due to prejudice.

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