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., 2003, p. 27).

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 perceived 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?”

- Intentional 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.

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

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 they perceived as intentionally/unintentionally harmful. When, 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

- Bellet, B., Jones, P., & McNally, R. (2018). Trigger warning: Empirical evidence ahead. 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).