Escalating Linguistic Violence: From Microaggressions to Hate Speech[1]

Introduction

Microaggressions are stereotype-based slights against members of marginalized groups. Linguistic microaggressions communicate hidden insults and invalidations either verbally or in writing.[2] When viewed in isolation, linguistic microaggressions may seem neutral or even complimentary, but when enmeshed in a pattern of similarly stereotypical encounters, microaggressions function to derogate, demean, and degrade members of marginalized groups. Asking an Asian-American woman "Where are you *really* from?" implies that she can't really be American, even if she was born in the U.S. Adding, "You look so exotic!" reinforces the message that she doesn't belong and also sexualizes her. People who are the frequent targets of linguistic microaggressions recognize these messages and the harm caused by a constant stream of subtle mistreatment: small slights can accumulate into serious harms, especially when the same hidden messages are repeated over a long period of time and/or from a variety of sources. However, perpetrators may not recognize the harm they've done. If a target objects to their mistreatment, perpetrators may feel unjustly attacked and might respond by saying, "I didn't mean to offend you. Stop being so sensitive!"

This response seems natural (to some) because it tracks many of our intuitions about

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[1] I'd like to thank the audiences and organizers of the Society for Analytical Feminism panel at the APA Pacific 2019 as well as Amy Mullin, Arthur Ripstein, Andrew Franklin-Hall, and especially Kayla Wiebe for helpful comments and conversations.

[2] There are many other types of microaggressions, but I'll focus here on the verbal and written ones. The other types (behavioral and environmental) also communicate hidden messages, so arguably, they have some implied linguistic content. But given space constraints, I won't make that argument here.

moral blameworthiness: we should only blame intentional actions; we should assume good intentions from our interlocutors; and we should brush off small harms. These same intuitions are mirrored in our criminal law system: typically, without intention there is no crime; the accused is innocent until proven guilty; and only serious offenses are worth prosecuting. Thus, it may seem that perpetrators' defensiveness is justified, or at least excusable. They can't know in advance exactly how much harm their words will do—if any—and they don't say the words with the intent to harm their targets. It seems, pre-theoretically, like they shouldn't be blamed for that harm.

Let's make these intuitions more precise. Microaggressions seem to be prevented from being candidates for blame by two main features:

1) Problem of Cumulative Harm: Microaggressions can be very damaging, but often their harmfulness only materializes after a pattern of repeated experiences. How can individual perpetrators be blamed for acts that do not immediately and on their own cause harm and may in fact never cause noticeable harm to a particular target?

2) Problem of Ambiguous Intent: Microaggressions can be intentional, but often they are committed without any intent to harm. How can perpetrators be blamed for unintentional microaggressions, and how can we tell which perpetrators acted intentionally?

These features of microaggressions have raised difficulties for philosophers writing about the perpetrator's moral responsibility (Brennan 2016, Friedlaender 2018, O'Dowd 2018) and also for those offering more practical advice for targets responding to microaggressions (Dotson 2011, McKinnon 2017, Fatima 2017, Rini 2018).

I agree with the above theorists that these problems require solutions. However, I disagree that these problems are *unique* to microaggressions. For those acquainted with the history of civil rights movements, microaggressions are facing a familiar brand of resistance. As Derald Wing Sue has suggested, the pushback against microaggressions mirrors previous attempts to squash protest against oppressive features of our society, such as race riots in the 1960s (2019, 237-8). In a similar vein, my chapter will frame current criticisms of microaggressions within the context of past criticisms of previous attempts to protest oppressive speech. My analysis will show that in the 1980s debate surrounding hate speech, critical race theorists considered criticisms similar to the problems of cumulative harm and ambiguous intent—and their responses to these criticisms will help us to respond to contemporary criticisms of microaggressions.

It may initially be difficult to see any similarities between microaggressions and hate speech, besides the fact that both can take place verbally or in writing. In many countries, hate speech is outlawed as an aggressive act that causes significant harm to its targets. Even in the United States—the notable exception to the global consensus—hate speech is forbidden in schools and workplaces because it creates a chilly climate that harms women and minorities. Thus, hate speech seems to lack the slowly accumulating harm and ambiguous intent that characterize microaggressions.

However, whatever associations we have between hate speech, harmfulness, and intentionality are relatively recent. In the U.S. in the 1980s, slurs and other overt forms of discrimination were widely considered to be socially acceptable behavior. These acts were thought of as too inconsequential and commonplace to fall within the purview of legal—or

even moral—sanctions. Mari Matsuda lists the following abhorrent acts that were considered "just kidding" pranks: hanging a noose, spray-painting KKK inscriptions on cars, burning crosses, and displaying a swastika around the office (1989, 2327-8). Charles Lawrence discusses a sportscaster who, when confronted with video evidence that he called a black player "a little monkey," claimed "no racial slur was intended" (1987, 340). Patricia Williams confirms the presence of similar interpretative contortions in the court room: a man who murdered four black teenagers in cold blood and bragged about his planned actions in a taped confession was found not guilty of premeditation or intent (1987, 153). I'll explore these points further below, but for now, we can see that hate speech, and even physically violent hate crimes, were not thought to be blameworthy—precisely because they seemed to lack either clear intent or immediate and obvious harm. Those who saw their harmfulness denied their intentionality, and those who saw their intentionality denied their harmfulness.

Our current intuitions about hate speech result from a hard-fought battle by critical race theorists, feminists, and other activists. Their arguments succeeded in shifting the public's associations so that hate speech is taken more seriously, especially in workplace and school settings. Thus, I argue that the hate speech debate is a useful resource for microaggression researchers attempting a similar project of intuition-building, again focused on workplace and school settings.[3] I don't have space to discuss all of the benefits of aligning these two discussions, so I'll focus, as a kind of case study, on how revisiting the 1980s hate speech debate

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[3] These voices have not been completely left out of modern microaggression research. Solórzano (1998) employs a framework drawn from critical race theory and cites Mari Matsuda. Williams (2019) and Rini (2018) both cite Peggy Davis, another legal critical race theorist. However, none of these papers say much about hate speech. Tynes et al. (2019) discusses hate speech at some length, but only in an online context and without attempting to specify what differentiates microaggressions and hate speech. Levchak (2018) does the most to distinguish microaggressions and hate speech, but does not discuss Richard Delgado, Mari Matsuda, Charles Lawrence, or Patricia Williams.

enables us to resolve a knotty debate in current microaggression research, namely, the question of "what's aggressive—and what's micro—about microaggressions?"

The first worry, "What's aggressive about microaggressions?", has dogged microaggression research since its inception. Psychologist Scott Lilienfeld (2017) raises the most forceful version of this objection: "The very idea of an unintentional act of aggression is almost certainly oxymoronic and misleading, as aggressive actions are virtually by definition intended to produce harm" (161). Here, Lilienfeld refers to decades of psychological research linking aggression with intention.[4] He also echoes the opening intuitions of this chapter: blameworthy attacks and blameless accidents are often distinguished by whether perpetrators knew what they were doing. Moreover, Lilienfeld argues that the terminological unclarity leads to practical difficulties. Perpetrators become defensive when accused of micro*aggression*, but they might not be so resistant to being called deliverers of "inadvertent racial slights" (161).

The second worry, "What's micro about microaggressions?" tends to arise in more sympathetic circles. Ten years after Derald Wing Sue (2010) popularized the concept, microaggression research has been so heavily advertised that many of his original examples no longer seem harmless or plausibly unintentional. In fact, members of Derald Wing Sue's own lab have recently argued that 'micro' was never meant to imply microaggressions were "smaller, less than, or inconsequential" because the cumulative effects are so clearly devastating (Torino et al, 2019, 311). Instead, they argue that 'micro' demarcates the interpersonal nature of microaggressive interactions, which separates them from what has

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[4] Lilienfeld cites Geen 2001, Baron and Richardson 1994, Berkowitz 1981, and Klama 1988 (161). However, not all psychologists agree with this emphasis on intentionality. See Williams (2019) for why psychological definitions of aggression should not center intention.

been called the institutional macroaggressions of structural oppression (see also Huber and Solorzano 2015). The name 'microaggression' has already become enmeshed in public consciousness, but Sue and other microaggression researchers hope to refine the concept to avoid further misconstruals.

But notice that together, these two worries threaten to erase the concept 'microaggression' entirely. Those who see the smallness of microaggressions deny their seriousness, while those who see their seriousness deny their smallness! In this chapter, I'll avoid both of these pitfalls. Contra Torino et al. (2019), I argue that microaggressions are small. They are not tantamount to murder, or even to hate speech, and the story we tell about moral responsibility will be more complex than either of these macroaggressions.[5] But contra Lilienfeld, I argue that microaggressions are aggressive, even when they are not intended to be harmful. They are not random or accidental harms for which the perpetrator bears no responsibility; when they take place within the context of systemic oppression, they are targeted attacks on the victim's dignity. As Chester Pierce (1970) wrote in the paper where he coined the term 'microaggression': "Most offensive actions are not gross and crippling. They are subtle and stunning" (265-6). If we lose track of these two features, we lose track of the very phenomenon we were trying to explain.

Specifying the similarities and contrasts with hate speech will allow us to resist these two competing pressures and to defend both halves of the term. In section I, I'll take up the

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[5] Note that here and throughout the paper, I'll be using the term 'macroaggression' differently from how Huber and Solorzano (2015) employ it. Instead of using it to refer to institutional aggressions, I'll be using it as Pierce does when he defines subtle and stunning "*micro-aggression*, as opposed to a gross, dramatic, obvious *macroaggression* such as lynching" (1970, 266). See Levchak (2018) for further reasons to embrace Pierce's original distinction.

first worry. I'll argue that linguistic microaggressions are a type of aggression because like hate speech, they threaten the dignity of their targets and can also pressure non-targeted bystanders into oppressive patterns of thought and behavior. In section II, I'll consider whether the problems of cumulative harm and ambiguous intent prevent microaggressions from being aggressions. I'll show that hate speech can share these features without thereby losing its aggressive nature, and I'll use this discussion to demonstrate that microaggressions, similarly, can have these features and still be a type of aggression. However, by highlighting these similarities between hate speech and microaggressions in sections I and II, I risk blurring the boundary between these different types of aggression. Thus, in section III, I'll redraw the boundary between micro- and macro-aggressions and answer the second worry. I'll claim that microaggressions are micro (and hate speech is macro) because of their relative positions on a spectrum of escalating violence and the qualitatively different ways they contribute to perpetuating oppression.

By the end of the paper, we'll be able to situate linguistic microaggressions within a broader historical and theoretical context that includes other forms of derogatory speech. Exploring resonances with the 1980s hate speech debate will allow us to explain why microaggressions fall below the cutoff for legal liability but remain apt targets for moral blame.

I. What's Aggressive About Microaggressions?

In his seminal paper "Words that Wound," Richard Delgado argued that slurs do serious damage to targeted minority group members and that courts should protect "the right of all citizens to lead their lives free from attacks on their dignity and psychological integrity" (1982,

181). He further argued that bystanders and even perpetrators from the privileged majority can also be damaged by slurs, even though they aren't the intended targets. Later that decade, Mari Matsuda (1989) expanded Delgado's argument to include other types of hate speech and to foreground the threat it poses to the autonomy of both targets and bystanders.[6]

In this section, I'll argue that microaggressions, too, are words that wound. I'll highlight three broad similarities they have to hate speech. I'll argue that microaggressions threaten the dignity of their targets, as we can see by their cumulative, corrosive effect on the target's self-esteem and autonomous capacities. Further, I'll argue that over time, microaggressions can pressure targets into life choices that damage their material prospects and social relationships. Finally, I'll argue that microaggressions can also pressure non-targeted bystanders into damaging patterns of thought and behavior. I'll conclude this section by arguing that because of these similarities microaggressions are appropriately included as a type of aggression. However, lest it seems like I'm conflating these two concepts, I'll also flag a way in which microaggressions are distinct from hate speech: a single instance of hate speech tends to be more harmful than a single instance of microaggressions. (Then in section III, I'll demonstrate that microaggressions and hate speech also have other, more significant differences.)[7]

The first similarity between hate speech and microaggressions is the threat they pose to dignity. Perpetrators may think that their words merely cause offense, but the harms of both hate speech and microaggressions can go far beyond hurt feelings. Marginalized targets can

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[6] More modern hate speech theorists have further illuminated how hate speech threatens the dignity and autonomy of targets and bystanders. (See for instance: Brison (1999), Langton (2012), and Waldron (2012).) But due to space constraints, I'll stay focused on Delgado's and Matsuda's versions of these views.

[7] Here I'm departing from Derald Wing Sue's lab. Sue (2010) and Torino et al. (2019) don't see this stark difference between microaggressions and hate speech, since they include slurs as a microassault, under the microaggression umbrella. I'll offer a different way to connect these two concepts—one that is more in line with Levchak (2018).

internalize demeaning messages, coming to see themselves as less worthy or less capable than their more privileged counterparts. In the hate speech literature, Richard Delgado explains how these harms occurred in a world where racial slurs were commonplace: "Human beings… whose daily experience tells them that almost nowhere in society are they respected and granted the ordinary dignity and courtesy accorded to others will, as a matter of course, begin to doubt their own worth" (1982, 136-7, quoting Kenneth Clark). In the microaggression literature, Chester Pierce makes the same point about the harms that accrue when racial minorities are exposed to a perpetual stream of microaggressions: "It is a summation of collective micro-offenses by the whites to minimize the social importance of any black or any black achievement so that blacks will see themselves as useless, unlovable, unable" (1970, 268). Like hate speech, microaggressions degrade their targets, threatening their sense of self-worth.

Hate speech and microaggression researchers also emphasize that the loss of self-respect caused by both forms of derogatory speech can inspire feelings of helplessness. Delgado stresses that children are particularly vulnerable to feel helplessness in response to harassment and hate speech:

> The child who is the victim of belittlement can react with only two unsuccessful strategies, hostility or passivity. Aggressive reactions can lead to consequences which reinforce the harm caused by the insults; children who behave aggressively in school are marked by their teachers as troublemakers, adding to the children's alienation and sense of rejection. Seemingly passive reactions have no better results; children who are passive towards their insulters turn the aggressive response on themselves; robbed of confidence and motivation, these children withdraw into moroseness, fantasy, and fear

(1982, 147).

We can clarify Delgado's point by borrowing terminology from Diana Meyers (1989), a feminist theorist writing at the same time.[8] Negative childhood socialization does not necessarily predetermine one's future, but as children who have been victims of hate speech grow into adults, their learned helplessness may prevent them from fully developing important autonomous capacities (169-70). Targets of hate speech may lose imaginative skills like being able to conceive of superior alternative outcomes (80-1), volitional skills like standing up for themselves (83-4), and/or interpersonal skills like community building with people outside of their social group (197).

Similarly, as Sue explores in detail, if a marginalized person is repeatedly targeted by microaggressions and repeatedly finds that their attempts to protest are not given proper uptake, they may "develop a sense of helplessness, powerlessness, or hopelessness of having any impact upon their situation" (2010, 57). Sue quotes heavily from survey participants, and his examples demonstrate that victims of repeated microaggressions experience a loss of autonomous capacities (though they don't use that terminology). Some participants reported their inability to imagine alternative outcomes: "It gets so tiring, you know… From the moment I wake up, I know stepping out that door, that it will be the same, day after day" (87). Other participants reported their loss of volitional capacities: "It's no use trying" (80) and "I was angry at myself for not speaking out. What a coward I must be" (81). Several respondents emphasized their social isolation from white colleagues: "There's a part of me that feels like I'm pretending

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[8] Meyers (1989) is focused on autonomy-constraining gender socialization, but here I'll use her discussion to make similar points about autonomy-constraining racial socialization.

at my job" (82). Hate speech may do a greater degree of damage to autonomous capacities more quickly, but over time, small slights can cumulatively do just as much damage to the target's autonomy. In fact, Sue suggests that microaggressions may actually pose more of a threat to autonomy, since covert oppression requires more cognitive attention to recognize and resist (2010, 101).

Theorists in both literatures also demonstrate the more material harms of these different types of derogatory speech. Hate speech and microaggressions contribute to creating a "chilly climate" that pushes members of marginalized groups to choose different majors in university, living situations, or professions (hate speech: Delgado 1982, 139; Matsuda 1989, 2337; microaggressions: Fatima 2017, 149; Sue 2010, 65). These coerced decisions may involve periods of unemployment, diminished earnings, costly moves, or other harms to financial stability (Delgado 1982, 139-40; Matsuda 1989, 2337 and Fatima 2017, 149; Sue 2010, 16). The target's social life may also be negatively impacted by being the target of derogatory speech. They may lose friends or lose the ability to trust members of privileged social groups (hate speech: Delgado 1982, 137; microaggressions: McKinnon 2017, 171). Finally, targets of hate speech or repeated microaggressions may experience stress that manifests as physical harms in the form of hypertension, increased morbidity, and even early mortality (Delgado 1982, 139; Matsuda 1989, 2336 and Sue 2010, 66; Pierce 1970, 268). Hate speech may do this damage in a more immediate and obvious way—Delgado foregrounds the damage caused by a single act of hate speech—but Sue, Fatima, and Pierce demonstrate that a pattern of repeated microaggressions can do very similar damage. I argue that if the threats of hate speech are taken seriously as an aggressive attack, then the cumulative, corrosive effects of

microaggressions merit the same attention.

Although the targets of derogatory speech deserve most of our focus, theorists in both literatures point out that targets are not the only ones threatened by hate speech and microaggressions. Bystanders may also be endangered by witnessing degrading speech. Matsuda gives an example showing how adults who witness hate speech may feel compelled to reproduce the offensive acts:

> In conducting research for this Article, I read an unhealthy number of racist statements. A few weeks after reading about a "dotbusters" campaign against immigrants from India, I passed by an Indian woman on my campus. Instead of thinking, "What a beautiful sari," the first thought that came into my mind was "dotbusters." Only after setting aside the hate message could I move on to my own thoughts. The propaganda I read had taken me one step back from casually treating a fellow brown-skinned human being as that, rather than as someone distanced from myself (1989, 2340).

If even an expert on hate speech can find herself repeating the dehumanizing propaganda that she's been exposed to, then it seems very likely that untrained bystanders would also unthinkingly repeat the hateful messages they have overheard.

Pierce (1970) suggests that microaggressions are have a similar effect on bystanders (and do not just harm intended targets). He discusses how white children, whom he called "bigots-in-training," are inculcated into the practice of racist microaggressions through witnessing the constant mistreatment of Black people: "[S]ociety is unrelenting in teaching its white youth how to maximize the advantages of being on the offense towards blacks" (269-70). Here, Pierce is not arguing that white adults intentionally pass on their microaggressions to

children, but rather, that white children who are exposed to microaggressions will imitate the behaviors without being explicitly taught to do so. Just as members of marginalized groups can internalize the demeaning messages directed at them, so too can members of privileged groups internalize the subtle messages of superiority that surround them.

More research is necessary before we can specify exactly how derogatory speech spreads from perpetrator to perpetrator, but these excerpts show that both hate speech and microaggressions can push bystanders into oppressive patterns of thought and speech. Furthermore, both sets of researchers have argued that complicity in oppression can be harmful to perpetrators—by diminishing our perceptual capacities (hate speech: Delgado 1982, 140; microaggressions: Sue 2010, 128) and by disrupting our social relationships (Matsuda 1989, 2338 and Liebow 2017, 75). Derogatory speech can threaten the well-being of privileged bystanders, as well as members of marginalized groups.

Given the consequences of hate speech and microaggressions that I've just considered, we have good reason to believe that targets of both kinds of derogatory speech are not overreacting when they find this speech offensive and harmful. Such speech is an offense against the targets' dignity and a threat to their autonomy. Bystanders who are not targeted by these forms of derogatory speech may also object to being pressured into damaging patterns of speech and behavior. When we consider the effects that hate speech and microaggressions have on their targets, we can see that both forms of derogatory speech are aggressive attacks that can wound in a myriad of ways.

In this section, I've shown the ways in which hate speech and microaggressions are similarly aggressive: they are both targeted attacks on the dignity and autonomy of members of

marginalized groups. In section III, I'll be highlighting the differences between these two types

of derogatory speech that explain why they belong on opposite ends of a spectrum of

aggression. But before doing so, in section II, I'll respond to a few objections. Naysayers will

argue that I haven't yet shown that microaggressions have enough in common with hate

speech to be appropriately considered aggressive. I'll consider two, linked objections that

naysayers might raise: the problem of cumulative harm and the problem of ambiguous intent.

II. Whether Cumulative Harm and Ambiguous Intent Preclude Aggression

In this section, I'll continue answering the question, "What's aggressive about

microaggressions?" by considering whether microaggressions are in fact similar enough to hate

speech to be considered a type of aggressive speech. Microaggressions appear to lack two

essential features of aggression that hate speech embodies—immediate harm and clear intent.

In "Words that Wound," Delgado (1982) provides some support for the naysayers who

think that these features are essential to aggression. Delgado argues that hate speech is worth

taking seriously without a cumulative pattern of repeated instances. He claims that a single slur

should be enough for hate speech prosecution, even without evidence of other discriminatory

behavior, because even a single instance does a large amount of damage (1982, 164).

Furthermore, Delgado argues that hate speech only merits legal redress because the speaker

clearly intends to wound:

The need for legal redress for victims also is underscored by the fact that racial insults

are intentional acts. The intentionality of racial insults is obvious: what other purposes

could the insult serve? There can be little doubt that the dignitary affront of racial

insults, except perhaps those that are overheard, is intentional and therefore most

reprehensible. Most people today know that certain words are offensive and only

calculated to wound (1982, 145).

Here, Delgado echoes the opening intuitions of the chapter: hate speech requires legal redress

because the perpetrator intends to harm, or at least, the perpetrator should have known that

their speech was likely to wound.

But the features that Delgado emphasizes are precisely the features that

microaggressions often lack. The problem of cumulative harm arose because microaggressions

only become noticeably harmful after numerous repetitions, and in some instances, never

become noticeably harmful. The problem of ambiguous intent arose because microaggressive

perpetrators may not intend to harm their targets or even be aware of the possibility that they

might do harm. If hate speech is only aggressive because of its obvious harmfulness and clear

intent, then perhaps microaggressions are not similar enough to hate speech to count as

aggressions, after all.

In response, I'll argue that aggression does not require immediate harm or clear intent.

Rather, as I've suggested in section I, being a targeted attack on dignity and autonomy is

sufficient for an act to qualify as aggressive. I'll show this by demonstrating that hate speech

may not do immediate harm and may lack clear intent, while remaining an aggressive act. By

parallel logic, I'll argue that microaggressions, too, may be aggressive without these features.

Focusing on often overlooked features of hate speech will allow us to answer naysayers about

the kind of aggression present in microaggressions and to show that the problems of

cumulative harm and ambiguous intent do not prevent microaggressions from being

appropriately termed aggressive.

II.i. Like Microaggressions, Hate Speech Can Feature Cumulative Harm

One feature that seems to clearly separate hate speech and microaggressions is that hate speech often causes significant damage after a single act, whereas microaggressions tend to cause significant damage only after multiple acts accumulate over time. Even in section I, I highlighted this difference in degree between the harms done by hate speech and microaggressions, but here I'll argue that this statistical tendency is not a defining difference between these two forms of derogatory speech.[9] In certain circumstances, the harms of hate speech may also not be immediately apparent and may require repetition before they accumulate into noticeable violence.

Although Delgado foregrounds the harmfulness of each individual act of hate speech, other critical race theorists focus on the harmfulness that hate speech acquires when embedded in a culture rife with hate speech and other forms of overt discrimination. Matsuda (1989) argues against the trend of treating hate speech as harmless, isolated "pranks" by showing that they are not isolated incidents and therefore, should not be treated as inconsequential. She gives numerous examples of when racist hate speech, "those [racist slur for Asian groups] are taking over 'our' country" (2330), preceded an outbreak of racially-motivated violence—including state sponsored violence like the Japanese internment camps of WWII and the bombings of Hiroshima. As she says, "people with features like mine are regular victims of violence tied to a wave of anti-Asian propaganda that stretches from Boston to San Francisco, from Galveston to Detroit" (2329). Knowing this history makes each new instance of

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[9] The defining differences will lie elsewhere, as I'll discuss in section III.

hate speech a more believable and effective threat.

However, in Matsuda (1989)'s discussion, it remains unclear precisely how the cultural pattern contributes to the harmfulness of hate speech. Does the repetition magnify the harmfulness, as it does for microaggressions, or does the pattern play some other role? After all, even Delgado would agree that hate speech only becomes *obviously* harmful after we see that it is embedded in a pattern of oppressive speech, but Matsuda seems to further suggest that being part of such a pattern is somehow *constitutive* of the harmfulness of hate speech. It is difficult to pry these points apart in the cultural context of the 1980s, when hate speech was already rampant in the culture, or in our current political climate, when hate speech has again become all too common. But we can become more exact about the patterned nature of hate speech if we turn to a different cultural context, when hate speech is occurring but is not yet commonplace. Hence, I will turn now to Lynne Tirrell's description of the how hate speech spread in the period preceding the Rwandan genocide. I will use this jump in time and space to highlight a feature implicit in Matsuda's argument: hate speech, like microaggressions, may be invisible before it accumulates and becomes a serious threat.

First, a bit of context. Many of us are aware of the role that hate speech played during the Rwandan genocide. Radio announcers and journalists directed Hutus to massacre Tutsis by saying "clear the tall trees" (Tirrell 2012, 175) or "clean the Nyamata church of its cockroaches" (202). These atrocities fit our intuitive associations with hate speech. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda judged this speech to be obviously harmful and intentionally hateful. In fact, Tirrell reports that the Tribunal went so far as to convict some perpetrators of hate speech as *génocidaires*, i.e. for the commission of genocide, rather than the lesser charge of incitement

(2012, 185).

But Tirrell (2012) also calls our attention to less well-known aspects of the Rwandan genocide. She highlights a theme that appears in the testimonies of several convicted *génocidaires*: before the genocide, many of the same threats were made without the same violent results. Tirrell quotes at length from the testimony of Léopord Twagirayezu:

It is awkward to talk about hatred between Hutus and Tutsis, because *words changed meaning after the killings*… Before, we could fool around among ourselves and say we were going to kill them all, and the next moment we would join them to share some work or a bottle. Jokes and threats were mixed together. We no longer paid heed to what we said. We could toss around awful words without awful thoughts. The Tutsis did not even get very upset. I mean, they didn't draw apart because of those unfortunate discussions. Since then we have seen: those words brought on grave consequences (quoted in Tirrell 2012, 202, emphasis original).

Clearly, the perpetrators of hate speech did not see the harm of this incendiary way of talking, but more surprisingly, no grave consequences immediately materialized. Neither Hutus nor Tutsis seemed to register the genocidal force of the "jokes."[10] The threats were not taken seriously, so the hate speech did not disrupt relationships or employment. A Hutu could threaten to kill a Tutsi, and then they would all share a drink or go to work as if nothing had happened. The linguistic practices were still in transition: jokes and threats mixed together.

Here, we can begin to see some parallels with microaggressions. At first, the hate

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[10] Levchak might include these racist jokes as a type of microaggression (2018, 20), but I'll follow Tirrell (2012) in categorizing these threatening jokes as a form of macroaggressive hate speech.

speech seemed like "just talk" (Tirrell 2012, 187), in the way that individual microaggressions may seem easy to brush off before they accumulate. In this "preparatory phase," hate speech didn't yet incite violence: "anti-Tutsi speech acts… did not yet attach to anti-Tutsi behavior" (204). Yet once a pattern of hateful speech developed, the linguistic conventions changed, and the words began to be said with more seriousness. The repetition of hate speech over a period of several years facilitated the change from seemingly harmless jokes to serious, deadly violence. It was only in retrospect that Léopord and others realized, "those words brought on grave consequences" (202). These cumulative effects are much more dramatic and violent than the effects of microaggressions, but the patterned nature is the same. In some contexts, the harms of hate speech, too, can be invisible before they accumulate.

Of course, Léopord is giving the perpetrator's perspective. As Tirrell points out, non-response from Tutsis does not necessarily signal a lack of awareness or concern: "A Tutsi aware of the threat posed by linguistic violence might feel caught in a double bind: speak up now and be punished now, or stay silent now and risk greater harm later" (2012, 203). However, this possibility makes hate speech even more like microaggressions. Microaggressions, too, often become obvious to their targets before they are obvious to privileged perpetrators, and microaggressive targets face a similar double bind when considering whether to speak up or stay silent. Sue calls this a "Catch-22": targets must decide whether to speak up and risk being punished by further microaggressions, or remain silent and risk the harms of internalizing microaggressive messages (2010, 53). Thus, any divergence between perpetrator and target perspectives would be a further point of overlap between hate speech and microaggressions— strengthening my case that it may be difficult to reach consensus about the harmfulness of any

particular instance of microaggression or hate speech. At this early point, Tutsis already have reason to fear that hate speech would escalate into violence, but since they couldn't yet point to any material harms, their worries might have been treated as an inability to take a joke, being overly sensitive, or reading too much into things—which are all common rejoinders made by critics of microaggressions. (We could even imagine a pre-genocide Léopord responding to objections with a comment like the ones that accused microaggressors often make, namely, "I don't hate Tutsis! I have Tutsi friends!") In certain circumstances, the harms of hate speech can be just as subtle and difficult to name as the harms of microaggressions.

Now we can see that cumulative harm can be a shared feature of hate speech and microaggressions, not a defining difference. I won't attempt to resolve the problem of cumulative harm here, but I suggest that the hate speech debate can be a helpful resource for microaggression researchers deciding how to apportion blame and responsibility for the cumulative harms of microaggressions. For example, Matsuda emphasizes the importance of looking beyond the U.S. context: after running into difficulties attempting to prove a direct link between hate speech and physical violence, many countries have departed from criminal law and set a different standard for hate speech prosecution—outlawing speech that foments hatred, as well as speech that directly incites violence (Matsuda 1989, 2341-9). Exploring similarities with hate speech won't necessarily solve the questions plaguing microaggression research, but they will offer us tools with which to hone our responses.

II.ii. Like Microaggressions, Hate Speech Can Feature Ambiguous Intent

Turning now to the second feature that seems to clearly distinguish hate speech and microaggression: perpetrators of hate speech usually intend to harm their targets, while

perpetrators of microaggressions may not realize that their words are doing harm.

Microaggression skeptics would challenge my argument on this ground: if hate speech only

counts as an aggressive attack because of its malicious intent, then microaggressions may not

have enough in common with hate speech to be appropriately termed aggressive. But I'll argue

that this supposed difference is actually a further point of similarity between hate speech and

microaggressions.[11] In certain circumstances, hate speech may also not be intended to harm.

Remember that Delgado claimed that hate speech is always intended to harm: "The

intentionality of racial insults is obvious: what other purpose could the insult serve?... Most

people today know that certain words are offensive and only calculated to wound" (1989, 145).

However, the cumulative harms that we discussed in section II.i also raise problems for this

simplistic ascription of intentionality. As Tirrell shows, speakers in pre-genocide Rwanda were

not (fully) aware of the impact of their words: "If Pio calls Albert '*inyenzi*' [cockroach], he may

be setting in motion much more than he intends. What we do with our speech acts often

outstrips our own mastery" (2012, 187). Moreover, Tirrell points out that this remains true

even in our own cultural context: "When a ten-year-old boy in the USA calls one of his

classmates [a homophobic slur], he is unlikely to fully understand the entire inferential role of

that term, nor is he likely to think about, much less have mastery of, the broader social context

of homophobia and hate crimes against homosexuals" (2012, 206). Speakers may not know in

advance what their words will do, and even in retrospect it can be difficult to apportion exactly

how much damage arose from any particular act of hate speech. In certain circumstances, hate

speech also faces the problem of ambiguous intent: how can we say that perpetrators intended

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[11] Again, the defining differences will lie elsewhere, as I'll discuss in section III.

to cause genocidal violence, if it was impossible to say in advance exactly how much harm any instance of hate speech would bring about?

Even in contexts where the harms of hate speech are clearer, like the 1980s U.S., other critical race theorists take a more nuanced view of intention than Delgado does. Charles Lawrence argues for a middle ground between intentional and unintentional speech acts:

Traditional notions of intent do not reflect the fact that decisions about racial matters are influenced in large part by factors that can be characterized as neither intentional—in the sense that certain outcomes are self-consciously sought—nor unintentional—in the sense that the outcomes are random, fortuitous, and uninfluenced by the decisionmaker's beliefs, desires, and wishes (1987, 322).

Lawrence gives an example to clarify how hate speech may be inadvertent and non-malicious without being fully unintentional. He discusses an incident where a sportscaster called a black player a "little monkey" (339). When confronted about the incident, the sportscaster claimed "no racial slur was *intended*" (340, emphasis original). Lawrence sees no reason to doubt the truth of this claim, since the sportscaster's livelihood depends upon his good relations with black players and audiences. However, Lawrence argues that the sportscaster's choice of words is nevertheless "not random" (340). Instead, Lawrence claims that the racist, derogatory speech was neither intentional nor unintentional because it was inspired by unconscious racism—a racism shared by all Americans:

Americans share a common historical and cultural heritage in which racism has played and still plays a dominant role. Because of this shared experience, we also inevitably share many ideas, attitudes, and beliefs that attach significance to an individual's race

and induce negative feelings and opinions about nonwhites. To the extent that this

cultural belief system has influenced all of us, we are all racists (1987, 322).

Living in a racist culture can cause racist beliefs to seep into individuals, often without our full

awareness. We may then find ourselves speaking in ways that reflect beliefs we didn't know we

had and non-consciously targeting members of marginalized groups. (Remember Matsuda's

example: even experts on hate speech may unwittingly repeat the slurs they study!)

Perpetrators may not intend their words to harm, yet the harm is not a random accident either.

Hate speech performs its racist, culturally-mandated purpose, with or without the conscious

intention of its speaker.

The points Lawrence (1987) makes about hate speech are echoed in a recent psychology

article on microaggressions. Williams (2019) describes the ambiguity inherent in attempts to

judge the intentionality of microaggressive acts:

Microaggressions are part of an ideological social system that confers benefits to the

dominant group at the expense of the subordinate group. As such, they are in fact

intentional, although the intentionality may represent individual bias in the offender

(conscious or unconscious) or may be the manifestation of the aggressive goals of the

dominant group, taught to unwitting actors through observational learning or other

social mechanisms. In either case, the social context is required to understand individual

behaviors.

Once again, we find that 1980s hate speech theorists prefiguring modern microaggression

researchers, and further reason to suppose that microaggressions are not alone in facing the

problem of ambiguous intent. The role socialization plays in hate speech and microaggressions

may make ascriptions of intentionality—and blame—difficult for both sets of researchers.

In fact, Lawrence himself recognizes the similarities between these two forms of derogatory speech. He was aware of Pierce's research (he cites Pierce's *Psychiatric Problems of Black Minority*) and discusses microaggressions—though under a different name:

> One might call it a slip of the mind: While one says what one intends, one fails to grasp the racist implications of one's benignly motivated words or behavior. For example, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when integration and assimilation were unquestioned ideals among those who consciously rejected the ideology of racism, white liberals often expressed their acceptance of and friendship with blacks by telling them that they 'did not think of them as Negroes' (1987, 341).

This passage bears chilling resonances to Ornaith O'Dowd's recent example of a microaggression within a cross-racial friendship: "The white friend says, 'You know, I love that we can see past race in our friendship. It's like I don't even notice that you're African-American'" (2018, 1224; see also Sue 2010, 38). The language has been updated (African-American, not Negro) but the sentiment remains the same. White condescension has not changed substantially in the intervening 30—or 80—years.

Though they're discussing a very similar example, however, these two theorists gloss it very differently. O'Dowd follows Sue in calling the exchange a 'microinvalidation,' claiming that the wrong stems from invalidating the friend's experience of racism: "There is a signaling that the African-American friend's testimony about experiencing racism may not be taken seriously" (2018, 1226). Lawrence, in contrast, claims the wrong stems from an implied insult, not an invalidation:

Their conscious intent was complimentary. The speaker was saying, 'I think of you as normal human beings, just like me.' But he was not conscious of the underlying implication of his words. What did this mean about most Negroes? Were they not normal human beings? If the white liberal were asked if this was his inference, he would doubtless have protested that his words were being misconstrued and that he only intended to state that he did not think of anyone in racial terms. But to say that one does not think of a Negro as a Negro is to say that one thinks of him as something else. The statement is made in the context of the real world, and implicit in it is a comparison to some norm. In this case the norm is whiteness (1987, 341).

In Lawrence's paper, unlike in the modern debate, we can see that microaggressions serve the same function as more obviously derogatory speech. Microaggressions demean their targets, in addition to whatever other epistemic harms they may do.[12] The perpetrator may not intend their words to be derogatory, yet this outcome isn't an accident. Rather, their choice of words reflects their unconscious white supremacy. Saying "I don't see you as black" is only a compliment if there's something wrong with being black!

Throughout his article, Lawrence (1987) highlights the difficulty of ascribing intention in all sorts of conversational contexts, ranging from slurs to microaggressions. By looking back at his work, we can see that the problem of ambiguous intent is shared by many different types of oppressive speech. It is not a new problem unique to microaggressions, and therefore our answer to this problem need not be entirely new either. In the future, microaggression

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[12] For further discussion of epistemic harm to targets of microaggressions, see Dotson 2011, Tschaepe 2016, Fatima 2017, Liebow 2017, McKinnon 2017, and Freeman and Stewart 2018, 2019.

theorists can draw from the rich history of debate about other forms of derogatory speech, rather than starting from a blank slate.

II.iii. Aggression Does Not Require Clear Intent and Immediate Harm

In the above sections, we've seen that the problems of cumulative harm and ambiguous intent are not unique to microaggressions: in certain circumstances, hate speech can share the same unclarities of harm and intent. However, in emphasizing these similarities to microaggressions, I don't mean to suggest that hate speech is any less aggressive before it becomes obviously harmful and clearly intentional. Hate speech is always an aggressive act.

Returning once again to the Rwandan context, we can see this point clearly during the testimony of another convicted *genocidaire*, Pio Mitungirehe:

> Maybe we did not hate all the Tutsis, especially our neighbors, and maybe we did not see them as wicked enemies. But among ourselves we said we no longer wanted to live together. We even said we did not want them anywhere around us anymore, and that we had to clear them from our land. It's serious, saying that—it's already sharpening the machete (quoted in Tirrell 2012, 204).

A threat you don't intend to act upon is still a threat, and threatening to kill your neighbors (or "joking" about turning them over to the KKK) is certainly menacing! The Rwandan case shows that our paradigm instances of hate speech are misleading: aggression, intent, and harm can come apart. Even early, "joking" versions of hate speech are still an attack on the victim's dignity and a threat to their autonomy. Hate speech need not be obviously harmful or clearly intentional in order to be a serious act of aggression, akin to sharpening the machete in preparation for genocide.

Similarly, microaggressions are not prevented from being appropriately termed 'aggression' simply because they feature cumulative harm and ambiguous intent. As we'll explore further in the next section, aggression can come in many forms—ranging from the physical slashing of the machete; to the words that whet the blade; to other more subtle deeds that, when allowed to accumulate, can do similarly serious damage.

III. What's Micro about Microaggressions?

In the previous sections, as I argued for why microaggressions are a type of aggression, I dismantled the intuitive picture of what separates hate speech and microaggressions. We may have thought that microaggressions are micro because they do less serious damage, but in section I, I showed that both microaggressions and hate speech can do the same kind of damage to the dignity and well-being. We may have thought that microaggressions are micro because they are cumulatively harmful and ambiguously intentional, but in section II, I've shown that hate speech, too, can feature cumulative harm and ambiguous intent. We might now wonder what differences remain between these forms of derogatory speech. Therefore, in this section, we'll turn to the other side of the debate about microaggressions: "What makes microaggressions micro (and hate speech macro)?" I'll begin by considering previous answers to this question. Then I'll argue that acknowledging the connections to hate speech allows us to form a more accurate picture of where microaggressions fit on a spectrum of escalating violence. The implicit racism of microaggression has the tendency to escalate into the explicit racism of hate speech, which in turn can escalate into the physical violence of hate speech and genocide.

III.i. Previous Attempts to Specify What's Micro about Microaggressions

Remember that worries about the smallness of microaggressions arise primarily in sympathetic circles. As Freeman and Stewart pose the problem: "Insofar as we're taking as our point of departure the experiences of victims, one might immediately object that the prefix 'micro' isn't appropriate since it seems to undermine the seriousness of harms that result" (2018, 414). Their answer is to embrace the tension: in the term 'microaggression', they argue, 'micro' captures the viewpoint of the perpetrators while 'aggression' captures the viewpoint of the targets (415).

I won't follow their approach, because I want to differentiate between the immediate effects of individual microaggressions and the cumulative effects of repeated microaggressions. Perpetrators are not the only ones who see individual instances of microaggressions as small. As I've mentioned, many targets also report experiencing a single microaggression as a small harm, and some targets don't experience any noticeable harm at all. Indeed, the subtlety of the harm is part of what makes it difficult for targets to know how to react to particular instances of microaggressions (Sue 2010, Fatima 2017, Rini 2018). Thus, I don't want to underemphasize the subtlety of microaggressions.

However, I don't want to overemphasize their subtlety either, so I also won't ultimately be following Emily McTernan (2017)'s solution. When faced with the question, "What's micro about microaggressions?", McTernan bites the bullet and responds by saying that many of the original examples of microaggressions do not count as micro anymore:

In one case, Pierce discusses a white woman so uncomfortable about sitting next to a black man on an aeroplane that a white man intervenes to swap seats for the sake of

the woman. To modern sensibilities this looks instead to be a case of overt racism. Over

time, then, we may change what instances we label microaggressions. But that

changeability should give us hope, not make us think there are no such things as

microaggressions (2017, 267).

I agree with McTernan that some of the original examples don't fit the concept. Slurs, for

instance, should never have been included as a type of microaggression. Moreover, I agree that

we should distinguish covert and overt forms of aggressions.

However, my worry with McTernan's approach is that may lead to other examples being

excluded merely because they've become obvious "to modern sensibilities." Even Sue's

examples have been discussed so frequently over the past decade that they may no longer

seem covert or micro but instead overt macroaggressions intended to harm: who now would

say, "You're a credit to your race!" without cringing? When I've given talks to academic

audiences I sometimes even get pushback for using the example with which I began this paper:

"How could anyone ask their Asian-American colleague where she's from without knowing that

the question implies immigrants don't belong here?" If, as McTernan suggests, our examples of

microaggressions will cyclically expire as they become more well-known and obvious, then we'd

have to search for increasingly more subtle and invisible examples of racist microaggressions. [13]

I do not want to search for vanishingly small slights. Instead, as I've argued in section

II.ii, changes in the obviousness of a racist behavior don't necessarily track differences in kind.

Hate speech was not obviously harmful in pre-genocide Rwanda, but it was still a

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[13] Levchak doesn't go into as much detail as McTernan, but Levchak defines overt macroaggressions as obvious (2018, 20 and 22) and sometimes suggests that covert microaggressions are subtle to the point of invisibility (2018, 48 and 63). Hence, I will also depart from Levchak (2018)'s version of the micro/macroaggression spectrum.

macroaggression. Likewise, microaggressions can become more obvious while still remaining microaggressions. I'll argue the features that differentiate micro- and macroaggressions lie elsewhere.

III.ii. My Proposal: Placing Microaggressions on a Spectrum of Escalating Violence

Instead of generating an entirely new answer to the question, "what's micro about microaggressions?" I will again turn to the older hate speech debate for guidance on where to begin. As I'll discuss, Matsuda and Tirrell foreground the relationship between the linguistic violence of hate speech and the physical violence of hate crimes and genocide. They argue that racist hate speech sets the stage for the outbreak of racist violence. I'll propose that microaggressions play a similar role in setting the stage for hate speech: a culture rife with racial microaggressions is likely to spark outbreaks of more overtly racist speech.

Like Lawrence, Matsuda (1989) mentions microaggressions during her analysis of how hate speech functions. Her list of the "implements of racism" runs as follows:

1. Violence and genocide;

2. Racial hate messages, disparagement, and threats;

3. Overt disparate treatment; and

4. Covert disparate treatment and sanitized racist comments. (1989, 2332)

Notice the last item on the list. Matsuda stresses that these "sanitized racist comments" are said by white liberals who would never say racist slurs or condone other overtly racist treatment (2334). She even confirms in a footnote that "micro-aggressions" fit within this category (ft 76, 2334).

Matsuda doesn't give much detail about how to distinguish covert and overt racism, but

she does discuss the other end of the spectrum:

> Less egregious forms of racism degenerate easily into more serious forms… there is a
> connection between racist words and racist deeds. The racially motivated beating death
> of Vincent Chin by unemployed white auto workers in Detroit, during a time of
> widespread anti-Asian propaganda in the auto-industry, was no accident. Nor was the
> murder of the Davis, California, high school student Thong Hy Huynh, after months of
> anti-Asian racial slurs (1989, 2335).

Matsuda shows that hate speech tends to escalate into physical violence. Although the slide from hate speech to hate crimes is not inevitable or immediate, it is also "no accident." Hate speech and hate crimes are connected: hate speech sets the stage for the violent acts that follow.

Tirrell sees a similar pattern in pre-genocide Rwandan. When analyzing Pio's testimony (see full quote in section II.iii), she says: "Pio's denying initial attitudes of hate suggests that the speech acts were stronger than and did not arise from speakers' intentions, suggesting instead that the speech acts conditioned attitudes over time" (2012, 204). Pio claims he did not start out with feelings of hatred or the intention to hurt his neighbors. He thought he was joking when he threatened to clear the Tutsis from the land. But hearing himself say the threats aloud, and hearing others repeat the same threats, changed what the words meant. When violent speech pervades the culture, it makes violent behavior imaginable, then desirable, then (seemingly) required. Pio himself sees, in retrospect, the tendency for invisible hate speech to degenerate into visible violence: "It's serious, saying that—it's already sharpening the machete"

(quoted in Tirrell 2012, 204).[14]

Returning to the issue at hand, we can now begin answering, "What's micro about microaggressions (and macro about hate speech)?" Matsuda and Tirrell argue that hate speech paves the way for genocide. I argue that microaggressions perform a similar role in conditioning speakers and audiences: an atmosphere rife with microaggressions is likely to spark more overtly hateful speech. Consider the examples we've thus far discussed:

1. Asking an Asian-American woman, "Where are you really from?" implies that she can't really be from the U.S., even if she was born here. Further, it implies that people of color will never really belong in America—(unlike white people) people of color belong elsewhere. But this assumption easily tends to devolve into another, more sinister one: if people of color don't belong here, we should "send them back." In this one small step, we arrive at the words of hate speech that in Matsuda's time were used to justify murder and that have recently been hurled at senators and used to justify concentration camps at the U.S.-Mexican border.[15]

2. Saying to your African-American friend, "I don't see you as black. You're my friend!"

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[14] I'm focused on racialized hate speech here, but see Solnit 2014 for a similar argument about how gender-based hate speech can also escalate into violence.

[15] "You look so exotic" is another way of implying that you don't belong here, and therefore similarly close to hate speech like "send her back." But "You look so exotic" is a more complex case because it also objectifies the targeted woman. Animals are exotic. Clothing or food is exotic. Not people, or least, not equals with valuable perspectives and ideas. In this intersectional microaggression, exotic women are seen as adornments and attached to a whole host of stereotypes about subservience and sexual submissiveness. It may be difficult to think of examples of violence specifically targeted at Asian or Asian-American women, until we remember that erasing, dehumanizing, and silencing are themselves forms of institutional and state-sponsored violence. I'll say more about this in section IV. (See also Robin Zheng's "Why Yellow Fever Isn't Flattering: A Case Against Racial Fetishes" and Mitsuye Yamada's "Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster: Reflections of an Asian American Woman").

implies there's something wrong with being black, some negative feature your friend

doesn't share. Further, it implies that if you did see her as black, you wouldn't be friends

with her. But this implication raises a more sinister one: white people shouldn't (be

allowed to) associate with black people. In this one small step, we arrive at a central

tenant of the Ku Klux Klan—used in 1980s propaganda and reappearing today in cities

across North America.

Microaggressions say by implication the assumptions that hate speech takes for granted. Just as

hate speech tends to generate physical violence, the implicit threats of microaggressions tend

to degenerate into the overt threats of hate speech.

Thus I propose the following spectrum:

Spectrum of Escalating Violence

Microaggressions	Hate Speech	Hate Crime	Genocide
propagate/reinforce expectations about the target group's place, where they "naturally" belong[16]	explicitly advocates putting or keeping targets in their "natural" place	physically enforces dictates of hate speech through murder, rape, arson, etc.	publicly mandated violence through mass killings, incarceration, deportation, etc.

Microaggressions are not hate speech, and we should not lose track of the differences

between these two forms of derogatory speech. Microaggressions are micro because they

don't explicitly threaten their targets. As I discussed in section I, microaggressions exert some

coercive pressure on targets that threatens their autonomy, but we can now see that the

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[16] Perhaps not all microaggressions fit neatly into this category. Microinvalidations like "America is a melting pot" or "The most qualified person will get the job" work even more subtly to reinforce historical hierarchies, so they may belong in a separate category—and even further towards the micro end of the spectrum—from the microinsults I focus on in this section.

pressure microaggressions exert is qualitatively different from the explicit threat of violence that hate speech employs. Microaggressions' coercive pressure towards conformity is hidden within their implied content (and therefore plausibly deniable by perpetrators). However, these hidden messages may be uncovered by those of us who pay attention, and as more and more microaggression researchers highlight the covert racism of microaggressions, I hope the hidden messages become obvious to all of us. Yet, even if we all gain the ability to interpret the hidden messages of microaggressions, microaggressions would still remain covert and implicit, rather than overt and explicit.

Hate speech, in contrast, is a macroaggression because it openly advocates violence. Hate speech sends overt and explicit threats, even if those threats may sometimes be misinterpreted as mere jokes. Moreover, hate speech presages and often inspires individual hate crimes and state-mandated genocide. This qualitative difference also explains why hate speech requires legal sanctions whereas microaggressions only require moral sanctions. Both hate speech and microaggressions are morally impermissible attacks against marginalized individuals, but hate speech—in addition to attacking individuals—is a criminal offense against the public peace. Although unchecked microaggressions have some danger of escalating into a threat to the public peace, that danger is not nearly so great as the clear and present danger of fermenting race-based hatred through hate speech. Hence, microaggressions do not require legal sanctions.

Further research is needed before we can fully understand the connections between microaggressions and hate speech. I hope microaggression researchers continue exploring resonances with the 1980s hate speech debate and also with more modern discussions of hate

speech. There may also be benefits in the other direction of research: I invite hate speech

researchers to examine the role that microaggressions play in setting the stage for hate speech.

Most pressingly, we might wonder whether conservatives' recent resistance to taking

microaggressions seriously paved the way for self-identified Nazis to re-enter public discourse.

To borrow Lynne Tirrell's idiom: if hate speech sharpens the machetes, microaggressions

display those same machetes on the wall—dull, for the moment, but someday, sharp.

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