

Plan of talk: explain psychology research, point to problem in psych discussion, turn to Rae Langton's model of hate speech, expand into a model of microaggressions, suggest solution and also moral duty

WHAT IS A MICROAGGRESSION?

1. Microassaults: tend to have speaker awareness/intent (e.g. a racial slur, racist joke)
2. Microinsults and Microinvalidations: seemingly negligible slights that are cumulatively very harmful to the target of repeated microaggressions; tend to lack speaker awareness/intent
3. Derald Wing Sue has compiled a list of examples (*Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, 32-34):

| Microinsult | Hidden Message |
|--------------------------------|---|
| You are a credit to your race. | People of color are not generally as intelligent as Whites. |
| Smile, beautiful. | Your appearance is for men's enjoyment. |
| That's so gay. | Gay people are weird and different. |

4. Sue has also researched the harms of microaggressions:
 - a. Time and energy required to process the event.
 - b. Difficulty of deciding how to respond, given risk of retaliation—especially if the speaker is a friend, coworker, mentor, or boss.
 - c. Possibility of sparking further microinvalidations:
 - i. Accusations of overreacting or being “too sensitive.”
 - ii. Denial of the possibility of harboring racist/sexist/homophobic sentiments.
 - d. Long-term effects:
 - i. Feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness, loss of self-esteem
 - ii. Physical health problems, limited job prospects, lowered earning potential

PROBLEM: Psychology literature offers no model of how microaggressions function and provides few recommendations for how to avoid them.

SOLUTION: By building from discussions in the hate speech literature, I offer a model that will enable us to anticipate and prevent microaggressions.

RAE LANGTON'S MODEL OF HOW HATE SPEECH FUNCTIONS:

1. Unlike an order, hate speech and pornography “implicitly *presuppose* certain facts and norms, rather than explicitly enacting them” (“Beyond Belief,” 82).
2. Donald Trump example (sorry!)
3. If the interlocutor doesn't protest, then these presuppositions become part of a set of shared assumptions that can be used for the duration of the conversation—what David Lewis calls the “conversational score” (83).
4. “Speakers invite hearers not only to join in a shared belief world, but also a shared desire world, and a shared hate world” (86).
5. Audience members can resist hate speech by explicitly rejecting racist presuppositions.

BUILDING FROM LANGTON TO A MODEL OF MICROAGGRESSIONS:

1. Langton's model can be easily applied to intentional microaggressions like microassaults.
2. With some tweaking, it can also be applied to unintentional microinsults and microinvalidations:
 - a. Conversational score "follows the rules of accommodation" (83).
 - b. Sometimes accommodation tracks speaker intention, but sometimes the speaker does not realize that their words presuppose racist/sexist/homophobic statements.
3. Facebook example: "This Alabama County Just Elected 9 Black Women to Become Judges"
 - a. First comment: "*If they're qualified*, this is great news for black girls everywhere."
 - b. Ambiguous between several possible presuppositions:
 - i. Corruption is rampant in the system and may have been a factor in any election.
 - ii. Black women tend not be intelligent or hardworking, so it's reasonable to assume that they're not qualified for the position.
 - iii. Affirmative action should not be used to decide influential positions like judgeships since it tracks race and gender instead of relevant qualifications.
 - c. Langton's technique for challenging hateful presuppositions will not be very effective, since the speaker can always fall back upon a non-bigoted explanation of her words.
 - d. The commenter reacted badly to attempts to explain: "*I'm racist? Didn't you see how positive my comment was?*" (a microinvalidation).
 - e. As Sue predicted, "*She finds it difficult to see a pattern of bias and is defended by a belief in her own morality*" (55). We need a different solution.

SPEAKER-BASED METHOD FOR PREVENTING MICROAGGRESSIONS:

1. To avoid ambiguity between racist and non-racist presuppositions, we need to be more explicit: "I'm torn. I don't usually think that judgeships should be elected positions, since the general populace isn't qualified to decide what makes a good judge. But this particular election seems like it's done something really good. I'm glad that black girls have 9 new role models. I just hope they do a good job."
 - a. Shows that her words are inspired by a general distrust of the systems, rather than a disbelief in the worthiness of black women.
 - b. Gives audience members a reason to give her the benefit of the doubt.
2. As with any new skill, avoiding microaggressions takes practice, and no matter how careful we are, sometimes we'll make mistakes.
 - a. Possibility of being too explicit: "I'm not racist, but..."
 - b. We should be humble and admit possibility that we could be racist/sexist/homophobic.
 - c. Most importantly, if someone calls us out for committing a microaggression, we should listen and hopefully learn from our mistake.
 - d. NOT "*I'm racist!?*" INSTEAD "*I'm sorry. I didn't realize that my comment contained a microaggression. I'll be more careful next time.*"

CONCLUSION:

1. Although we will never be perfect, we can see the steps required to improve.
2. Given the ease of doing better in this area and the magnitude of the harms we can avoid with these simple steps, I suggest that avoiding microaggressions should be treated as a moral duty.