

Language Perceptions and Identity:
How to host a conversation about linguistic microaggressions

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Linguistic microaggressions have been identified as creating hostile learning environments on university campuses. Solutions for dealing with linguistic microaggressions often focus on the hearer. In this paper, we report on a gathering of 65 faculty, staff and students to discuss microaggressions as a model of how a diverse group can gather to address cultural problems in the community. We report on how to structure such a group to best address the problems of linguistic microaggressions from the perspective of both speakers and hearers. Instructors can apply this model of group discussion to classroom activities, and faculty developers can apply this model to faculty and staff awareness building sessions.

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Linguistic microaggressions are often defined by the hearer's interpretation, not the speaker's intent. Microaggressions, in general, are a form of unintended discrimination (Sue, Capdilupo, and Bucceri, 2007). Given this essential miscommunication, what is the best way to respond to perceived linguistic microaggressions that fosters better communication rather than insult and retribution? Universities are concerned with this question as multi-cultural institutions that seek to provide a safe place to explore new ideas and new approaches to social issues. Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff and Sriken (2014) reported a survey study that suggests that microaggressions in school strongly affect students' feelings of self-worth. Therefore, it is important for universities to find constructive, sustainable ways to address the problem of linguistic microaggressions both in classrooms and in faculty and staff awareness building workshops.

When we consider "college teaching", we usually think of a professor and students. However, teaching in university and college contexts includes teaching, or creating learning experiences, for faculty and staff as well. Many institutions of higher education are concerned with how to offer professional development opportunities for faculty and staff to explore issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. A simple solution is an online professional development course to raise awareness. In this discussion, we discuss a different approach to faculty and staff professional development: structured community conversations.

Similar to the model of Young, Anderson, and Stewart (2014), this paper reports on a conversation at our university where 65 people convened to discuss how to deal with linguistic

microaggressions during a conference on equity and inclusion. Young et al. reported on the conversations of participants in cultural competence workshops and focused on categorizing hierarchical microaggressions in the university environment. In our model of this kind of discussion, community members not only categorized microaggressions, but then they offered strategies for addressing them. As members of a multi-cultural education-oriented community, faculty and staff have a vested interest in addressing linguistic microaggression in a mindful, deliberate, and compassionate way. We also have an educational commitment to share these concerns and solutions with each other. This group's conversation could suggest one way to realize a professional development opportunity about linguistic microaggressions in a multi-cultural community. This model of community conversations from multiple perspectives as a "teachable moment" can be used in classrooms as well as faculty development workshops to facilitate awareness of this important element of classroom and workplace environments.

Background

The personal and cultural invalidation of microaggressions has been well documented in the academic literature. Gómez (2015) suggests that microaggressions are the most egregious contributors to the unhealthy work environment for people of color. She writes, "Consequently, microaggressions may be increasingly prevalent as a way for White Americans, particularly those who are privileged beyond or in addition to race, to perpetrate racism without having to take personal responsibility for their intentional or unintentional roles in inequality..." (p.123). According to the accounts of African American university community members, confronting microaggressions is not a favored strategy. In the university setting, Salazar (2009) documents the coping strategies of faculty of color in American universities when faced with racial microaggressions in relationships and institutional policies. In Salazar's catalog of coping

strategies, personal safeguarding through distancing oneself, bolstering personal confidence and identity, and maintaining support networks were nominated by the participants. Butler-Byrd (2010) reviews microaggressions from her point of view as an African American supervisor in the university setting. She promotes explicit dialog to help students identify their personal biases that might result in microaggressions. Butler-Byrd echoes Salazar's participants' coping strategies of self-care and maintaining supportive social networks. Similarly, Grossman and Porche (2014) report that participants in a survey study of STEM students described coping through social network support and focusing on person goals rather than the negativity of the microaggressions. In contrast, Orelus (2013) presents the challenges of participating in university life as exhausting and marginalizing for a person of color. He asserts that his construction of personal support networks is insufficient given the institutionalized racism of the university culture.

In addition to the documentation of microaggressions in the lives of African American community members, Latinos and members of the Lesbian/ Gay/ Bisexual/ Transgender/ Questioning (LGBTQ) community also discuss the challenges of living with microaggressions. Huynh (2012) describes how Latino and Asian American adolescents suffer from the ambiguity of interpreting linguistic microaggressions. The stress of living with a constant barrage of perceived invalidations causes depression and anxiety that may influence these young people's development. In Huynh's survey study, participants reported invalidations of their identity through emphasis on differences, denial of racial reality, and treatment as inferiors. Huynh suggests that faculty, staff, and students all need to become aware of how psychologically stressful microaggressions are, even if these microaggressions are unknowingly committed. However, this very subtlety of microaggressions makes them difficult to address.

Less subtle would be the sexual orientation microaggressions that have been well documented on university campuses. Woodford, Howell, Kulick and Silverschanz (2013) document the usage of the phrase, “That’s so gay,” among heterosexual male undergraduates. Woodford et al. argue that this heterosexist phrase is a microaggression because it has become incorporated into common parlance. In a survey study of undergraduates, Woodford et al. found that students who associated more with LGBTQ peers used the phrase less often than those who did not associate with that community. Thus, community networks and communication seem to be positive influences on unreflective use of microaggressive language.

While the academic literature discusses how the recipients of microaggressions are negatively affected by linguistic microaggressions, the popular culture literature describes a different current of thought on linguistic microaggressions which hinges on the problem of intent. The question of intention is important because if the speaker intends to slight the hearer, this is explicit bigotry. If speakers are unaware of their biases, their perceived social status as an insider may give them power to seem to invoke a categorical identity for the hearer. In every case, the situation is complicated by who says what, to whom, and where. The message hearers receive is conditioned by context through what they hear speakers say, and the perceived covert message they interpret from the utterance. In the classic study of Jones and Harris (1967), these researchers describe “fundamental attribution error”. They conclude that, “correspondence in attributing underlying attitudes to account for expressed opinions is high when the opinions are unexpected and expressed in a context of free choice” (p.23). In the case of linguistic microaggressions, this means that the hearer may attribute the speaker’s personal biases to what the speaker says before considering situational factors. This difficulty of attributing bias or situation to a comment contributes to the ambiguity of linguistic microaggressions, which

increases the stress of the interaction for the hearer, and when confronted, the speaker. Berry and Frederickson (2015) assert that fundamental attribution error contributes to oppression, and propose that the answer to this problem is education and training for people to better understand the complexity of what influences what they say and hear.

Popular literature writers, such as authors for the *The Huffington Post*, *Everyday Feminism*, and *The New York Times* have weighed in on linguistic microaggressions and emphasized the difficulties of applying the concept in the world beyond academic research due to the “unintended” or “unconscious” part of the speaker. The hearer has to decide if what he or she has heard is a result of fundamental attribution error, unconscious privilege, or outright bigotry. For example, Kerr (2014) in *The Huffington Post*, acknowledges that microaggressions can make a person feel uncomfortable, but she focuses her article on how to deal with microaggressions. The principal advice is for the person who perceives the microaggression and how to constructively move past it without taking any self-harm in the process.

Similarly, Khan (2015), in *Everyday Feminism* also acknowledges that the comments of microaggressions “sneak into our minds and out our mouths without us being completely aware.” In her article, “Six ways to respond to sexist microaggressions in everyday conversation,” she also focuses on what the hearer should do, generally promoting the hearer to educate the speaker about the difficulty of the linguistic microaggression rather than provoke a fight at each instance. Nonetheless, she also notes, “Just like you are not a full-time educator, you are not required to intervene at every microaggression you hear.” Again, it is the hearer of the microaggression who must figure out how to deal with the situation, whether it be to take action or choose to let it go.

Vega (2014), in *The New York Times*, outlines the social challenges suggested by Kerr (2014) and Khan (2015) by acknowledging the problems of linguistic microaggressions but also

why Khan and Kerr would be so focused on the hearer and not the speaker of the microaggressions. Vega writes, “What is less clear is how much is truly aggressive and how much is pretty micro – whether the issues raised are a useful way of bringing to light often elusive slights in a world where overt prejudice is seldom tolerated, or a new form of divisive hypersensitivity, in which casual remarks are blown out of proportion.” McWhorter, in *Time*, weighs in by simplifying the definition to focus not on the aggressiveness or the micro-ness of the utterance. He writes, “Let’s call it microaggression when people belittle us on the basis of stereotypes.” In this definition, the essence of a microaggression is the reduction of identity to a stereotype. The popular question is not whether linguistic microaggressions exist or not, or whether they are hurtful, but what to do about them in a way that is helpful to both the speaker and the hearer. The community conversation described in this paper is one answer to this call for education and training.

In order to understand how the larger public understood linguistic microaggressions, we looked to the website, <http://www.microaggressions.com>. On this site, contributors from anywhere can offer personal examples of microaggressions. In the entries that offered specific quotes, we coded the contributions as of January 15, 2014 according to grounded theory to understand what the contributors perceived to be linguistic microaggressions (Bernard and Ryan, (2010). We coded quotes from the site’s examples in the following themes: identity, majority resentment, bad jokes, judgement by a stranger, and reactions of blame. For example, a comment on identity is, “There’s fighting, for you boys, and romance, for you girls,” uttered by a teacher introducing *Les Miserables* to the class, thus defining the gender identity characteristics for the students. Expressions of majority resentment included comments such as, “I like you; you’re cool. But some others, you know, why do they have to shove it in our face?” uttered by a person

who was cisgender to a person who was a lesbian, thus complaining about having to deal with other people who were gay. Several comments nominated by people on this site were explicitly explained as jokes in poor taste, such as asking a woman attending a women’s college, “Are you majoring in cooking and cleaning?” and then being offended that the hearer did not hear the utterance to be a funny joke. Another theme in the comments seemed to be judgements uttered by strangers such as when a stranger asks a woman who is white with a daughter who is black, “Is she yours?” Finally, there were entries on the site that seemed to be reactions of blame such as a person who practices Christianity speaking to a person who practices Hinduism, “I don’t get it. How do you believe something that’s so wrong?” It would appear that the majority of the linguistic microaggressions included on the site, as of this date, were microaggressions where the speaker took power to define the hearer’s identity (see figure 1).

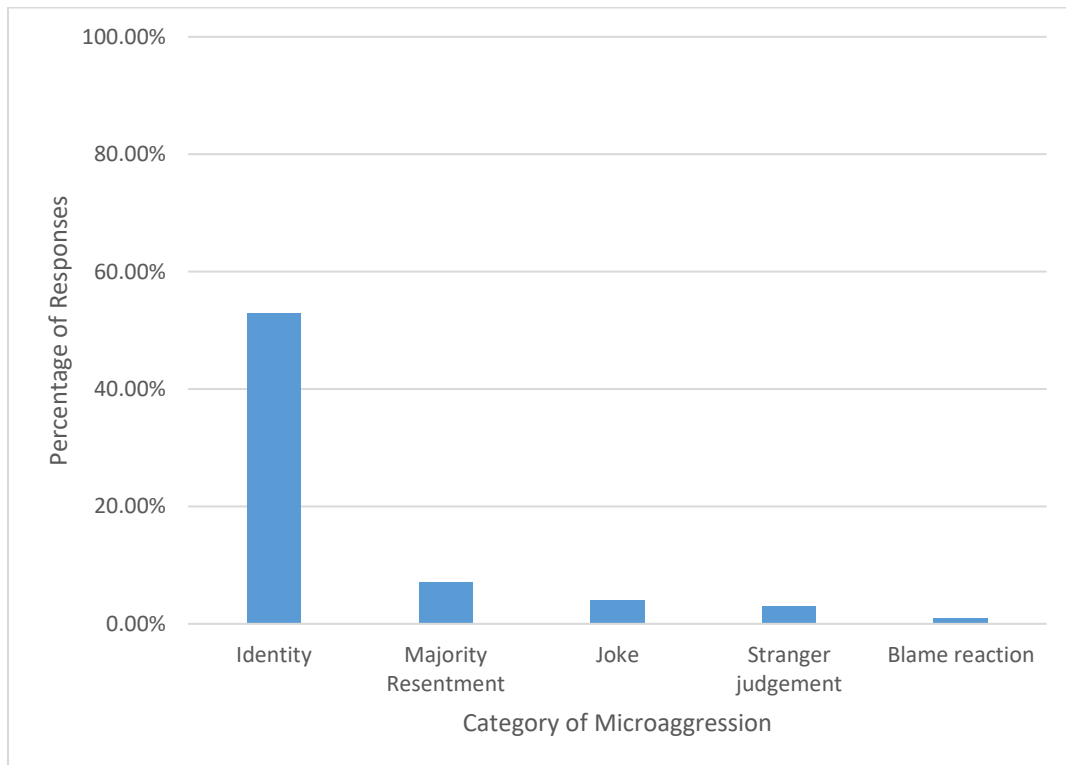


Figure 1. Linguistic Microaggressions from <http://www.microaggressions.com> as of January 15, 2014. Percentages of categories represented by entries to the website, N=282.

On this website, contributors most often represented linguistic microaggressions as one person defining another person's identity based on external features, often with the implication that the speaker had the power define the addressee. Given this strong bias towards definition of another's identity via linguistic microaggressions, we were interested to see if this pattern was duplicated in the perceptions of the participants in our community conversation.

Context

Our university is a large, Midwestern, research university, which includes two open access regional campuses. To explore, educate, and debrief in our university community, and as part of our university's diversity and inclusion conference, we offered an hour long community conversation about linguistic microaggression. Sixty five people chose to attend this conversation. The facilitators introduced the concept of linguistic microaggression and briefly situated it in the academic and popular discourse. Participants broke into small groups, and first outlined microaggressions that they had heard and then translated each one into the implied message. After debriefing this exercise, participants formulated advice for both speakers and hearers of microaggressions. Each group of participants was a mix of ethnicities and genders as well as a mix of faculty, staff, and graduate students. There were no homogeneous groups.

Participant Responses

Definitions

The participants in this conversation formed several groups of four to six people and began the conversation with personal stories of linguistic microaggressions. Once each person in the group has shared a personal experience, the group then listed the microaggressions and what the covert meaning was for each statement. These lists of microaggressions overwhelmingly defined linguistic microaggressions as expropriation of personal identity, often resulting in the

hearer feeling boxed into a stereotype. The groups collectively nominated 49 linguistic microaggressions, and all but one dealt with identity, such as, “I’m more black than you,” “You throw like a girl,” and “Keep up old man.” All of the interpretations of the microaggressions were where the hearer interpreted the utterance as an assertion of their inferiority. However, these microaggressions were not always a majority ethnicity speaker to a minority ethnicity speaker. For example, “You talk like a White girl,” uttered by a person who is Black to another person who is Black was interpreted to mean, “You talk like a northerner, so you think you’re better than me.” Clearly, to this group, linguistic microaggressions were less about one group asserting power over another, but rather one individual asserting power over another.

The group agreed that intention was a difficult addition to interpretation. Where one group nominated, “You have an accent. Where are you from?” to be a microaggression interpreted as “You are slow and uneducated based on how you talk,” another group asserted that this was a common friendly icebreaker indicating curiosity about the other person. Another comment that caused complication in the conversation was, “You look nice today.” Some in the group nominated this as a microaggression because it was interpreted to imply that the person normally does not look nice. Nevertheless, others disagreed, asserting that this was a common compliment, not with the intent to note that the person does not normally look nice, but that the person is particularly dressed up and looks especially nice. The groups agreed that this debate about intent made the problem of microaggressions particularly fraught.

Advice to speakers and hearers

As a way to seek community solutions to the problem of linguistic microaggressions, after identifying microaggressions, the groups brainstormed advice for speakers and hearers. The advice of the groups for speakers and hearers overlap. This community of people recommended

enhanced personal awareness in multi-cultural groups for both speaker and hearer. The common advice offered for those who both speak in a way that offends the hearer and for the hearer of the hurtful comments is to be aware of the fact that beliefs and understandings may not be shared and to check personal biases that might exacerbate the communication difficulty. Overall, this community group recommended basic empathy for each other, to “put yourself in their shoes.” While this might be advice that is difficult for less multiculturally experienced people to realize, it seems to be the foundation of being able to apply the further advice that the groups recommended.

For hearers, this community group’s advice was consistent with the perspectives offered in the popular literature. This community group of participants were people who had extensive experience in multicultural interactions, and their comfort with negotiation was reflected in their advice. For people who hear linguistic microaggressions, the advice did not include confrontation and escalation, rather, they recommended engaging in constructive dialog to educate or help the speaker be more aware. Nevertheless, a certain weariness with the constant requirement to empathize and educate people who are covertly insulting was indicated in the advice to “pick your battles”, walk away, and forgive.

In both the academic and popular literature, the focus is on the hearer of the linguistic microaggressions. This community group also offered advice for speakers. Rather than condemning speakers of linguistic microaggressions for their ignorance or cruelty, this community group took seriously the potential that the speaker may not know how hurtful he or she is being. It is possible that this perspective may have been enhanced by the heterogeneous composition of the groups and the introduction to the topic through personal experiences. A strength of this approach to community problem solving is the safe space to hear multiple

perspectives in a personal context. In this way, multicultural friction can be more effectively addressed when both sides of the difficulty take responsibility for the solutions, rather than leaving the solution to one party. The advice for the speakers included heightened awareness of the multicultural situation as well as thoughtfulness in choosing what to say. Specifically for speakers, the community group recommended some very thoughtful advice. They recommended, “If you aren’t sure, ask.” This addresses the very real problem of a person not being familiar with all the potential pitfalls of language. Also, this group recommended, “Discuss it with your ‘safe folks.’” This recommendation to confront the challenges directly, in a safe place, is a recommendation of taking linguistic microaggressions out of silence and into discussion, which this community group asserted, is the only way to really address the problem.

Key in the conversations was the personal experience as a way to start a conversation about more general solutions. By creating a safe place to discuss the problem of linguistic microaggressions in a multicultural environment, participants were able to embrace multiple perspectives and help each other come to practical and empathic solutions.

In the academic and popular understanding of the dynamics of how micro-aggressions occur, the sticking point seems to be the intention of the speaker; in most cases of microaggressions, it is not intended to offend or insult. The origin of the micro-aggression can be the result of a miscommunication or misinterpretation. The role of academia in studying microaggressions has been one of providing strategies in how to deal with them, from a recipient’s point of view. This approach expressed by academia reveals a unidirectional view of micro-aggressions that does not necessarily invite or promote dialogue and conversation concerning how linguistic microaggressions come about. People do create support networks that provide comfort, but in most cases, the aggressed often share that they feel confused and isolated

with a one plan strategy of merely being consoled by others after the fact. Confronting the offending speaker can be seen as a risky strategy. This limited set of strategies translates to protection without dialogue, thus guiding people to assume that others might be hurtful on purpose and that the only options are to dare to confront them or mostly accept the microaggressions. These strategies provide little support for understanding how these micro-aggressions surface, leaving no accountability for the speaker since the focus is mainly in how the receiver deals with it. As a consequence, these strategies seem to continue to perpetuate micro-aggressions due to the fact that the aggressors might not even know that this is part of their discourse. Offending speakers might believe that their remarks are acceptable in popular culture out of plain ignorance and lack of multiculturalism, or even inherited behaviors that have never been questioned.

The conversations held in our university's diversity and inclusion conversation became a safe space where these exchanges could be held. Based on what the participants shared, as part of understanding and dealing with micro-aggressions, a constructive dialogue came about resulting in advice and strategies for both speakers and hearers involved in these dynamics. After reviewing the different statements made by the speakers, the community expressed a sense of personal responsibility towards personal biases as key to recognizing a comment that could become a microaggression. The overall advice was to start with checking personal biases, since most times speakers might be unaware that what they are uttering can be offensive, hurtful, or uninformed, due to a lack of multicultural interactions. The different groups agreed that asking, not assuming, is a better strategy. From these discussions, we believe that discussion about linguistic microaggressions in a safe space, with a trustworthy group, can provide more insight into the complexity of linguistic microaggressions. These conversations can lead to providing

perspectives that can generate a sense of empathy and awareness for the speaker. As a later consequence, this can help transform the microaggressor into a person who can slowly transition to a more open-minded, accepting, and culturally aware individual.

When looking at the advice recommended for the hearer, recommendations go beyond just feeling bad and walking away to engaging the speaker constructively, or emphasizing how these words made the person feel. This group seemed to highlight empathy as the first point of departure. The next step then is providing non-threatening responses and helping the speaker be aware that what was said was difficult for the hearer. This strategy means having a conversation to create awareness but not a confrontation of the speaker. When tension is high, the group did recommend avoiding being triggered and thinking carefully if engaging is necessary, and just moving on, if the ability of the speaker to have a conversation might be unclear. In this case, there still is a sense of responsibility for the hearer, but at least there are more options than just taking the aggression from the speaker as always a one-way interaction.

The Community Conversation Model

The principle of this community conversation model is mutual engagement in defining the problem and recommending solutions.

1. Form groups of four to five people.
2. Each person tells a story of when they felt they experienced a linguistic microaggression.
3. The group lists the microaggressions and what the implied messages are.
4. The groups creates advice for both the speaker and the hearer for how to deal with linguistic microaggressions.

In this model, the conversation begins with personal narratives as a way of creating a supportive common experience. Deconstructing the microaggressions for their implicit meaning can help build knowledge of how hearers interpret what they feel is commentary on their identity. This deconstruction can help participants understand linguistic microaggressions better. Finally, creating advice for both speaker and hearer helps participants look more closely at multiple strategies for addressing linguistic microaggressions.

Conclusion

Stewart (2014), a blogger dedicated to the study of understanding and dealing with micro-aggressions, recommends moving away “from ethnocentricity to cosmopolitan perspectives” as a strategy for opening up the world of the speaker to be exposed to a cultural dialogue that expands from a limited cultural view and interaction with the world. These types of dialogs can be seen as invitations to explore one’s own culture from another culture’s point of view, not just to see what could be misguided perceptions of other cultures, but also of your own culture. This is a clear message of cultural empathy. These ideas bridge easily into what emerged from our community conversations’ conclusions in how to handle micro-aggressions: check personal biases, stop and think before talking, and be empathetic to both speaker and hearer. These realizations shifted the advice for dealing with linguistic microaggressions from a unidirectional point of view to a multidirectional invitation to dialogue in order to have empathy and create understanding, appreciation, and respect for each other. As a learning activity, this structured conversation was more effective for community building and awareness than an online diversity training course or a lecture presentation on equity and inclusion. Because diversity, equity, and inclusion are community issues, it seems effective to learn about these issues together, in a community context.

Finally, in any space where discomfort for what is different seems to be prevailing, either in classrooms or in workplaces, this community conversation model gives a constructive strategy for how to approach linguistic micro-aggressions before they turn into a discourse of discrimination. It seems, from this approach to community conversation, that dialogue in linguistic microaggressions will be more productive than being directive about how people have to behave. One of the most important and encouraging pieces of advice that can be taken from this community exploration is that all community members must be stakeholders in actively seeking solutions to the addressing the difficulties of micro-aggressions in order to develop a more culturally empathetic and accepting environment in our university communities.

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