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Commentary

Exposing the Woke Lie Called Microaggressions for What It Is

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In the commentary “Exposing the Woke Lie Called Microaggressions for What It Is,” the author argues against the validity of the concept of microaggressions. The author contends that the notion places an impossible demand on people to attend to a vast number of perceptual details in social interactions due to inherent cognitive limitations. The commentary critiques the idea that subtle behaviors should be labeled as aggressions given typical lack of harmful intent. The author further states that taking offense at microaggressions allows claiming undeserved victimhood and making unreasonable demands of others. Overall, the commentary makes the case that the microaggression concept divides people and should be ended.

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“When you bring a misogynistic, white supremacist men’s rights activist to campus in the name of “dialogue” and “the other side,” you are not only causing actual mental, social, psychological, and physical harm to students, but you are also – paying – for the continued dispersal of violent ideologies that kill our black and brown (trans) femme sisters. ... Know, you are dipping your hands in their blood...” (Wood, 2018, p. 223)

In woke speak, the mere presence of a “symbol” of uncomfortable thought, or worse, the expression of that thought to a “marginalized person,” is a microaggression. (See the list of microaggression research articles below.) Microaggressions are said to cause psychological harm and to be the beginnings of a slippery slope to actual violent physical harm. Wikipedia defines them: “Microaggression is a term used for brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative attitudes toward stigmatized or culturally marginalized groups.”

Notice that in the definition, no microaggression is deemed to occur when brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities are perceived by those not of a stigmatized or culturally marginalized group. Notice also that intent is not required and that the microaggression perceiver is ascribing a hostile, derogatory, or negative attitude to the transmitter. Thus, if one is a member of a stigmatized or culturally marginalized group and something leads you to feel “dissed,” a microaggression can be said to have occurred. Somehow, society must protect members of these groups from having to perceive brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities. How nice for them, and how sad for all the rest of us.

That said, the issues raised by the concept of microaggressions are issues that society as a whole does need to be aware of. We do not need to make a common habit of using historical references, disrespectful language, or cultural examples that we know are reasonably likely to cause another in our midst to feel disrespected. The key variable here is the word “know.” Programs that help raise awareness of how people from other groups see, hear, perceive, or get cued by “normal discourse” items are of great value. They create the possibility of a more welcoming common ground. However, it must also be emphasized that the mere existence of such programs does not

create an assumption that such social awareness is well-established throughout the population. Many will simply not know. Others will commit not microaggressions but real aggressions. If one does know that language, symbols, etc., are likely to offend and then chooses to deliberately use them regardless, such intentional acts are real aggression and should be dealt with accordingly. There is no excuse for intentionally setting out to cause another harm – physical, psychological, or emotional.

Intentionally using “triggering” language, discourse, symbols, etc., gets falsely labeled as microaggressions. The use of the label is an example of deliberate *real* aggression. Those who choose to ascribe that label are unwilling to extend to the accused any possibility of unintentionality or perhaps a conflict between two value systems. Instead, there is an ugly label attached: “microaggression.” The demands that the definition and use of the term microaggression place upon all of us are literally impossible for us to meet. Impossible demands are null and void. Holding people to a standard that cannot be met is simply abusive. Microaggressions as a concept are a lie. The constant repetition of that lie does not make it true.

How We Treat Others

Humans have limited cognitive abilities. Since the days of George Miller’s 1956 paper “The Magic Number Seven Plus or Minus Two,” folk wisdom has held that our minds are poor at holding and dealing with more than seven unrelated items simultaneously. More contemporary research (Cowan, 2015) strongly suggests that the correct number is more likely five. Either number poses a cognitive problem for our minds: we do not live in a world where five or seven unrelated variables are sufficient to describe the totality of what we are dealing with at any given instant. We live in a complex world for which we are ill-equipped, as we cannot process cognitively beyond these limits. We are generally stuck with the natural material we were given (thus barring some exogenous computational resource to extend the number upwards from seven) and must cope with the complex world through the lenses these 5 to 7 variables provide. We have no access to the total or the whole. Instead, we only have access to aspects – aspects restricted to what the lenses provide.

“What we do is we add observations (what some might call evidence) that we collect through our existence in the stream of our experience, and we build understandings, testing them in a process of confirmation

and enrichment. If, after a bit, we find ourselves facing observations that we cannot account for, we handle them in one of several ways: we ignore them (are blind to them, a process sometimes known as denial); we dismiss them as anomalies; we find a way of changing the observation so that it fits what we expect, or we have to change our explanation (a constant object) – a process that gets harder the more we have invested in it, or have built on it, as we find reflected in the progressive difficulty of changing our concepts.” (Ranulph Glanville, 2006)

These lenses act to change our very notion of the world itself. Glanville notes that we are very attached to the concepts in which we have invested energy, time, and attention. When we perceive the world as coherent, as holding together and making sense, we can assume our situation and get on with things. The lenses reduce the world to something we are capable of attending to. This kind of reduction applies to the information we process about the world and how we interact with others.

Interactions are information-intensive. Given our cognitive limitations, we can only attend to a small percentage of the perceptual aspects of the multitude of interactions that fill our days. That which we do not attend to, we cannot control. The notion of microaggressions demands that we do what we cannot – attend to a virtually infinite amount of perceptual information with severely limited cognitive equipment. It just cannot be done.

The summary of this line of reasoning is: when someone “A” charges that another “B” has committed a microaggression, what they are demanding is that B makes a careful consideration of A’s perspectives, beliefs, and context while dealing with A. We can only do that for a very limited number of other people. For those outside of this limited group to make such a demand is abusive. Worse is when A demands B but is simultaneously unwilling to expend effort to understand B’s perspectives, beliefs, and context. The one-sidedness of the assumptions (A matters, but B does not) is as offensive as the demand that B focuses on A when A is not part of B’s inner circle of family and friends.

Social psychology, anthropology, and sociology have vast bodies of research regarding different manners by which we interact with others and the number of people with whom we can conduct such interactions. Figure 1 below illustrates a simplified view of this research:



Figure 1. Whom We Deal With and How

“The world is not divided into different groups of objects but rather into different groups of relationships. ... The world thus appears as a complicated tissue of events, in which connections of different kinds alternate or overlap or combine and thereby determine the texture of the whole.”
(Heisenberg, 1959)

Figure 1 distinguishes among four different groups: our trusted intimates, committed friends and family, the associates, colleagues, and others whom we label as “friends” (so-called), and everyone else. These groups have very different sizes and are treated by each of us rather differently – a requirement for us to cope based on the cognitive limits described above. Three kinds of interactions are listed:

- The golden rule: We all are familiar with this one, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”
- The platinum rule: a revision to the golden rule: “Do unto others as they would have done unto themselves.”
- Treating others as objects: our interactions are “transactional”; others are a means for us to get what we are after – if we expect repeated interactions, better “behavior” is more likely.

With our trusted intimates (those with whom we share nearly unlimited amounts of information), we are invested enough to have the platinum rule as the default. We can engage in this heavy information load with 5-7 people.

With our committed friends (those with whom we share lesser amounts of information than with our trusted intimates), we alternate on a contextual basis between

the golden rule and the platinum rule. When we attend to the context of an interaction, we sometimes shift our mindset to our best understanding of what that friend desires. When rushed or preoccupied, we instead default to the golden rule. We can engage in this kind of information load with roughly 15 people.

We have a broader group of associates, colleagues, and people with whom we use the label “friend” (but with whom our interactions are much less information-loaded than with committed friends or trusted intimates). The psychologist Robin Dunbar (1992, 1993) has done significant work regarding our abilities to interact with this group – which he describes as limited to roughly 150 people (the “Dunbar number”). He calls this the “suggested cognitive limit to the number of people with whom one can maintain stable social relationships,” and thus numbers larger than this generally require more restrictive rules, laws, and enforced norms to maintain a stable, cohesive group. Our default with this group is to make use of the golden rule. Members of this group take offense when they are “taken for granted,” and the golden rule is neglected.

Finally, there is everyone else. We all interact with hundreds, if not thousands, of people each year. We simply lack the cognitive equipment to attend to them as much more than an object that is some component of an interaction or a transaction. How we treat those “others” is modified by the extent to which we believe there will be repeated interactions with that person or with the category they represent in our minds. (For example, we say hello to certain categories of people, nod at others, and do not react to many more. Some of us have a general rule about tipping service people – e.g., in restaurants – while others of us differentiate by the individual person. Many of us will leave a holiday tip for the garbage collector we have never met.) This “belief about repeated interactions” is encoded in the word respect. “Spect” means to view. “Re” means again. Thus, respect is predicated on the belief that the person will be seen again. It is a sad truth in modern society that many of us fail to treat the ubiquitous others around us respectfully.

The illustration in Figure 1 is thus of what we CAN do – asking for any of us to elevate the status of people in one group to a more “respected” group is a demand for effort, which we may or may not have the capacity for at any given moment.

How “Transgressions” Are Perceived

None of us are perfect, and our cognitive limitations may take hold when we are overloaded – regardless of an interaction with someone in any of our “respected” groups. Transgressions occur – whereby we fail to extend the “correct” or “expected” rule to the other person, or where we give the other person the perception that they have been shifted to a lesser “respected” group. These transgressions are illustrated in Figure 2 below.

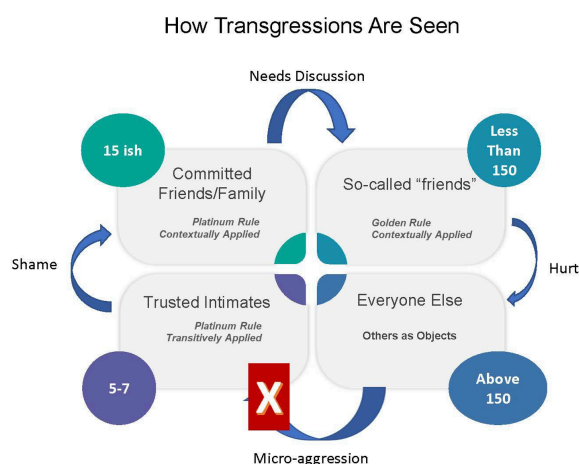


Figure 2. How Transgressions Are Perceived

The key distinction shown in Figure 2 lies at the bottom of the illustration. What the woke describe as a “microaggression” is a demand that a person (supposedly of a non-stigmatized nor marginalized group) treat someone who normally would be an “everyone else” as if they were a trusted intimate. The demand by which microaggressions are avoided is for the non-aggressor to apply the platinum rule to the supposed otherwise “victim.” This is an IMPOSSIBLE demand. It places all responsibility and agency on the hypothetical aggressor/non-aggressor despite the impossible cognitive overload such a demand would impose. It ignores all agency on the part of the “victim,” who can choose to be upset by this “violation” or to ignore it. Microaggressions, as defined (if one removes the requirement for membership in a stigmatized or marginalized group), are a NORMAL part of everyday experience for ALL of us.

“Knowledge is not a matter of getting reality right... but rather a matter of acquiring

habits of action for coping with reality.”
(Rorty, 1991)

What the woke define as a microaggression is, in reality, an alternative coping strategy. Instead of accepting agency and responsibility for the normal slights that occur when dealing with more than 150 people, the woke want to shift that responsibility onto “the other.” The new coping strategy is to complain, proclaim victimhood, and then demand that “still others” redress the supposed “harm.” It is, in short, emotional blackmail or extortion.

This is further shown in Figure 3, which identifies which party to a transgression is “expected” to work to fix it.

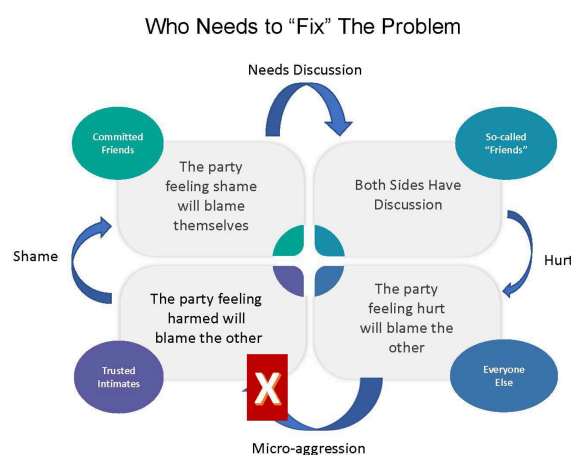


Figure 3. Assigning Responsibility

By contrast, the rest of the transgressions shown in Figures 2 and 3 work in the manner one might expect. When a trusted intimate perceives themselves treated as something less *and chooses to attend to that perception*, there is a perception of shame. When a committed friend perceives there has been a taken-for-grantedness to an interaction *and chooses to attend to that perception*, there is usually a desire for a discussion to “clear the air.” When a “so-called friend” perceives there has been a taken-for-grantedness to an interaction *and chooses to attend to that perception*, there is usually a perception of hurt. When the “hurts” recur, at some point, either a discussion happens or the “aggrieved” party decides that they are now in the “everyone else” category. Generally, we shrug off taken-for-grantedness in interactions amongst others we regard as “everyone else,” or we lament a “lack of respect.”

Only the woke assert that they have the right to demand the platinum rule from others whom they (and the others) regard as everyone else. That impossible demand cannot be met.

The concerns that the concept of microaggressions attempts to address are valid. As a society, we all too often take the lazy way out and ignore the contextual situations of others, which we might attend to without great effort. Learning about such contexts and how they affect the frameworks through which others understand the world can help to create more common ground for all of us. But the claims of victim status and one-sided demands for the redress of supposed psychological “harms” triggered by what gets labeled as microaggressions work in the opposite direction. Claims of microaggressions only serve to divide us. The absence of reciprocity regarding whose intentions count, whose perspectives count, and whose “harms” are real only further such divides. The positive value of raising concerns is more than offset by the methods employed when making microaggression claims.

The woke assert that a microaggression is a denial of agency, a denial of responsibility, a projection of victimhood, and a demand for actual redress of an imaginary harm. Microaggressions are a lie – a lie that needs to end.

See final note after references.

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Final Note

To this author, the very word “woke” would be a microaggression. That is, if I were to agree that the concept has merit. Those supposedly “woke” have no special claim to enlightenment or being “awakened” to a new sense of understanding. Instead, they have staked out an intellectual position that allows the assertion of victimhood and the possibility of

emotional extortion. Being awakened to the idea that we each have our own cultural and personal habitus (Bourdieu, 1977), which shapes how we frame and see the world, is important. Deciding that one person's ignorance of another's habitus is grounds for shaming, victimhood, and redress is simply evil. Real aggressions (including intentional disrespect) must be addressed as they occur, and prevention efforts are worthy. The lie of microaggressions, by contrast, needs to end. It is time for that evil to stop.

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