Using Situational Judgment Tests To Study Subtle Discrimination

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Jones, Arena, Nittrouer, Alonso, and Lindsey (2017) present an expansive overview of microaggressive behaviors, with specific emphasis on the work place. Their overview includes the dimensionality of microaggressions (subtlety, formality, and intentionality), the dynamic and cyclical nature of a microaggressive culture, and the multitude of perspectives from which to view microaggressions (target, perpetrator, bystander, and ally). For any empirical study, researchers are faced with the challenge that microaggressions are subtle forms of discrimination often motivated by unconscious biases. As a result of this lack of personal insight, perpetrators and bystanders are likely to attribute microaggressive behaviors to nondiscriminatory reasons (i.e., defensive rationalizations). Furthermore, even if perpetrators and bystanders have insights into their bigotry, they are most likely socially astute enough to deny their bigotry through defensive rationalizations. Jones et al. (2017) provided many examples of microaggression research but did not directly address the methodological challenges. The purpose of the current commentary is to argue that situational judgment tests (SJTs) have great potential for the study of microaggressions within the Jones et al. (2017) framework.

SJTs are scenario-based assessments meant to simulate real-life situations where participants are prompted to choose/rate a set of response options (Weekley & Ployhart, 2006), and SJT responses have been shown to translate into actual participant behaviors (Lievens & Sackett, 2012). Beyond the extensive evidence of the validity of SJT scores, a clear strength of the SJT approach is the flexibility it affords in being molded to the specific research questions being asked. A less obvious strength in relation to studying microaggressions is that the SJT approach may cause respondents to expose bigoted tendencies that likely go undetected by other self-report methods.

Flexibility of SJTs for Studying Microaggressions

The flexibility of the SJT lies in both how it is used and how it is developed. SJT responses can be used as a predictor/independent variable. For example, Hauenstein, Van Driel, Arun, and McDonald (2014) developed a

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racism/White-privilege SJT to predict the training performance of military equal opportunity advisors (EOAs). Each scenario described defensive rationalizations to racial microaggressions and asked individuals to rate their likelihood of responding to each rationalization in one of three different ways: challenging the rationalization, ambivalence toward the rationalization, and reinforcing the rationalization. Hauenstein et al. (2014) found that the higher the self-reported intentions to challenge the defensive rationalizations of racial microaggressions described in the SJT items, the better EOA training performance was on both multiple knowledge tests and multiple measures of interpersonal sensitivity to diversity issues. Alternatively, SJT scores can also be used as a criterion/dependent variable. For example, Hauenstein et al. (2014) could have used scores on SJT to evaluate training effectiveness, thus, it is hoped, showing that after training EOAs expressed greater intentions to challenge racial microaggressions when compared with the intentions of a control group.

Another aspect of flexibility afforded by SJTs is that any social group that is potentially considered "less empowered" than another social group can be the target of microaggressions in an SJT, for example, women, people with disabilities, gay men and lesbians, and so forth. Furthermore, SJTs can be constructed so that any individual can respond (not just members of the more empowered group, e.g., racism/White-privilege scales), and the perpetrator of the microaggression can be from any social group, including perpetrators who are also members of the group targeted by the microaggressive behavior.

As to the Jones et al. (2017) framework, SJT scenarios and response options can readily be created to systematically vary subtlety, formality and intention (i.e., microaggression dimensionality), and perspectives other than the perpetrator (i.e., target, bystander, and ally). For example, the SJT scenarios below reflect differences in formality:

> *Low formality*: Your boss, a White man named Thomas, called everyone in for a project team meeting. Before the meeting started, Thomas turned to Deshaun, a Black man, and said, "Your Dashiki shirt is marvelous! The colors are so bright, and the print is so bold! I'm not sure it fits the professional image we are trying to portray, though."
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> *High formality:* Your boss, a White man named Thomas, called everyone in for a project team meeting. Before the meeting started, Thomas turned to Deshaun, a Black man, and said, "Your Dashiki shirt is marvelous! The colors are so bright, and the print is so bold!" At the next project meeting, Thomas distributed an updated version of the employee handbook and reviewed a revision that provided explicit guidance about acceptable work attire being traditional suits, jackets, and dresses.

Moral Licensing and SJT Responses

In the study of racism/White privilege, there are two dominant measurement strategies, explicit measures based on self-report attitudinal scales and the more recently developed implicit association tests (IATs) based on

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measuring response latencies. Reaction time measures based on IATs are difficult to interpret (Blanton & Jaccard, 2008), and they do not allow an examination of actual microaggressions and/or reactions to microaggressions. Another clear limitation is that social desirability responding is an obvious threat to the construct validity of explicit measures of racism/White privilege (Krysan & Couper, 2003).

As a potential counter to social desirability bias when using explicit measures, Hauenstein et al. (2014) found evidence of a "moral licensing" effect in their EOA study. Monin and Miller (2001) demonstrated that after acting in ways that established themselves as not prejudiced, individuals are more willing to self-disclose bigoted attitudes, a phenomenon they labeled as a moral licensing effect. Not surprisingly, EOAs rated their intentions to challenge defensive rationalizations of microaggressions much higher than their intentions to reinforce defensive rationalizations of microaggressions. Surprisingly though, intentions to reinforce defensive rationalizations predicted EOA training performance (high scores predicted worse training performance) better than intentions to challenge defensive rationalizations. Reinforcing intentions accounted for unique variance in training performance beyond challenging intentions, but the reverse was not true. Furthermore, standardizing intentions within each EOA respondent did not affect the results, thereby ruling out a response bias explanation that EOA trainees who rated their intentions more leniently for some reason outperformed EOAs that rated their intentions more severely. The superior predictive accuracy of intentions to reinforce suggested that providing high ratings on behavioral intentions to challenge defensive rationalizations gave EOAs the moral license to respond more honestly to the reinforcing rationalizations. Perhaps the most exciting aspect about using SJTs for the study of microaggression is the potential for a moral licensing effect to ameliorate some of the concerns about social desirability response biases.

Limitations of SJTs

The flexibility of SJTs also comes with increased development costs. Developing an item pool of scenarios and response options is more complex than developing self-report attitudinal scales. The validation process is more complex, too. Dimensionality of SJTs is not as clear cut as traditional self-report attitude measures (McDaniel & Whetzel, 2005). For example, in the aforementioned EOA study, the construct of ambivalent responses to defensive rationalizations of microaggressions did emerge in the exploratory factor analysis results. However, once an SJT is developed and validated, there is an economy of scale that is difficult to achieve using other methods for studying microaggressions, for example, observational studies or interviews.

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Conclusion

Clearly the framework provided by Jones et al. (2017) will stimulate and guide future research on microaggressions. When faced with the measurement and methodological challenges of microaggression research, researchers should consider whether SJTs can be used to create alternative ways to frame the methodology and to help produce rigorous research designs.

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A Cycle or a Ceiling? The Cumulative Effects of Subtle Discrimination Through the Lens of Performance Management

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We agree that the impact of subtle discrimination spawns from a dynamic process containing inherent cyclical elements, and we applaud the focal article's effort to provide clarity to a murky arena. More nefarious than the cycle,

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