

Background

Microaggressions were originally defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271).

Over the past decade, awareness of microaggressions has increased and use of the term “microaggression” has spread beyond race into many domains, including gender and sexuality (Lilienfeld, 2017). In some universities, administrators and faculty distribute lists of words and phrases that students and staff are asked to refrain from using out of concern for their presumed harmful effects (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018).

Despite the good intentions of individuals on the frontlines of the microaggression movement, research on microaggressions has not provided (a) clear operational definitions of the microaggression construct; (b) rigorous evidence for the claim that microaggressions cause psychological harm to those who perceive themselves as recipients of them; or (c) evidence that individuals agree about what types of statements are – and are not – harmful (Lilienfeld, 2017).

Our lab (alongside other labs around the country; see Bellet, Jones, & McNally, 2018) is beginning a series of studies to begin to operationalize the concept of microaggression. In this study, we aim to illustrate that a clear operationalization of the term is necessary by showing, experimentally, that priming individuals to perceive others' words as harmful leads them to perceive others' words as harmful. Thus, labeling too many things as “microaggressions” could backfire by essentially leading people, especially people who are emotionally unstable and prone to feeling victimized by others, to interpret ambiguous statements as harmful (Lilienfeld, 2017; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018).

Hypotheses

Our first hypothesis is that people who are primed to perceive statements as harmful will perceive statements as more harmful than will people who are not primed. Further, participants who are primed to perceive statements as intentionally harmful will perceive statement as more harmful than will people who are primed to perceive statements as unintentionally harmful.

Our second hypothesis is that emotional instability will be positively associated with perceiving others' words as harmful, particularly when participants have been primed with the suggestion that others say hurtful things.

Participants

Participants were 217 UWEC students (160 women, 55 men, 2 no reply) who completed the questionnaire as part of a voluntary classroom activity.

Method

The questionnaire began with the following introductory material:

“Research suggests that the typical person engages in some form of conversation, however short or long, with over 25 people each day.”

The next sentence was the manipulation. It showed up in one of three versions:

- **(Control Condition)**
“Through the course of so many interactions with strangers, friends, teachers, etc., people say or ask about all kinds of different things. How do you interpret each of the following statements/questions?”
- **(Unintentional Harm Condition)**
“Through the course of so many interactions with strangers, friends, teachers, etc., sometimes people say or ask things that they don't realize are harmful and can create a hostile environment for others.”
- **(Intentional Harm Condition)**
“Through the course of so many interactions with strangers, friends, teachers, etc., sometimes people intentionally say or ask things that are harmful and can create a hostile environment for others.”

Then participants were asked, “How do you interpret each of the following statements/questions?” Participants then rated 12 statements, 5 of which were selected as benign and 7 as ambiguous. These ratings were on a seven-point scale ranging from *Harmless* to *Neutral* to *Harmful*.

Sample benign statements (Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$):

“I can't go out tonight; I have a paper to write.”
“What do you like to watch on Netflix?”

Sample ambiguous statements (Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$):

“You should pick up running.”
“Is everything okay? You look tired.”

Participants then completed a thorough inventory of their Emotional Instability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$). Participants responded to each statement using a five-point scale ranging from *Not at all like me* to *Very much like me*. Sample items are shown below:

Self-consciousness (8 items)

- “I often feel inferior to others.”
- “I seldom feel self-conscious when I'm around people.” (rev)

Vulnerability (8 items)

- “When everything seems to be going wrong, I can still make good decisions.” (rev)
- “It's often hard for me to make up my mind.”

Alienation (3 items)

- “I am extremely suspicious; I feel exploited by others.”
- “I feel extremely unlucky; poorly treated.”

Stress Reaction (5 items)

- “I am extremely tense, nervous, or worried.”
- “I am extremely even-tempered; I am emotionally stable.” (rev)

Anxiety (8 items)

- “I am not a worrier.” (rev)
- “I often worry about things that might go wrong.”

Angry Hostility (8 items)

- “At times I fell bitter and resentful.”
- “It takes a lot to get me mad.” (rev)

Depression (8 items)

- “I tend to blame myself when anything goes wrong.”
- “Sometimes I fell completely worthless.”

Impulsiveness (8 items)

- “I have little difficulty resisting temptation.” (rev)
- “Sometimes I do things on impulse that I later regret.”

Results

Figure 1: Perceived harmfulness of ambiguous statements (top) and benign statements (bottom), as a function of prime condition.

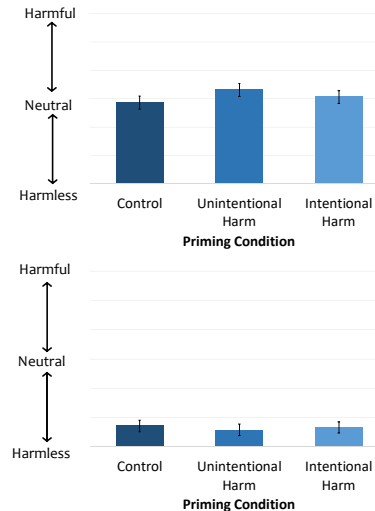


Figure 1 shows the results in relation to hypothesis 1. Participants who were primed with the idea that people say unintentionally harmful words perceived the ambiguous statements as more harmful than those who were not primed at all. However, the hypothesis was not fully supported because those who were primed with the idea that people say intentionally harmful words did not differ from those who were not primed at all.

The benign statements were designed to be control statements. As expected, the participants in the three conditions did not differ in their perceptions of the benign statements.

Table 1: Links between participants' emotional instability and the degree to which they perceive other's words as harmful.

	No Prime: Control	Prime: Unintentional Harm	Prime: Intentional Harm
Benign Statements	$r = -.15$ $p = .268$	$r = .11$ $p = .415$	$r = .10$ $p = .446$
Ambiguous Statements	$r = -.04$ $p = .763$	$r = .26^*$ $p = .047$	$r = .16$ $p = .195$

Table 1 shows the results for Hypothesis 2, which was partially supported. In the primed condition of unintentional harm, participants who were high in emotional instability perceived statements as more harmful. However, in the intentional harm condition, emotional instability was not associated with increased perceptions of harm.

Discussion

We designed this study to test the general hypothesis that priming people to perceive others' words as harmful will lead them to perceive others' words as, in fact, harmful. We found that people who were primed to perceive others' words as unintentionally harmful did perceive the ambiguous statements as more harmful than did those who were not primed. However, people who were primed to perceive others' words as unintentionally harmful did not perceive the ambiguous statements as more harmful than did those who were primed to perceive others' words as intentionally harmful.

We also documented that when participants were primed to think that others sometimes say things that are hurtful even when they do not mean to be hurtful, the individuals who were high in emotional instability perceived ambiguous statements as more harmful. This is an important finding because people who are high in emotional instability are at risk of a variety of mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression. Emotional instability could be an underlying personality disposition that places individuals at risk of both mental health concerns and perceiving others as causing them harm – especially if they are given recommendations from trusted authority figures to be wary of the many subtle ways that other people can hurt them.

Our results should be interpreted with caution because our study was not without limitations. It is possible that the participants did not carefully read the instructions, consequentially skipping over the manipulation. Reading the instructions carefully was essential for a valid test of the manipulation.

We intentionally chose statements that did not have anything to do with race, ethnicity, gender, or any other marginalized identities. By avoiding identity contexts, we may have limited the range of emotion our statements may have elicited; for example, statements such as “Can I touch your hair?” or “I didn't know lesbians could be feminine, too!” are focused on identity of the recipient, and thus, could elicit a greater range of emotions, possibly increasing one's perception of harm from those statements.

In this study, we presented the ambiguous and benign statements to participants and assessed their perception of harm. In the future, we plan to collect people's reports of circumstances in which they have said something to someone that was intentionally/unintentionally harmful as well as when someone has said something to them that they perceived as intentionally/unintentionally harmful. Then, we will ask others to rate their perceptions of these statements' level of harm. We aim to determine whether there is any consensus about which statements or types of statements are perceived as harmful.

References

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Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the many faculty who invited us into their classrooms for student participation: Dr. David Sparkman, Dr. Nicole Schultz, Dr. Pete Myers, Dr. Evan Weiher, Dr. Jason Spraitz, Dr. Kevin Klatt, Dr. Jenna Zucker, Dr. Matt Wiggins.

This research is supported by the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at UWEC. We thank LTS for printing this poster.