Microaggressions are generally taken to involve brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate slights and insults toward members of oppressed groups. The concept of microaggressions has become popular in the last few years in large part due to what some authors have called the “microaggression research program” or simply the “microaggression program”: efforts adopted by businesses and campuses to counteract microaggressions. Yet the concept of microaggressions along with the microaggression program have increasingly been under scrutiny, most recently by Scott O. Lilienfeld, who argues that the microaggression program is “far too underdeveloped on the conceptual and methodological fronts to warrant real-world application”; and by Jonathan Haidt, who argues that the microaggression program is “much more damaging and much less salvageable than Lilienfeld suggests,” and that campuses should “renounce [it] and discourage faculty and administrators from even using the term [microaggression].”

These criticisms are principally based on the idea that the concept of microaggression is just too wide to be useful—that is, microaggressions are “posited to comprise an extremely diverse class of slights, insults, and snubs of various sorts emanating from a diverse array of individuals” that makes it difficult to be useful. This point is not difficult to see, for according to Derald Wing Sue, the pioneer of the microaggression program, microaggressions lie in the eye of the beholder: it is up to the individual to “determine whether a microaggression has occurred.” Being asked where one was born, being complemented for one’s eloquence, and being told “As a woman, I know what you go through as a racial minority” or “You are a credit to your race” all count as instances of microaggressions, according to Sue.

In this paper, I agree with critics that the concept of microaggression as it stands is too wide to be useful for the microaggression program, but I argue that there are some microaggressions that deserve more attention, as they can amount acts that are wrongful and harmful. I maintain that understanding how microaggressions wrong and harm individuals is useful for the microaggression program. I suggest that microaggression amounts to a moral wrong when they involve demeaning beliefs about social groups, whether intentional or unintentional, and that what makes them harmful is that they can indirectly reinforce the structural disadvantages faced by members of disadvantaged groups. I conclude that the microaggression program is in desperate need of revision but not of retraction.

The term microaggression was coined in 1970 by Chester Pierce, a Harvard University psychiatrist, to denote minor but damaging “proracist” insults, put-downs, offenses, or indignities faced by African Americans. It wasn’t until 2007, however, that the concept of microaggression began to receive academic attention, particularly in psychology, when Derald Wing Sue and his coauthors published a paper on

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1 Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, Esquilin (2007) describe (racial) 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. Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities” in “Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice.” American Psychologist, 62, 4, 271-286.
2 Lilienfeld, 2017.
3 Haidt 2017.
5 Haidt 2017, 176-177.
6 Sue et al., 2007, qtd. In Lilienfeld, 156.
7 Lilienfeld 141.
8 Sue, 279.
microaggressions in a prestigious psychology journal. Sue et al. define 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.” But microaggressions no longer refer just to slights and the like against racial minorities; they now also include slights and the like against members of other historically disadvantaged groups, such as women; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered or transsexual individuals; Asian-Americans; Hispanic-Americans; Muslim-Americans; as well as individuals who are obese.

Sue et al. propose that microaggressions express messages such as that minority individuals are not true Americans, that people of color are not as intelligent as whites, that women tend not to have strong mathematical skills, or that people of color are lazy or incompetent and should work harder to get ahead. Moreover, Sue et al. maintain that whether or not a microaggression has occurred will depend on whether or not individuals interpret a verbal, nonverbal, or environmental slight, snub, or insult as a microaggression. In other words, microaggressions lie in the eyes of the beholder. This is presumably partly because microaggressions tend to be unintentional—“[p]erpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities” but the often denigrating messages they communicate are clear to the recipients of the comment or action.

Microaggressions are purported to be harmful in various ways. For instance, Sue et al. maintain that microaggressions put members of minority groups in something of a catch-22, where if they don’t call out a microaggressor they risk becoming resentful or encouraging further microaggressions, but if they do call out a microaggressor they may be accused of being overly sensitive or paranoid. Moreover, since Sue et al. seminal paper, other authors have claimed that microaggressions can be detrimental to individuals’ mental health, specifically in terms of psychological disturbances such as anxiety and depression.

Perhaps not unexpectedly, the microaggression program has faced a great deal of criticism. Some critics argue that such a heavy emphasis on microaggressions leads to unwarranted restrictions on free speech, helps create a victim culture, and worsens racial tensions. Nevertheless, that the microaggression program may have bad effects is not the most serious criticism against it. In a recent paper, Lilienfeld has argued that the microagression program is “far too underdeveloped on the conceptual and methodological fronts to warrant real-world application.” This is the main criticism of the microaggression concept: it is too wide to be useful to the microaggression program, for microaggressions are “posited to comprise an extremely diverse class of slights, insults, and snubs of various sorts emanating from a diverse array of individuals.” The worry that opponents of the microaggression program raise is that such a wide concept is unhelpful in telling us how to proceed in order to avoid being a microaggressor because almost anything can be considered a microaggression.


Microaggressions chart, Sue et al 2007.

Lukianoff, Greg and Jonathan Haidt argue that “In the name of emotional well-being, college students are increasingly demanding protection from words and ideas they don’t like” and that this is “disastrous for education—and mental health” in “The Coddling of the American Mind,” The Atlantic, September 2015 Issue.


Lukianoff and Haidt (2015).

Thomas (2008).

Haidt and Jussim (2016).

Lilienfeld 2017: 142.

10 Sue et al., 2007: 271.
13 Ibid.
14 Lukianoff, Greg and Jonathan Haidt argue that “In the name of emotional well-being, college students are increasingly demanding protection from words and ideas they don’t like” and that this is “disastrous for education—and mental health” in “The Coddling of the American Mind,” The Atlantic, September 2015 Issue. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/.
15 Lukianoff and Haidt (2015).
16 Thomas (2008).
17 Haidt and Jussim (2016).
19 Sue et al., 2007, qtd. In Lilienfeld, 156.
One way to address this worry is to examine why microaggressions horrify some of us. I think that there are at least three ways in which microaggressions can be morally problematic: when they are profoundly offensive but don’t impact negatively the life prospects of members of disadvantaged groups, when they are profoundly offensive and do impact negatively the life prospects of members of disadvantaged groups, and when they aren’t profoundly offensive—or offensive at all—but they still impact negatively the life prospects of members of disadvantaged groups. For the sake of space, in the rest of the paper I focus on microaggressions that are profoundly offensive.

Sue et al. claim that some of the negative effects of microaggressions are caused in part by the negative, denigrating messages that microaggressions convey. The idea is that hearing statements that carry insulting messages “makes the recipient likely to experience them as aggressions.” What Sue et al. seem to have in mind is that when people experience such hidden negative messages repeatedly, they are reminded of their lack of membership in a dominant group—whether that group membership is perceived by others of self-ascribed. Sue et al. offer a list of examples of comments or situations and their corresponding “hidden assumptions and messages” that includes that:

1. Clutching on to one’s purse and crossing the street at the sight of a person of color approaching conveys the messages “You are a criminal” or “You are going to steal,”
2. The overabundance of liquor stores in communities of color (!) conveys the message “People of color are deviant,” and
3. Commenting “Everyone can succeed in this society if they work hard enough” conveys the message “People of color are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder.”

Although it is difficult to see prima facie why these microaggressions would carry these denigrating messages, it’s important to note that according to Sue et al. context matters. As they explain,

When a White employer tells a prospective candidate of color “I believe the most qualified person should get the job, regardless of race” or when an employee of color is asked “How did you get your job?” the underlying message from the perspective of the recipient may be twofold: (a) People of color are not qualified, and (b) as a minority group members, you must have obtained the position through some affirmative action or quota program and not because of ability.

We can assume, then, that Sue et al. would agree that in a very different context—for instance, in a context in which it is not a person of color who is asked the question of how she got the job—such a comment would likely not be interpreted to carry denigrating messages such as “People of color are not qualified.” Still, it’s important to keep in mind that for Sue et al. whether or not a microaggression carries that message is up to the victim of the microaggression. But can microaggressions carry certain denigrating messages even without a victim’s judgment? My thesis here is that what makes microaggressions morally problematic is not that they can carry denigrating messages, but that they sometimes reflect particularly demeaning attitudes—attitudes the nature of which will be determined by our public meanings. In order to get there, however, it will be useful to start by clarifying what Sue et al. may have in mind when they say that microaggressions carry certain messages.

Philosophers of language agree that the meaning of an utterance will depend on the intention of the speaker, on the understanding of the interpreter, and on the context in which the utterance is said. What

21 Sue et al. 274.
22 Sue et al. 274.
23 Sue et al. 274.
this means is that the same utterance can have different meanings, or more than one meaning depending on the intention of the speaker, the understanding of the interpreter, and the context in which the utterance is said. For instance, suppose you are in the kitchen and your friend asks you, “Could you please give me a cup of H₂O?” You interpret the meaning of his utterance correctly and proceed to approach the sink to pour water from the tap. Now, suppose you are in a chemistry lab and your lab partner asks you, “Could you please give me a cup of H₂O?” In this context, “H₂O” still means “water,” of course, but you would be wrong to approach the sink and begin to pour water from the tap. This is because in this context, “H₂O” means “distilled water.”

In the case of microaggressions, however, it would be a mistake to say that the meaning of an utterance changes depending on the context. That is to say, it would be a mistake to say that when an employee of color is asked “How did you get the job?” the meaning of the utterance changes from “How did you get the job?” to “People of color are not qualified,” or “as a minority group members, you must have obtained the position through some affirmative action or quota program and not because of ability.” Here, what is conveyed is not a different meaning of the same utterance, but a certain attitude or value judgment that the speaker holds.

Suppose that as you are leaving the office with a couple of friends, you suddenly remember that you forgot to turn off the lights in your office, so you say to your friends “Wait, I forgot to turn off the lights!” Now, suppose that one of your friends says “What? We don’t pay for electricity!” While the meaning of your friend’s utterance may be literally that you do not pay for electricity, his exclamation conveys more than that. It also conveys that it’s fine for you to leave without going back to turn off the lights, as well as an attitude or value judgment that he holds: that unnecessarily wasting resources isn’t an issue (at least when he isn’t responsible for paying for those resources). Or, suppose someone says “Oh, he won’t know you weren’t there on time, just tell him you were!” While this person’s utterance implies that being late won’t make a difference, her attitude that leading someone to believe something false would be okay (at least in this case) is also conveyed.

The context against which actions or utterances are evaluated includes not only the conversation the actions take place within, but also, and often more saliently, the shared historical, social, and cultural meanings in which it takes place. Consider the utterance “Everyone can succeed in this society if they work hard enough.” Sue et al. claim that this comment, under certain contexts, conveys the message that “People of color are given extra unfair benefits because of their race” or that “People of color are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder.” Of course, without a context, it’s difficult to see why these messages would be conveyed. For example, suppose your five-year-old daughter comes home from school saying she doesn’t understand it, and you respond, “Everyone can succeed in this society if they work hard enough.” In this case, it would just be wrong to say that the message you convey is that “People of color are lazy and/or incompetent and need to work harder.” But imagine a situation in which a person utters the comment “Everyone can succeed in this society if they work hard enough” in the context of a conversation about blacks having higher unemployment rates than whites. In this case, it would not be unreasonable to deduce that the utterance expresses something more than a statement about hard work. For instance, it may imply that “blacks just don’t work hard enough” or that “if only blacks worked harder they would also succeed.” In either case however, it would be wrong to say that the meaning of the utterance changes because the context changes. What changes is the information that the utterance reveals. In other words, in both examples the utterance carries the meaning that hard work is important. But only in the context of a conversation about blacks’

24 Sue et al. 2007: Table 1.
higher unemployment rates does the utterance carry the attitude or value judgment that if people (who are black) don’t succeed it’s because they don’t work hard enough.\(^{25}\)

In the context in which someone utters “Everyone can succeed in this society if they work hard enough” and conveys the attitude “blacks just don’t work hard enough” or that “if only blacks worked harder they would also succeed,” it would be difficult to deny that there is something problematic about the utterance, as the utterance conveys not a neutral attitude, but one that is profoundly offensive: the belief that blacks as a group share qualities such as laziness. Context becomes important, then, because the shared history and culture of the attitude helps us determine the offensiveness of the attitude.

To see how an attitude can be offensive, it’s useful to consider Joel Feinberg’s work on offense. Feinberg classifies “offenses” among the things that are disliked or unpleasant but generally not harmful, and he interprets them in the widest possible sense, to include “offenses proper (e.g., revulsion and disgust), hurts (e.g., ‘harmless’ throbs and pangs), and ‘others’ (e.g., shame and embarrassment).”\(^{26}\) Although Feinberg’s aim is to offer an account of when it is permissible for the criminal law to punish offenses, what’s important for our purposes is to note that offenses can vary in degree. As Feinberg notes, whereas some offenses may be unpleasant and inconvenient, and often better described as nuisances, others may be so profound that they can wrong us. For example, using the term “nuisance” to describe an affront to one’s dignity underestimates the extent of the offense.\(^{27}\) Such profound offenses can wrong people even if they don’t harm them. Thus, we can say that there is also a distinction to be made between harms and wrongs, such that one can wrong an individual without harming him and, similarly, harm him without wronging him.

Affronts to one’s dignity are an example of wrongs that do not harm. Affronts to one’s dignity involve disrespectful treatment—for instance, treatment that discredits people as moral, social or political equals. In the rest of this paper, however, I want to focus on a particular kind of affront to dignity: one that occurs when an action offends an individual not only by highlighting a characteristic believed to be true of him because of his perceived group membership, but also when it takes the individual to be less than an equal. I will refer to such actions as particularly demeaning. Actions are particularly demeaning, on this account, when they involve judgments that (1) are offensive, given our shared historical and cultural meanings about group membership, and (2) take individuals to be less deserving of the respect a moral equal would deserve. While each of these conditions implies that there is something wrong with the action that reflects such a judgment, both conditions have to be met in order for an action to be particularly demeaning. This is because although the first condition alone tackles the idea that microaggressions can offend members of oppressed groups, such offense need not involve a lack of respect for individuals as moral equals, in which case it would not be particularly demeaning. Moreover, while the second condition alone involves a lack of respect, what makes it particularly demeaning is the historical and cultural meanings that make the judgment offensive.

On this account, not only verbal or nonverbal actions can demean, but so can the attitudes that verbal and nonverbal actions reflect. For example, the comment “Everyone can succeed in this society if they work hard enough” in the context of a conversation about blacks having higher unemployment rates, reflects demeaning attitudes about blacks. These attitudes are demeaning because they involve offensive beliefs that result in taking individuals as less than a moral equal. Given the history of our country, the idea that

\(^{25}\) It’s debatable that the attitude or value judgment conveyed is necessarily that “blacks just don’t work hard enough” or that “if only blacks worked harder they would also succeed.” But at the very least, the utterance reflects an attitude of unawareness of the falsity “Everyone can succeed in this society if they work hard enough” when it comes to blacks’ higher rates of unemployment.

\(^{26}\) Feinberg, *Harm to Others*, 48.

\(^{27}\) Feinberg, *Offense to Others* 25.
blacks don’t succeed because they don’t work hard enough is offensive, as blacks have historically had fewer opportunities and resources than whites. Moreover, this offensiveness involves taking individuals as less than a moral equal. Thus, the attitude is demeaning because it offends and results in treatment that involves taking individuals as less than equals, discrediting them as moral, social or political equals.

I have argued that some microaggressions are morally problematic when the attitudes they reflect or the messages they imply involves an affront to someone’s dignity, as it happens when such messages or attitudes amount to offenses that demean. I also suggested that microaggressions can do this even if both the microaggressor and the microaggressee are oblivious to such attitudes—for instance, when the context involves our shared historical, cultural meanings. If I am right that some microaggressions pick out a morally significant phenomenon, it would be a mistake to abandon the program altogether. Rather, it is imperative that we take seriously the project of clarifying our understanding of what microaggressions are wrongful (and harmful), and which microaggressions are just the result of thin-skinned individuals.

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