



How Racial Microaggressions Create Hostile Spaces

Evan Auguste, University of Massachusetts Boston

In 2017, a surge of college campus protests reignited debate about the dangers of allowing insulting — and by some standards, hateful — speech aimed at minority groups to go unchecked. Pundits and politicians described it as a “war on free speech” and “the problem of political correctness.” At the center of this politically fraught dispute was the term “microaggression.” As described by psychological research, microaggressions are implicit, often unconscious insults directed at people from historically disadvantaged groups. While the term is now used to describe derogatory speech directed at people from various religious, sexual, and gender backgrounds, it was first used to describe the subtle, everyday forms of bigotry racial minority group members experience all too frequently in the United States.

For those who experience microaggressions, those who study them, and those who want to address them, these demeaning interactions demonstrate how racist assumptions have been normalized, and thus, are too frequently communicated to U.S. minority group members — even in the absence of intentional racial animosity. The concept of microaggressions is relatively new to psychology, so researchers debate about how to best understand, assess, and treat their effects. The desire to create a more strict research base for understanding microaggressions is balanced against the felt urgency to attend to what research has already documented — that these interactions can have real costs for U.S. racial and ethnic minorities.

Understanding Microaggressions

In current research, microaggressions are organized into three main types:

- **Micro-invalidations** – Communications that exclude or negate the thoughts, feelings, or experiences of people of color. Examples include: when people say they do not see color or when someone from a racial minority group is told not to be so sensitive to perceived discrimination.
- **Micro-insults** – Communications that unintentionally demean another person’s racial identity. Examples include: when people imply that someone was offered a position or acceptance solely because of affirmative action.
- **Micro-assaults** – Discriminatory name-calling, as in the use of racial epithets. This is the only intentional form of microaggression.

Microaggressions in these three categories take several other standard forms, including statements that suggest: someone is intellectually or otherwise less-than the majority group, someone is dangerous or less deserving of respect, and that someone is unnatural or foreign — as well as statements that fetishize those assumed differences. Microaggressions are often assumed to contribute to minority groups’ lack of positive representation in U.S. politics and media and have been used to describe how people can be subtly prevented from contributing professionally or academically because of their race or ethnicity.

Qualitative work has shown that daily exposure to microaggressions can create hostile spaces — where the value of racially diverse identities seems to always be on trial. People confronted by microaggressions often see them as reminders that their peers may believe they belong to a lower social class, simply because of their race. However, because these demeaning interactions often *unintentionally* affirm racist ideas — the receiver has to evaluate the interaction carefully. These passing comments can confuse and disarm the receiver while they attempt to decipher the meaning and intent of the comment. Only after deciphering the meaning of the comment do they then have to decide how to respond. Some researchers posit that even if minority group members do not respond directly to each instance, microaggressions can gradually tax racial minority group members’ coping mechanisms — at times pushing them into extreme distress.

The Psychological Side Effects

While there is a debate around the strength of microaggression research, several studies find links to microaggression exposures and mental health problems including: increases in self-reported symptoms of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. It should also be noted that the effects have been shown in black, Asian, Latinx, and other racial and ethnic minority groups across the United States.

It has been suggested that those who are impacted by microaggressions are more likely to be offended in general, however, research has found that even though many people from racial and ethnic minority groups do not find microaggressions stressful in the moment, the cumulative impacts are still linked to increases in symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. While there is still significantly more work to be done to understand microaggressions, most of the existing evidence suggests that these exposures are detrimental to members of groups that are already stigmatized.

Shifting the Conversation

Is free speech undermined when microaggressions are identified and addressed? To answer this question, the discussion must be reframed. Questions about the limitations of free speech must also ask who has been subtly — perhaps unintentionally — silenced by statements that demean, belittle, or insult a speaker's identity, family or culture? To answer this question, we must first understand the power that these implicit messages can hold. The history of racism in the United States teaches that prejudice can be a powerful force in social, political, and economic interactions, whether deliberate racial animus exists or not.

Researchers must continue to explore the clinical factors related to the specific mental health care needs of racial and ethnic minority groups. At the same time, policymakers, university administrators, and others must work to shape institutional policies and programs to help train people to see (and un-see) how people from minority groups are often viewed and discussed with disdain. These efforts will be necessary to create the kinds of inclusive spaces that can prevent and address the harm done by demeaning and derogatory speech and ensure that people from all backgrounds can contribute to the life of universities and other shared settings in American life.