

Political Speech as a Weapon

Microaggression in a Changing Racial and Ethnic Environment

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Subtle Yet Effective: Microaggression Cues

During the 2016 Republican National Convention, legendary Notre Dame college football coach Lou Holtz offered his views on immigration at a luncheon hosted by the Republican National Coalition for Life. Holtz compared immigrants to an “invasion,” stating that immigrants coming to the United States should learn to speak English and “become us.” Holtz went on to say, “I don’t want to become you.” “I don’t want to speak your language, I don’t want to celebrate your holidays, I sure as hell don’t want to cheer for your soccer team!”¹

The use of microaggressions is not a new phenomenon in education, employment, and politics. What is new is the format in which microaggressions are communicated. In a technological era where cable television, social media, and the Internet are accessible 24/7, an avenue has been created in which perpetrators of microaggressions are free to espouse their comments with little oversight. On the other side, recipients of microaggressions are also impacted by *their* use of technology. This group is exposed to microaggression messages via the same medium that perpetrators use (i.e., cable television, social media, and the Internet). The term *racial microaggression* was introduced in 1970 and defined as everyday subtle verbal and nonverbal attacks and insults directed toward others, generally African Americans.² Racial microaggressions are systematic forms of racism used to “keep those at the racial margins in their place.”³ Microaggressions are typically unconscious views of inclusion/exclusion and superiority/inferiority negatively impacting the recipient.⁴ However, microaggressions can also be intentional due to feelings of superiority from perpetrators. Take, for example, legendary

coach Lou Holtz from the vignette above. Holtz intentionally conveyed various microaggressions against immigrants, validating his own implicit superiority by stating, "I don't want to become you. . . . I don't want to speak your language, I don't want to celebrate your holidays, I sure as hell don't want to cheer for your soccer team!"⁵ Holtz's outburst is a classic example of a microaggression, an intentional insult meant to demean others.

This chapter will introduce readers to racial and political microaggressions in politics. It also asks why we should care that microaggressions are used in politics and whether negative political rhetoric really matters. The short answer is yes, we should care. Negative political rhetoric, particularly microaggressions, matter not only in society in general but also in U.S. politics. Negative rhetoric is effective at creating an atmosphere where politicians and regular Americans citizens feel comfortable disparaging and stereotyping certain individuals and groups, which leads to an inequitable sociopolitical environment. While political microaggressions are the focus of this book, it is important to acknowledge that microaggressions are not isolated to political venues; they are part of everyday life for many recipients of microaggressions and their perpetrators. This chapter will briefly acquaint readers with microaggressions in education and employment as a way to provide a complete picture on the use of microaggressions in society.

The majority of research on racial microaggressions derives from the discipline of psychology, which provides a contextual framework for what constitutes a microaggression.⁶ Derald Wing Sue and colleagues define racial microaggressions as commonplace, intentional or unintentional, verbal and nonverbal demeaning comments that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative insults toward a person or group.⁷ Examples of microaggressions include the assumption that all Muslims are terrorists; a white man or woman crossing the street or clutching their bag or purse when they see an African American or Latino man approaching; the assumption that all Asians are good at math and science;⁸ commenting that all Latinos must have swum over (alluding to swimming across the Rio Grande River to reach the United States), and the assumption that all Latinos are of Mexican descent and undocumented. Although prior scholarship and research contends that microaggressions are often unintentional, blatant incidents of derogatory or negative insults routinely erupt, resulting in recipients being offended and perpetrators arguing that society has become too politically correct.

Perpetrators frame microaggressions in two distinct ways: first, as harmless, inoffensive, and often as nonracially motivated,⁹ and second, as intentional insults that can be racially motivated, which communicate feelings of inferiority and superiority among individuals. Research shows that overt forms of racism such as cross burnings have changed to less obvious forms of biases that often occur outside the consciousness of well-intentioned individuals.¹⁰ In his research on microaggression, Derald Wing Sue found that

white Americans are socialized to internalize their biases, stereotypes, and prejudices.¹¹ More recent research also indicates that perpetrators of microaggressions are not aware of the impact their actions have on minorities.¹² Although prior scholarship has laid a strong foundation for the notion that microaggressions are unconscious and oblivious actions, the contribution of this research puts forth the argument that microaggressions are intentional and purposeful and provide perpetrators an avenue for expressing internalized biases. Lou Holtz, a celebrated college football coach and the grandson of immigrants, used microaggressions as a release for his internalized stereotypes and prejudices against immigrants. Individuals may be more aware than we think about what they say, how they behave, and the stereotypes, biases, and prejudices they hold.

Microaggressions are used daily to insult and minimize individuals or groups; common examples of everyday microaggressions are illustrated in the following vignettes. An interracial couple invite the husband's mother to lunch after Sunday church. During the lunch, the mother-in-law makes a derogatory comment about Mexicans—the wife, who is Latina, exchanges “a look” with her husband. The mother-in-law, who is white, notices the exchange, leans over and touches the wife's hand, and says “Oh, but you're not like them.” In another instance, another interracial couple invite the husband's father to lunch. On the way to lunch, the group is visiting with each other and the father-in-law, who is white, mentions that he has a friend who is Puerto Rican. The father-in-law then states, “I call him a Mexican just to tease him . . . he gets mad at me and tells me he's Puerto Rican, not Mexican. I just laugh and say that he just had to swim farther to get here.” On the other hand, take for example, the following tweet from U.S. president Donald Trump intentionally disparaging a U.S. Congressman:

Little Adam Schiff, who is desperate to run for higher office, is one of the biggest liars and leakers in Washington, right up there with Comey, Warner, Brennan and Clapper! Adam leaves closed committee hearings to illegally leak confidential information. Must be stopped.¹³

As can be seen from these intentional comments, microaggressions are recurrent, continuous, and unending.¹⁴ As microaggressions build up, any one may represent the “last straw” that elicits an unexpected and intense reaction from the recipient.¹⁵ As such, perpetrators may not be as benign in their microaggressive behavior as previously thought. Why does this type of rhetoric matter? Because negative political rhetoric, particularly microaggression, is effective at creating a divisive environment where politicians and regular Americans citizens feel comfortable denigrating certain individuals and groups, which leads to inequitable sociopolitical policies and conditions.

What Is a Microaggression?

Most analyses on microaggressions are linked to race—the inclusion, exclusion, superiority, and inferiority of a specific group—meaning that an individual will be targeted for microaggression based on his or her race. However, this book extends the conceptualization of microaggressions to include political rhetoric.¹⁶ The framework of microaggressions has much to offer the political arena; the use of hostile political rhetoric by some elected officials and candidates is entwined with microaggressions, resulting in political polarization and an “us versus them” political and social environment. For these purposes, the theoretical framework I offer for political microaggressions is rooted in the constructs and taxonomy of psychology and extends the meaning of microaggressions to the following: political microaggressions are direct, intentional, verbal, and divisive comments that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative insults toward a person, group, or organization. Elected officials and/or candidates at various levels of government engage in negative political rhetoric to rally supporters while at the same time deliberately ostracizing a person, group, or organization. Political microaggressions target political opponents, political colleagues, voters, women, men, minorities, LGBT people, military veterans, immigrants, religious groups, and those with disabilities. Political rhetoric that marginalizes these groups conveys the message that these groups are less desirable and that it is acceptable for members of society to perceive them negatively.¹⁷

Moreover, the field of psychology identifies three forms of microaggressions that are also used in conjunction with political microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidation. These forms of microaggressions convey a deliberate or inadvertent disparaging remark toward a person or group. Political rhetoric is often infused with one or all three forms of these microaggressions. More importantly, political rhetoric based on microaggressions does influence how people act and react to hostile political rhetoric.

With this in mind, microaggressions are delineated in the following manner: *microassaults* are often-conscious, intentional biased beliefs or attitudes that are expressed primarily by a violent verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt a marginalized person or group.¹⁸ Microassaults are characterized by name-calling, persistent discriminatory actions, and avoidant behavior.¹⁹ A microassault equates to “old-fashioned racism” where the action is conscious and deliberate.²⁰ Take for example Adam W. Purinton, who on February 24, 2017, shot and killed Srinivas Kuchibhotla, a legally authorized immigrant from India, at a sports bar in Kansas City, Missouri. Witnesses indicated that Purinton shouted racial slurs and “Get out of my country” at the victim before firing and killing Kuchibhotla.²¹ In this microassault case, Purinton held a biased belief about immigrants and acted on those beliefs. More significant, Purinton expressed his bias by shouting “Get out of my country.”

A *microinsult* is often unconscious behavior or a verbal remark that is disguised as a compliment or positive statement directed toward the target group or person.²² An example of a microinsult occurred when Joe Biden, then the senator from Delaware, made a controversial comment about then senator of Illinois, Barack Obama. Biden was quoted as saying “I mean, you got the first mainstream African-American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy. I mean, that’s a storybook, man.”²³ Here the emphasis is on “first mainstream,” as if all other African Americans were not mainstream, bright, clean, or nice looking: a compliment infused with a subtle insult. Similarly, consider a news conference with President Trump and April Ryan, an African American White House correspondent and bureau chief of American Urban Radio. Ryan, in her normal duties as a White House correspondent, asked President Trump if he would be meeting with the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) to discuss his urban agenda. Trump in his response asked Ms. Ryan to set up a meeting with members of the CBC; he then further asked if the CBC were her friends. The assumption was that because Ryan is an African American, she must know the members of the CBC. In this case, Trump attempts to make a positive statement about setting up a meeting with the CBC, but his comments reveal an unconscious microinsult in which he assumes all African Americans must know each other.

Microinvalidations are often unconscious and occur outside the awareness of a perpetrator; this form of microaggression is the most damaging because verbal comments or behaviors negate or nullify the thoughts and feelings of people of color.²⁴ For instance, Asian Americans and Latinos are often perceived as being foreigners in the United States; these groups are often told, “You are not an American” or “If you don’t like it here, then go back.” There is an implied assumption that Asian Americans and Latinos have an allegiance to another country, not the United States.²⁵ The constructs of microinvalidations are rooted in race because they disagree with or do not acknowledge the realities of minorities.²⁶ Many microinvalidations stem from institutional microaggressions where people of color are confronted with microaggressions in government, education, employment,²⁷ and through political rhetoric. The negative effects from these forms of microaggressions vary by individual, group, and organization. Regardless of the form of microaggression (the damaging effects from microaggressions vary), these negative cues conveyed by political elites suggest certain social group identities are inferior and insignificant.²⁸

Microaggressions in Education and Employment Settings

While the majority of this book will focus on microaggressions in political rhetoric, it is worthwhile to examine how microaggressions play out in settings outside of politics. It is also important to illustrate that perpetrators of

microaggressions are not isolated to elected officials; microaggressive behavior is rampant in commonplace education and employment settings. Thus, the unconscious views of inclusion, exclusion, superiority, and/or inferiority that negatively affect recipients are not limited to race; the use of microaggressions is also prevalent in institutional settings such as education.²⁹ For instance, although microaggressions are often unintentional, institutions (i.e., educational settings) often create environments where microaggressions are routinely communicated to students. Educational institutions sometimes create environments that communicate negative cues to students about their academic capabilities.³⁰ Preconceived stereotypes set the stage for how students interact with educators. For example, educators with preconceived racialized assumptions about male African American middle-class students had negative assumptions regarding student intelligence.³¹ Intentional or unintentional preconceived racialized assumptions create an atmosphere in the classroom that is noninclusive to all students. Take for example, a high school advanced placement U.S. government teacher who referred to undocumented immigrants from Mexico as “wetbacks” in her lecture to students. The high school teacher may or may not be aware of her bias or preconceived attitude toward immigrants from Mexico or Latinos in general. In one statement, the high school teacher nullified the fact that not all immigrants are from Mexico or undocumented. Microaggressions, particularly by educators, matter because they create a hostile learning environment for students. One of the most influential socialization processes is between educators and their students³²—more significant, negative rhetoric in the classroom can influence how students view and interact with each other.

From the perspective of people of color, microaggressions are obvious and implied insults that convey a demeaning message.³³ To illustrate the point, consider the interaction between an American Latino college student and his college professor:

As part of my undergraduate degree plan, I was required to take a foreign language in order to graduate. Somehow, I managed to CLEP [College Level Examination Program] out of four hours of Spanish, but still needed to take one more Spanish course. Spanish was difficult for me since English was my first language, but I decided to take the second part of intro Spanish. During the course of the semester, I struggled with the grammar, and one day after class, I decided to go to my professor's office hours and ask for some help. When I got to his office there was a line of students waiting, and when I finally walked into his office and introduced myself, he just looked at me and said, “Are you Hispanic?” I just looked at him and said “Yeah.” My professor kept staring at me, and in a condescending voice said, “But you don't have an accent when you speak and how can you be struggling in my class? You just need to study harder.” I just looked at

him and said, “Don’t talk to me that way, I don’t need your help” and walked out of his office. I was so angry and to this day, it still makes my blood boil.³⁴

In the above exchange, the college professor intentionally insults the student by expressing his surprise that the student does not speak with an accent and is struggling with the course. The professor had a preconceived stereotype about Latino students, which illustrates how his disparaging remarks still impact the student. The microinvalidation is occurring outside the awareness of the professor and is the most damaging because verbal comments or behaviors negate the student. This is another example of why microaggressions matter in education. A hostile environment was created marginalizing and ostracizing the student.

Student-to-student microaggressions are also prevalent in academic spaces. Microaggressions between students create a hostile climate for the student who is attacked. Take this account from a female graduate student at a major university in the Southwest. She provides this account of her personal experience with a male colleague over graduate stipends.

Bill and I, both first-year graduate students, were catching up on homework in the graduate lab when Bill asked me if I had received my stipend award letter for the upcoming school year. Bill tells me that he has received his letter and has been denied funding. I was concerned about my funding status, so I stepped out of the grad lab to check my student mailbox in the department office. Upon reading my letter, I realized I had been funded for the next school year, so I went back to the lab. Bill was anxious to learn what my funding status was, and he asked me if I was awarded funding. For a minute, I thought about whether or not I should be honest with Bill about my funding. I decided to let him know I was awarded a stipend.

Bill was in shock that I had been awarded a stipend and he says to me “The only reason you received funding is because you are the token female and minority in the first-year cohort.” In disbelief over what I had just heard, I asked Bill if he was serious and if he truly believed my funding was because of my gender and ethnicity. Bill responded, “Yes, I’m the work mule for everyone to step on just because I’m white.” I then decided to confront Bill about his comments and asked him if he thought grades had anything to do with students getting funding. Bill, caught completely off guard by the question, says “But, my grades are better than yours.” At this point, I knew my grades were higher than Bill’s and asked him to reveal his grades. As we compared grades, Bill was shocked to learn that my grades were much better than his and he said, “I didn’t think you were smarter than me.” I simply said, “Well, I am” and turned my back to Bill and continued working on my homework.³⁵

Microinvalidations are often unconscious and occur outside the awareness of a perpetrator—this brief account reveals that it never occurred to Bill that graduate funding was based on grades and not gender or race.³⁶ Instead, Bill was sure his microaggressive preconceived stereotypic assumptions of minority female students as “tokens” was the only reason he had not received funding.³⁷ As demographics continue to change in the United States, diversity in education will also continue to increase. Thus, the use of microaggressions in educational settings has the potential to increase stress in already stressful environments, leaving underrepresented students to deal with the insult, anger, and feelings of isolation.

Microaggressions are not limited in their reach. Microinsults, microassaults, and microinvalidation attacks can manifest in multiple settings. Microaggressions are also prevalent in the workforce.³⁸ Because microaggressions are brief, commonplace verbal, behavioral, and environmental insults, they are often ambiguous and subtle; thus, individuals may perceive microaggressions in the workforce differently depending on the contextual environment.³⁹ Internalized biases and stereotypes about certain groups can lead to inflated views about one’s superiority and the inferiority of others.⁴⁰ In some work environments, evaluations used to measure and manage performance can often disguise unintentional microaggressions. For example, employees of color, certain genders, and those with disabilities often receive feedback such as “Everyone can succeed in this company, if they work hard enough” or “I believe the most qualified person should get the job.”⁴¹ Comments such as these send a message that some groups are lazy or incompetent and that some employees are given an unfair advantage because of their group identification.

Because microaggression cues are often unintentional, perpetrators are often unaware that their comments are off-putting and insulting. Take for instance, the exchange between a financial service manager and a member of her staff. In this exchange, the manager is speaking with one of her staff members who is a native of a country outside the United States. In the exchange, the manager, who is standing over the employee, states in a loud voice: “What language are you speaking? Is that even English?” At this organization, employees work in cubicles with very low walls, and thus other employees can hear and see the interaction between the two individuals. The employee whose language skills are being questioned is visibly uncomfortable, and her face turns red from embarrassment. Moreover, other employees who are witnessing the exchange are also uncomfortable with what the manager has said. After several more comments about the employee’s language skills, the manager walks away from the area, leaving the witnesses deflated, embarrassed, and angry. The employee who bore the brunt of the exchange is also embarrassed and comments to her coworker, “Why is she so mean?” Throughout this exchange, the manager was unaware that she had exhibited

classic signs of microaggressions and microinvalidations toward underrepresented minority employees.

Although overt, denigrating remarks are often seen as harmless, inoffensive, and nonracially motivated, they create negative and hostile environments for the affected employees.⁴² Moreover, overt racial microaggressions often take place between supervisors and trainees. Recent research by Madonna G. Constantine and Derald Wing Sue on cross-racial supervisory relationships between white supervisors and African American doctoral students in counseling and clinical psychology programs found numerous microaggression offenses directed at African Americans.⁴³ The cross-racial supervisory study found that white supervisors in clinical settings often made stereotypic assumptions about African American clients and their trainees. Several trainees reported that their supervisor made comments such as “You shouldn’t expect a lot of African American clients” and “I know that black people sometimes have a different time orientation and think it’s okay to be late for stuff, but I don’t want this to turn into some kind of cultural thing. Just get here on time.”⁴⁴ Because microaggressions are cumulative, the damaging effects from microaggressions vary from continued stereotypic views to cues that suggest certain social group identities are less worthy.⁴⁵ Internalized biases and stereotypes about certain groups can lead to negative working conditions for recipients of microaggressions.

Without doubt, microaggressions are present in various public and private settings. Although some microaggressions occur outside the consciousness of some perpetrators, there are numerous other hostile behaviors or verbal comments that purposely occur with the intent of marginalizing certain individuals or groups. As such, microaggressions in education and in the workplace create polarizing conditions where recipients have little to no power. Recipients are devalued and remain isolated because institutional microaggressions are difficult to explain and prove.⁴⁶

Up to this point, the taxonomy on microaggression has been defined and its prevalence illustrated in education and employment settings. With this foundation of what microaggressions are and how contextual factors matter, the remainder of the book will discuss the role of political microaggressions and their role in cuing supporters while denigrating others, and how microaggressions intersect with other issues, creating a polarizing economic, political, and social environment.

Political Environment

In most instances perpetrators of microaggressions are unaware that they have spoken or acted in a demeaning manner.⁴⁷ However, in today’s political climate these subtle, hidden messages are no longer subtle; this research argues that some comments are now direct, intentional hostile attacks.