

Threshold-Resistance: Adding a historical perspective to Hodson's (2021) observations on the "Microaggressions Pushback".

Word count: 2847 (excluding references)

“We no longer need to waste time, energy, or resources debating whether microaggressions are real or whether they cause harm.”

- Williams, 2021, p. 883

“The failure of our field to take seriously the experiences of racialized people, including the concept of microaggressions (or microtransgressions), risks putting our discipline on the wrong side of history”

- Hodson, 2021, p. 949

“The function, the very serious function of racism is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining, over and over again, your reason for being ... None of this is necessary. There will always be one more thing.”

- Toni Morrison (1975)

Over the past decade, racial microaggressions – “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273) – have received significant attention in social scientific circles (Spanierman, Clark, & Kim, 2021; West, 2019; Williams, 2019, 2021; Wong, Derthick, David, Saw, & Okazaki, 2014). Despite recent trends (Baboolal, 2020), expressions of blatant, old fashioned racism have generally become less socially acceptable over time (Crandall, Eshleman, & O’Brien, 2002; Gawronski, Peters, Brochu, & Strack, 2008). It is thus understandable that research has shifted focus to toward more subtle, but potentially more widespread, expressions of racism that remain after (or became more common because of) these changes in social norms. Over the last few decades this research focus has included topics like subtle prejudice (Meertens & Pettigrew, 1997), symbolic racism (Sears & Henry,

2003; Tarman & Sears, 2005), implicit racism (Nosek, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2007), and of course the current research on microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007; Wang, Leu, & Shoda, 2011; Williams, 2019).

In response to the wave of emerging research, some psychological scientists have advanced extremely negative assessments of the microaggressions research programme and even the very concept of microaggressions (Haidt, 2017; Lilienfeld, 2017a, 2017b; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; Thomas, 2008). There are far too many to permit a full description here. However, some elements of these criticisms are particularly relevant to this commentary: (1) *liberal political bias* – a concern that the microaggressions research program “seems to fall prey to the pitfall of embedded political values”, (Lilienfeld, 2017a, p. 147); (2) *concept creep* – the idea that racism used to refer to a real problem, but now refers to insignificant, “trivial” things (Lilienfeld, 2017a, p.162) that “lower the threshold for what is considered hostile or offensive” (Lilienfeld, 2017a, p.167); (3) *false categorization* – the concern that non-racist behavior was being reclassified as racist, or that participants “may endorse many of [the items in measures of microaggressions] without necessarily doing so out of prejudice” (Lilienfeld, 2017a, p. 146); (4) *victim mindsets* – the concern that microaggressions research desperately looks for signs of racism, even in its apparent absence or that “microaggression training is—by definition—instruction in how to detect ever- smaller specks in your neighbor’s eye” (Haidt, 2017, p. 176); and (5) *thought police* – the concern about microaggressions research leading to a tense, mistrustful atmosphere “that would stifle productive, honest debate”, where “everyone walks on eggshells”, “there is “a chilling effect on free speech”, and “students can file charges against each other—and against their professors—within minutes of any perceived offense” (Haidt, 2017, p. 177).

There have been many responses to this pushback against microaggressions research. This includes reviews that clarified and defended much of the existing microaggressions

research, pointing out flaws in the initial criticisms (e.g., Williams, 2019, 2020), new empirical work that challenged and undermined the assumptions of the critics of microaggressions (e.g., West, 2019), new empirical work that further built on and solidified the basis for microaggressions (e.g., Lui & Quezada, 2019), and new theoretical work that considered microaggressions in terms of systemic prejudice (Skinner-Dorkenoo, Sarmal, Andre, & Rogbeer, 2021) and intersectionality (Singh, Bhambhani, Skinta, & Torres-Harding, 2021). These appear, at least to some people, to be sufficient responses to the critics of microaggressions. Indeed, in this current issue, Williams (2021) asserts that “we no longer need to waste time, energy, or resources debating whether microaggressions are real or whether they cause harm.”

Hodson (2021) goes even further, identifying the pushback against microaggressions research as a phenomenon in its own right, and contextualizing it within a larger shift in social psychology. It is certainly the case that some criticisms of microaggressions may be due to concerns about the ambiguity or utility of the research program, as some have claimed (e.g., Haidt, 2017; Lilienfeld, 2017a). However, Hodson (2021) also points out that it coincides with a number of other movements. These include arguments concerning “concept creep” (p. 934), again, the idea that the definition of prejudice has become too broad and now includes things that are too trivial; “moral foundations theory” (p. 937) – the explicit inclusion of questionable foundations in moral reasoning; and “prejudice symmetry” (p. 939) an approach that ignores societal power dynamics to make the claim that there is equivalent or more prejudice against right-leaning targets (e.g., rich people) as against left-leaning targets (e.g., Black people). Hodson’s work is particularly important here. Rather than taking the microaggressions pushback at face value, he situates it in the context of these other movements in the field; the pushback against microaggressions is but another thread in the “fabric of distraction that effectively guts the field’s ability to take seriously the study of

microaggressions” (p. 944). Restricting ourselves to seeing the pushback as an isolated, face-value phenomenon would likely curtail our ability to understand or deal with it.

In this commentary I would like to go further still. Specifically, I will situate the current microaggressions pushback within a repeating historical context, thereby highlighting a pattern of similar concerns and suggesting steps to manage this pattern in the future.

To begin, it seems necessary to point out that social psychology as a discipline has had this argument, or versions of this argument, before. In the 1970’s and 1980’s Sears and colleagues (Kinder & Sears, 1981; Sears & Kinder, 1971; Sears & McConahay, 1973) proposed the existence of symbolic racism – a new, subtle form of racism that could be defined as a “blend of antiblack affect and the kind of traditional American moral values embodied in the Protestant Ethic” (Kinder & Sears, 1981, p. 416). In contemporary research, symbolic racism is generally considered a useful and uncontroversial addition to the broader knowledge about racism (Sears & Henry, 2005). However, at the time of its conception it was met with severe criticism.

Some of this criticism might sound familiar: (1) *liberal political bias* – “the symbolic racism research program politicizes political psychology” (Tetlock, 1994, p. 513), “branding people as racists who are not in fact racist, but merely conservative” (Sniderman & Tetlock, 1986a, p.182); (2) *concept creep* – “Racism used to refer to genuine prejudice . . . it is a mistake to leech away the meaning of racism” (Sniderman & Tetlock, 1986a, p.186), “Standards of evidence need to be exceptionally clear in passing such judgements” (p. 182); (3) *false categorization* – “people who oppose bussing may be wrong, but they should not, for this reason alone, be labelled racists” (Sniderman & Tetlock, 1986b, p 148); (4) *victim mindsets* – “Everyone is suspected by someone of being a racist nowadays (Sniderman, Piazza, Tetlock, & Kendrick, 1991, p. 429)”, and (5) *thought police* – “Even the peaceful life of our hypothetical neuro-psychologist can, however, be suddenly disrupted if it begins to

appear that his or her work has implications for gender differences, or interethnic or interracial differences in cognitive performance” (Tetlock, 1994, p. 514).

In another example, implicit racial bias – bias that we may be unwilling or unable to recognize – received renewed attention in the 1990’s and has generally been accepted as a useful, widely acknowledged aspect of contemporary social psychology (Nosek et al., 2007). However, at the time of its resurgence, there were a number of familiar concerns about implicit bias research: (1) *liberal political bias* – “armies of feminists, practitioners of ‘whiteness studies,’ sundry politicized deconstructionists and critical race theorists (among others) devote careers to exposing deeply buried evil” (Weissberg, 2007, p. 1); (2) *concept creep* – “is sinful thinking itself a punishable transgression? The obvious answer, at least among those prizing civil society, is that “bad thoughts” are harmless” (p. 1); (3) *false categorization* – “thus the reasonable, experience-based association of men with science is taken to be a stereotype and, implicitly, a potential obstacle for women thinking about a career in physics” (p. 3); (4) *victim mindsets* – “in the face of tranquility, some redouble their efforts to find aversion where none apparently exists” (p. 1); and (5) *thought police* – “the ability to read minds raises the specter of punishment of thought crimes” (Tetlock, Mitchell, & Anastasopoulos, 2013, p. 84) and “to suppress, let alone verify, Orwellian thought-crimes requires draconian totalitarian measures . . . an unwelcome invasion of privacy” (Weissberg, 2007, p. 1).

These comments illustrate a repeating pattern of (1) research into subtle forms of prejudice followed by (2) pushback that uses very similar, if not the same, arguments to undermine that research (and, as Hodson, 2021, p. 932, points out “strikingly little data” to accompany them). In the words of George Santayana, “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (Thompson, 2009, p. 157). Or, if references to Orwell are more

fashionable: “The cyclical movement of history was now intelligible, or appeared to be so; and if it was intelligible, then it was alterable” (Orwell, 1949, p. 217).

How, then, can we identify this intelligible pattern and thus better equip ourselves to alter it? To begin, one must acknowledge the uncontroversial point that many people in society harbor racist beliefs or sentiments that cannot be openly expressed due to egalitarian, anti-prejudice social norms (Crandall et al., 2002; Kawakami, Dunn, Karmali, & Dovidio, 2009; McConahay, Hardee, & Batts, 1981). As conservative commentator Dinesh D’Souza put it, “the topics of race and to a lesser extent gender have been taboo in our society, particularly in the universities. What people say in public is not the same as what they believe in private” (Van Boven, 2000, p. 267).

It follows that some people will find ways to express or act upon prejudice that fall below the threshold of identification as prejudice. These expressions might be widely interpreted as non-biased or, despite indicating some bias, they may nonetheless be considered too trivial or harmless to warrant attention. This, too, has been remarked several times. As Meertens and Pettigrew (1997 p. 56) pointed out, “the critical distinction between blatant and subtle forms of prejudice involves the difference between overt expression of norm-breaking views against minorities and the covert expression of socially acceptable antiminority views.” Sniderman and colleagues (1991, p. 423) acknowledged similar ideas: “the suggestion that there is a new racism – a racism that has new strength precisely because it does not appear to be racism”.

However, despite operating below the threshold indicated by prevailing social norms, these beliefs, sentiments and behaviors remain manifestations of racial bias, and (despite some ambiguity) may be recognized as such by the targets of that bias (Sue et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2011). Furthermore, these manifestations of bias may proliferate, either to fill the gap left by other expressions of bias that are no longer deemed acceptable, or in response to

new anti-bias movements. An excellent example would be the “All Lives Matter” movement, which only arose in response to the “Black Lives Matter” movement (Giorgi et al., 2020; Solomon, Kaplan, & Hancock, 2019), and has been shown to be strongly correlated with expressions of explicit modern racism ( $r = .57$ ), color-blindness ( $r = .71$ ) and narrow definitional boundaries of discrimination ( $r = .66$ ); (West, Greenland, & Van Laar, 2021). Eventually, these below-the-threshold manifestations receive increased attention in the wider media and social scientific circles, which highlights the racial bias in the previously acceptable responses.

In other words, the threshold moves.

It is important to be clear about the what that means. It does *not* mean, as many critics of microaggressions, implicit bias, and symbolic prejudice have asserted, that things which were genuinely non-prejudiced have come to be re-defined as racist (Lilienfeld, 2017a; Sniderman & Tetlock, 1986b; Weissberg, 2007). Rather, it means that *manifestations* of racism which were once likely to slip below “the threshold for what is considered hostile or offensive” (Lilienfeld, 2017a, p.167), are no longer likely to do so. Those accustomed to expressing certain manifestations of racism with ignorance and/or impunity, may feel as though racial and ethnic minorities have become “hypersensitive” (Lilienfeld, 2017a, p.162; see also West, 2019), or are searching for “ever- smaller specks in [their] neighbor’s eye” (Haidt, 2017, p. 176), but this is not the case. Instead, researchers are merely responding to new, subtle manifestations of racism that have proliferated, or switching focus to manifestations of racism that have long existed, but have been less urgent or immediate than other, more blatant forms of racism.

This phenomenon of pushback against the moving threshold (what I would describe as *threshold-resistance*) is, of course, merely a hypothesis. But it is a hypothesis worthy of consideration, one that fits the observation of the repeating pattern of research and pushback,



and one that could save us from “[wasting] time, energy, or resources” in the future (Williams, 2021, p. 883). In many ways it fulfils a similar function to the observations of Hodson (2021). It moves us away from taking the microaggressions pushback at face value, responding to it without appropriate context or awareness of similar movements. It would seem useful to empirically investigate this *threshold-resistance*, to understand its nature, its predecessors, and its consequences. Such a line of research would not only be useful for the microaggressions research program. Different regions of the world experience changes in social norms at different times. Thus, while studies in the US may be investigating microaggressions against sexual minorities (Sterzing & Gartner, 2018), studies in other parts of the world may be more interested in manifestations of anti-gay violence, or the criminalization of consensual, same-sex relationships between adults (West, 2018; West & Cowell, 2015). In both cases, though the threshold for socially acceptable behavior is quite different (West & Hewstone, 2012), we may still find that resistance to the movement of the threshold manifests in similar ways, is predicted by similar variables, and can be managed with similar interventions.

It is worth clarifying that I am not suggesting that *all* criticism of microaggressions research stem from this *threshold-resistance*. Some may be grounded in genuine ignorance of the previous findings of the field (Syed, 2021; Williams, 2020), or in useful insights concerning the limitations of the current research (Sue, 2017). Indeed, every new field of research has limitations, and it is to our benefit to recognize these limitations where they truly exist and use them to improve our methods and refine our conclusions. The hypothesis is merely that *some* of the pushback is grounded in this *threshold-resistance*, particularly the aspects that use a certain repeating pattern of argumentation: (1) *liberal political bias* (2) *concept creep* (3) *false categorization* (4) *victim mindsets* and (5) *thought police*.

It is also worth noting that many strands of research already address parts of the issue of *threshold-resistance*. This includes research on all the forms of subtle prejudice mentioned above (Nosek et al., 2007; Sears & Henry, 2005; Williams, 2021), but also research on political correctness (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Lalonde, Doan, & Patterson, 2000), research on using social norms to alter expressions of prejudice (Tankard & Paluck, 2016), and research on ways in which the rules for interpreting behaviors as prejudiced are not stable, but shift in ways that benefit the individual or the ingroup (Andreouli, Greenland, & Howarth, 2016; Durrheim, Quayle, & Dixon, 2016; Greenland, Andreouli, Augoustinos, & Taulke-Johnson, 2018). What is proposed here is the recognition of *threshold-resistance* as a specific phenomenon, one that arises at multiple moments in history, and one that impedes social psychology's progress in the recognition and reduction of racism.

Microaggressions are currently on the leading edge of research into subtle manifestations of racial (and other forms of) bias. However, this is not a permanent state of affairs. It is likely that, at some future date, microaggressions will join symbolic racism, implicit racism, and other concepts as generally uncontroversial inclusions in the wider body of social psychological knowledge. At this future time, there will almost certainly be new research on subtle expressions of racism that have not yet been identified or that have not yet received much scientific attention. It would behoove us to have a better understanding of *threshold-resistance* before these new, subtle expressions of racism become the focus of scientific research, to be prepared for the familiar pushback arguments before they arise anew. Failure to do so risks falling into the same cyclical patterns of debate and impeding scientific progress. Regardless of the specific nature of the subtle manifestation of racism, there will probably always be some version of this argument between those who believe that racial egalitarianism has gone too far (or far enough), and those who believe that the only acceptable level of racism in society is none.

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