Theorizing a Spectrum of Aggression: Microaggressions, Creepiness, and Sexual Assault

Abstract:

Microaggressions are seemingly negligible slights that can cause significant damage to frequently targeted members of marginalized groups. Recently, Scott O. Lilienfeld challenged a key platform of the microaggression research project: what's *aggressive* about microaggressions? To answer this challenge, Derald Wing Sue (the psychologist who has spearheaded the research on microaggressions) needs to theorize a spectrum of aggression that ranges from intentional assault to unintentional microaggressions. I suggest turning to Bonnie Mann's "Creepers, Flirts, Heroes and Allies" for inspiration. Building from Mann's richer theoretical framework will allow Sue to answer Lilienfeld's objection and defend the legitimacy of the concept, 'microaggression'.

1. Introduction

You may have heard of microaggressions—in the news, in a diversity training session, or during casual conversation with colleagues—but in case you haven't, let me begin with the basics. Chester Pierce coined the term in his 1970 article, "Offensive Mechanisms," yet microaggressions remained relatively undiscussed until Derald Wing Sue's 2010 book, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, popularized the concept. Sue defined microaggressions as "the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group" (5).[i] Although each individual microaggression may seem negligible, when repeated over time they can seriously damage the target's mental and physical health (88). The perpetrator may be unaware

of the damage they are doing, but the target is well-positioned to see how their words and actions fit into a larger pattern of discrimination (54).[ii]

In the years since Sue's publication, microaggressions have sparked debate both within and beyond academia. Many universities and workplaces have begun to offer trainings on how to avoid microaggressions, but some critics have challenged the appropriateness of such measures.[iii] In a recent *Perspectives on Psychological Science* paper, Scott O. Lilienfeld suggests that the current conceptualization of microaggressions is too vague and preliminary to justify its use in training sessions (140). Among other critiques, he asks a question that strikes to the heart of the Microaggression Research Project (MRP): "Where is the aggression in microaggressions?" (148).[iv]

It's a reasonable question to ask. After all, microaggression training sessions stress the unintentional nature of these acts, and as Lilienfeld points out, most theories of aggression require intent to harm the target (147). If the harm is done unintentionally, perhaps another term would be more appropriate. Lilienfeld suggests "inadvertent racial slights" in place of "microaggression" (161), and he recommends "the somewhat ungainly term 'deliverers' in lieu of the pejorative term 'perpetrators' to avoid any connotation of intentionality or malevolence" (141). Furthermore, Lilienfeld argues that this is not merely a semantic dispute. He claims that calling the act an 'aggression' and the person who commits the act a 'perpetrator' raises the emotional stakes and encourages the target to "respond aggressively in turn" (147). Inaccurate terminology may turn a misunderstanding into a perceived attack and lead to hostility and pain on both sides. Removing the associations with aggression can ease tensions and avoid further conflicts.[v]

I take these concerns seriously. The microaggression research project needs to defend its

terminology. Since Lilienfeld's article was published so recently, Sue has not yet replied at length,[vi] but in §2, I'll use his already published work to outline the best defense that can be given for how microaggressions are currently discussed. However, Lilienfeld has a rebuttal to this line of defense. Therefore, in §3, I'll turn from the psychology literature to another source of inspiration: Bonnie Mann's response to a parallel problem in her article, "Creepers, Flirts, Heroes and Allies." She explores what unintentional creepiness has in common with more explicit threats like sexual harassment and rape. Finally, in §§4-5, I will show how Sue could adapt her solution and give an answer to Lilienfeld. The kind of aggression involved in microaggressions is the same kind of aggression involved in creepiness: microaggressions constrict the target's agency and threaten their capacity for self-definition.

2. The Best Reply, Given the Current Conceptualization of Microaggressions

In response to Lilienfeld's objections, Sue could simply reiterate a point he has made before: microaggressions exist on a spectrum and come in many different types. They range from intentional microassaults to (predominately) unintentional microinsults and microinvalidations. Microassaults are "purposeful discriminatory actions" "meant to hurt the intended victim" (29). Yelling a sexist slur or leaving a noose on a black colleague's desk demonstrate a clear intent to threaten and demean (28, 30). The other two types of microaggression are more subtle. Microinsults are "communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity" (29); microinvalidations are communications that undermine "the experiential reality of a person of color" (29). Often, these communications take the form of unintended "hidden messages" (35) that are only apparent to the target who has experienced a pattern of oppression. The black person who often receives compliments for being so "articulate" or the woman who is repeatedly

dismissed as "overly emotional" both recognize the demeaning expectations that undergird these remarks. However, part of the harmfulness of these microaggressions is that the motivations of the speaker are unclear: it's possible that the speaker intended to be insulting or invalidating, but perhaps they had no idea that they were saying something objectional (54).

Given this theoretical framework, the best way for Sue to respond to Lilienfeld would be to emphasize the microassault end of the spectrum. He could argue that since microaggressions range from intentional to unintentional, they include clearly aggressive cases, in addition to the more borderline cases that Lilienfeld objects to. As Sue says, "no guesswork is involved" (23) when judging the motivations behind microassaults. Not even skeptics like Lilienfeld would deny that microassaults are aggressive, so the term 'microaggression' is not a misleading name for the general category.

However, Lilienfeld has a quick counter to this line of response: intentional microassaults should not be called 'microaggressions' at all. As he says, "This inclusion risks trivializing overt acts of racism by labeling them as 'micro' rather than as 'macro'" (148). Leaving a noose on the black colleague's desk is a litigable offense that rises to the level of criminal intimidation. Stalking a woman while yelling slurs at her is a similarly threatening and criminal act. As Lilienfeld points out, these differences have led some psychologists to distinguish between overt microassaults and more subtle forms of microaggressions by calling microassaults '*macro*aggressions' and reserving '*micro*aggression' for microinsults and microinvalidations (148).

If Sue wants to argue that these different forms of discrimination exist on a spectrum, he has to explain what makes subtle and ambiguously intentional microinsults and microinvalidations similar to intentional and obviously harmful microassaults. In short, Sue's

reply fails to answer Lilienfeld's challenge.[vii] We are still left wondering: what's *aggressive* about unintentional microaggressions? Wouldn't it be better to use a different, less loaded, word?

Sue's current set of theoretical tools cannot be used to defend against Lilienfeld's terminological attacks. Therefore, I suggest adopting a new set of theoretical tools. As I'll argue in the next section, Bonnie Mann's paper contains a version of aggression that does not require intent to harm.

3. Turning to a Philosopher for Help

Mann does not discuss microaggressions, but she is interested in a problem that is structurally similar to the challenge that Sue faces: what does the 'creepy' behavior of the men who interact with her teenage daughters have in common with more obviously threatening acts like workplace harassment and rape? While the latter harms are taken seriously and treated as litigable offenses, creepiness has often been dismissed as a mere annoyance. Mann thinks it merits closer attention. She argues that her daughters are picking up on a legitimate threat when they name a man a 'creeper' (25). They correctly perceive his behavior as an encroachment— even if he does not intend to hurt them.

To pinpoint what makes someone creepy, Mann gives an example of unintentional creepiness, drawn from the philosophical canon: Jean-Paul Sartre's example where a man (Sartre himself?) attempts to hold the hand of a young woman in a coffee shop (25). The girl tenses up, but instead of accepting the caress or moving her hand away, she changes the subject and ignores the man's hand entirely. Sartre accuses her of 'bad faith' because she refuses to see the situation for what it is: an attempt to initiate romantic contact. Mann gives another, more feminist reading of events: the young woman did not invite the romantic contact, nor does she wish for the

friendly meeting to become a date. Her companion is being creepy.

Mann delineates what's gone wrong in this situation. First, creepers "steal your time" (26). The creeper ignores the normal give-and-take of social interactions. He doesn't pay attention to the woman's desires—most saliently, her desire to keep the interaction platonic (at least for now). Instead, he is "already in the mode of 'I-regard-you-as-fuckable' by the time you've taken your seat" (26). He objectifies her physically, but more damningly, he forces her to make an immediate decision between two options he has already predetermined. He attempts to unilaterally set the terms of their interaction and compel her to "be-in-relation to him in a field whose possibility he effectively controls" (26).[viii]

This brings us to the second, more serious harm: a creeper "annexes your subjective powers" (27). The man defines the terms of the interaction such that there is no way for the girl to attain her desired outcome or choose for herself how this interaction unfolds. She can only play a role in the narrative he's already chosen. She can accept the caress, or she can refuse; but either way, he's succeeded in turning this platonic hangout into a romantic moment. She cannot choose to let the relationship go on as it was before. No matter what she does, he is either a successful or a rejected lover, no longer a friend. She's trapped there, not wanting to give a definitive answer to the question, wishing not to have been asked at all.

The creeper isn't being aggressive, exactly. At least, he doesn't intend to harm the girl, so traditional theories of aggression wouldn't call him an aggressor. As Mann points out, however, there is something predatory in the way he relates to the girl. His whole view of her is colored by a "mood of entitlement to acquisition" (26). Drawing from the language of phenomenology, Mann calls this his "intentionality" towards the girl (26). His thoughts are directed at her in an objectifying and dehumanizing way. He views her as an object to be acquired, rather than a

subject with her own ends. Although he doesn't form conscious intentions, his "dominant intentional mood" (26) makes him feel entitled to use the girl for his own purposes, without her consent. Moreover, nothing she does can puncture his "fog of entitlement" (26). She cannot effectively resist being cast as the leading lady in his own personal drama or regain her agential status as an equal partner in the give-and-take of conversation. By viewing her with this dominant intentional mood, the creeper encroaches upon her agential capacities. She correctly identifies this imposition as a threat.[ix]

All of this is bad enough, but Mann argues that the most harmful part of these interactions is that they take place within a society that affirms the man's sense of entitlement: "What makes creepiness so *effectively* creepy is that the mood of entitlement and acquisition that characterizes creepers is backed up by and taps into a whole world of imagery, language, and material relations that echo and amplify the creeper's demands" (27). So many stories—from childhood fairytales and Disney movies to romantic comedies directed at adults—confirm the "dominant cultural narratives" of our society (27). Men are entitled to set their terms and choose their targets; women passively play the parts we have been given. The creeper restricts our movements, and society confirms that these limited roles are all that we deserve. With such messages echoing from all sides, creepers have real power to control women and undermine our agential capacities—even when they don't explicitly threaten our livelihood or our bodies.

Mann never names this power to intimidate as anything more than 'creepiness', but she makes it clear what creepiness has in common with explicitly aggressive actions like sexual harassment and rape. Although these acts vary in their harmfulness and intentionality, they are all characterized by the same mood of entitlement to acquisition. This entitlement harms the other person by forcing her to play a role in the perpetrator's chosen scenario. He is active, free,

powerful; she is reactive, restricted, violated. Whether he realizes what he is doing is not central. What matters is whether she has been non-consensually forced into a role which limits and undermines her agency. Therein lies the similarity to rape and sexual harassment: not in the conscious intentions of the perpetrator, but in the damaging and constrictive effects of his entitlement—in the social world in which both the entitlement and its effects are embedded.[x]

4. Extending the Spectrum of Aggression to Include Microaggressions

Sue's account of microaggressions already has many overlaps with Mann's discussion of aggressive creepiness. Adding the other parts of her theoretical framework will allow him to respond to Lilienfeld's objection. To show how this would work, let's go through one of Sue's examples of a microaggression: the subtle, gender-based microinsult involved in catcalling.

Imagine a case where a woman is walking past a group of businessmen who have gathered on a patio for an after-work drink.[xi] As she walks by them on the sidewalk, one of the businessmen says to her: "Smile, beautiful!" Let's suppose this man has the best of intentions. He's seen that the woman is alone, perhaps frowning while she thinks about her tasks for the day. He wants to improve her mood. He doesn't act in any traditionally aggressive ways. He doesn't yell or stalk after her. He's just trying to compliment her. Nevertheless, as Sue points out, he's also sending the hidden message: "Your body/appearance is for men's enjoyment and pleasure" (34). Women are supposed to be beautiful in public spaces. They should smile, because that's what men want them to do. Sue gives this as an example of "sexual objectification"—a form of microinsult that "dehumanizes" the target (36). Mann might call this interaction 'creepy'.

Sue goes on to list the kinds of damaging effects that microaggressions have on their

targets. As we'll see, his list has much in common with Mann's list of the harms that creepiness shares with more overt forms of sexual violence. First, Sue explains that the most immediate harm of a microaggression is the cost of processing the incident. The target is forced to spend time and energy figuring out what happened and how best to respond (54). She must ask herself, *Did the man want to compliment me, or is he leering at me? Should I smile, call him sexist, or ignore him?* As Mann would say, the perpetrator has stolen her time and forced her to be in-relation to him.

Secondly, Sue explains that the target of a microaggression often feels trapped—just like the woman in Mann's coffee shop example. The woman who has been catcalled on the street knows that if she chooses to respond, her response may backfire. Sue describes this "catch-22" (58): if the target calls-out the perpetrator for the microaggression they have committed, then the perpetrator may respond with a further microinvalidation. The man might say: "Don't be so sensitive. It was a compliment. Lots of women like to be called beautiful." Or more vulgarly: "I'm not sexist. You're just an ungrateful bitch." In these ways, the businessman can respond to the woman's attempt to call him out by undermining her confidence in her interpretive capacities. He ignores her long experience with similar situations and treats her as his epistemic inferior. As Sue points out, such microinvalidations may be even more damaging than the original microaggression (37), and the target may decide to ignore than insult, rather than risk further threats to their self-esteem (58).

To translate this catch-22 into Mann's terminology, the businessman is annexing the woman's subjective powers. She is being forced to choose between an overly narrow set of options: she can be grateful for the compliment, or she can be a bitch who ignores or misinterprets his good intentions. No matter what she does, she cannot pierce the fog of his

entitlement. He will never admit that he had no right to define the terms of their interaction in this way, or that his actions were part of a misogynistic narrative of entitlement to women's bodies and attention. He will reject her attempts to regain control of the situation. He will not allow her to be an equal partner in setting the terms of their interaction. She correctly identifies this imposition as a threat to her agency.

At this point, Sue turns from immediate harms to the type of long-term, cumulative effects that Mann gestures towards during her discussion of "what makes creepiness so *effectively* creepy" (27). Sue gives empirical evidence that the daily indignities experienced by marginalized individuals can accumulate into more serious harms: psychological harms like a sense of helplessness or low-self-esteem (105, 57) and material harms like loss of employment or increased risk of physical health problems (96, 87). When repeated across a long period of time, both microinsults and microinvalidations can have the same serious and lasting effects that microassaults have been shown to have.

However, as we've seen, merely pointing out the similarity in long-term effect is not enough to show that microinsults and microinvalidations are appropriately termed 'aggression'. As it stands, Sue is missing a crucial step: What connects the action of an individual perpetrator to the damaging long-term effects of repeated microaggressions? Thus far, Lilienfeld can argue that the bad effects of microaggressions are based on a misunderstanding "in the eye of the beholder" (143). The target is tired, stressed, and confused by the ambiguity. If that's all, then the recipient of an inadvertent racial slight could simply ask the speaker what they meant to say, or better still, assume the speaker's good intentions. Moreover, if the recipient doesn't (falsely) accuse the speaker of aggression, then they can avoid the damaging catch-22 of microinvalidations.

Now we can see why Sue needs to adopt Mann's framework. Mann's discussion of creepiness gives us reason to suppose that Lilienfeld's summary is not a complete picture of what's happening when a microaggression is committed. The target isn't just confused; they are picking up on a real threat. Like the creeper, the perpetrator is engaging in damaging and aggressive behavior.

Building from Mann's discussion of societal background, we can see that the hidden messages sent during microaggressions work differently than Sue has proposed. Catcalling doesn't just objectify or demean, it participates in a dominant cultural narrative: Men arbitrate the value of women, and women should attempt to acquire their approval. Microaggressive interactions undermine her sense of self-worth. After being constantly exposed to a lifelong pattern of oppressive narratives, she may internalize these norms—adopting the terms men have chosen for her and judging her own value by the surface beauty they find attractive. When the woman is forced into the catch-22 of being further demeaned or remaining silent, her actions in the moment are controlled, but also, her capacities for self-definition are destabilized. She is forced to play a role in the man's narrative, and the mainstream media affirms that that this limited set of possibilities is all that she deserves. Over time, she may find herself feeling obliged to smile, accept compliments with gratitude, and be so silent she forgets she once wanted to object to such treatment.

In this way, Mann's account clarifies the most threatening aspect of microaggressions— not the momentary annoyance of a single less-than-ideal interaction, but the slow corrosion of our self-definition and our capacity to choose for ourselves what to value. The catcaller may have the best of intentions, but he perpetuates misogynistic narratives that have the potential to do serious and lasting harm to the woman he 'compliments' on the street. He steals her time,

constrains her in the moment, and forces her to participate in a stereotyped social narrative that undermines her agential capacities. This behavior is similar to the power plays involved in slurs or sexual assault—more subtle, less immediately harmful, less clearly intentional—but still an aggressive attack on the target's autonomy.

5. Conclusion

With this richer theoretical background, Sue can answer Lilienfeld's question. Gender-based microinsults and microinvalidations participate in the same patriarchal structures as overt micro (or macro) assaults. Hence, they belong together on a spectrum of misogynistic aggression. The main point at issue is not intentionality, but rather aggressive encroachment on the target's autonomy.

From here, the next step would be to expand this account to include other kinds of microaggressions. Unfortunately, I lack the space to go through further examples in detail, but I believe their upshot is the same.[xii] The privileged perpetrators feel entitled to define interactions using racist, homophobic, or ableist scripts that force the target into stereotyped and constrictive roles. After long exposure to these dominant social narratives, microaggressive interactions can erode the target's capacity for self-definition. Microaggressions are an aggressive attack that the target has a right to angrily resist. *Pace* Lilienfeld, the term 'microaggression' does not escalate tensions. It accurately represents tensions that are already present.

Endnotes:

[i] The microaggressions framework could also be extended to include slights targeting disability, low socioeconomic class, and other marginalized groups.

ii For a fuller discussion of Sue's and Pierce's definitions, see McTernan's "Microaggressions, Equality, and Social Practices."

iii See, for instance, articles by Friedersdorf, Lukianoff, and Haidt in the *Atlantic* and Barbash in *the Washington Post*. Also see Rini in the *LA Times* for a response to these concerns.

iv I will not attempt to engage Lilienfeld's other critiques in this paper. Many of his concerns about the methodology of the psychological studies remain just as forceful and apt, even if he accepts my response to his more philosophically-oriented terminological challenge. Fatima's "On the Edge of Knowing" does more to answer his concerns about the lack of objective verification and quantifiable data (although she doesn't directly respond to Lilienfeld's article).

v Friedlaender has raised a similar worry, in more philosophical terms. In her recent article, "On Microaggressions," she recommends a forward-looking account of responsibility, rather than an account (like the one I will propose) based on blameworthiness, because "blaming certain individuals might violate an ought-an-implies can principle" (14).

vi Sue has published a two-page response piece in the same issue as Lilienfeld's article.

vii Perhaps this is why Sue confined himself to a short and somewhat vague reply.

viii Mann calls this "characteristic of creepers" (26), but many non-creepy interactions share this feature. Forcing someone to make an immediate decision between a narrow set of options can be innocuous or even beneficial: e.g. being confronted with the decision, "Would you like fries with that?" is—at worst—a tiny bit manipulative. As the consumer, you have the power to end this interaction whenever you wish. In the case of creepers, however, the forced decision poses more of a threat. As we'll see, there's no easy way out of these interactions. The creeper entangles you in conversation and binds you into the role he's chosen. He steals more of your time than you are willing to give. (Thanks to Amy Mullin, for helpful discussion on this point.)

[ix] Compare this creepy interaction to the seemingly parallel complaint that the man could bring against a girl who refuses to acknowledge his amorous desires: she traps him in the "friendzone." This experience has something in common with the one I've described above. He isn't unfettered in his interactions; he is denied the free play of his desires. However, it differs because he's already consented to friendship with this woman. They've been hanging out and talking. This is a relationship they already have, and they have equal power within it. He can withdraw his consent by turning down opportunities to hang out, and so can she. The tacit invitation to continue the mutually beneficial relationship is not coercive in the way that the forced, self-aggrandizing demand for romantic relations can be.

[x] Perhaps this sounds overly utilitarian for some readers, but Mann also gives a Kantian version of the wrong: treating her as "a mere use value, a means to the old professor's narcissistic, urgent ends" (26).

[xi] I use this example, rather than the more cliché construction worker, in order to avoid the implication that catcalling is a problem confined to the working class.

[xii] To give just one example: Consider the slowly building creepiness in Jordan Peele's *Get Out*. The microaggressive interactions during the garden party/auction scene prepare the viewer for the advent of overt violence in the conclusion to the film. The viewer expects violence because, like Chris, they perceive the more subtle threat posed by stereotyped and controlling questions.

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