Diversity Training Methods, Opinions of Political Correctness, and Perceptions of Microaggressions

Nicole L. Smith [iD] and Elise J. Percy*
North Central College

ABSTRACT. This experiment studied the impact of diversity training methods and political correctness opinions on participants' perception of microaggressions. It was hypothesized that (a) those with a positive political correctness opinion would be more aware of microaggressions after diversity training than those with a negative political correctness opinion, (b) the perspective-taking training group would be more effective than the prescriptive training group, and (c) those with a negative political correctness opinion in the prescriptive training condition would have a backfire response in which their awareness of microaggressions would decrease. Using a 2 x 2 design, participants completed a questionnaire assessing their opinion of political correctness and were then randomly assigned to 1 of the diversity training conditions. All participants analyzed a series of comics depicting microaggressions and ranked their offensiveness on a 5-point Likert scale, both before and after training, to measure their change in perception. No significant difference was found for opinion of political correctness, $F(2, 54) = 0.11$, $p = .900$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$. A significant opposite result was found for diversity training method, $F(1, 54) = 10.03$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .150$, with a greater change in perception for those in the prescriptive group as compared to those in the perspective-taking group. Additionally, no backfire response was detected among those with a negative political correctness opinion in the prescriptive condition. Findings suggest that exposure to diverse perspectives is important for changes in microaggression perception to occur.

Keywords: microaggressions, political correctness, diversity training

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I n his 1903 seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk,* W.E.B. Du Bois addressed a White audience from behind the veil, a metaphorical curtain separating the experiences of White and Black citizens. The veil is a symbol of oppression, a persistent cloud looming over African Americans which is invisible to the majority of the White population.

I remember well when the shadow swept across me. . . something put it into the boys' and girls' heads to buy gorgeous

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*Faculty mentor

visiting-cards and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl refused my card, —refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned on me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others . . . shut out from their world by a vast veil. (Du Bois, 1903, p. 4)

Today, the girl's glance would be referred to as a racial microaggression, or a subtle form of discrimination experienced by a racial or ethnic minority (Ong & Burrow, 2017). These glances, slights, and snubs are extremely common, yet highly ambiguous, and not always recognized by the racial majority. When confronted, unaffected individuals often claim that racial minorities are being too sensitive, a similar argument made by those who reject political correctness (Loury, 1994). To lessen the frequency of microaggressions, organizations have implemented various diversity training programs, yet very few have empirical evidence to support their efficacy. Furthermore, none have assessed the impact of an individual's opinion of politically correct speech on the effectiveness of diversity training programs. This study aims to examine individual opinions of political correctness in relation to perceptions of microaggressions after two different diversity training methods.

Although the concept of microaggressions is not new, the language used to describe them is. Only within the past decade has research on the topic expanded, catalyzed by the taxonomy created by Sue et al. (2007). They identified and coined three forms of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are explicit, and often conscious, forms of discrimination such as racial slurs, displaying a swastika, or wearing blackface. Microinsults are rude or insensitive forms of communication which demean a person's racial or ethnic heritage. They are nuanced and often unintentional, such as avoiding eye contact. Microinvalidations, also commonly unintentional, minimize or negate the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of another person. For example, if someone said, "I just don't see color" to a Black friend, the intention may be to communicate that race does not change how they view people. However, by negating the reality that humans experience life differently based on their race, they minimized the obstacles that marginalized groups face (Sue et al., 2007).

Studies on microaggressions have primarily involved interviewing a population and coding responses for themes, most commonly using the framework set forth by Sue et al. (2007). Reil (2017) interviewed Black, White, and mixed-race high school students in rural North Carolina, finding common themes of pathologizing cultural values. One White student said, "[Black people] . . . don't like to keep their mouth shut . . .and have loud voices," a microinsult pathologizing her Black classmate's communication style (Reil, 2017). Similarly, Ayón and Philbin (2017) asked Latino immigrants in Arizona a series of open-ended questions, which elicited numerous responses surrounding assumptions of criminality, such as, "At school . . . someone found gun bullets and blamed my son." Although those on the receiving end struggle to express the subtle bias they have experienced, many perpetrators are blind to their own implicit biases, not even recognizing that a microaggression has occurred (Boysen, 2012). When confronted, the perpetrator will often provide excuses or become upset for being accused of bigotry. They are unable, or unwilling, to recognize that a veil even exists. Thus, with the receiver's recognition that a microaggression has occurred, comes the decision to speak up and potentially be met with pushback, or to remain silent and frustrated. The regularity and ambiguity of this discrepancy in perception has a detrimental impact to those on the receiving end. Hollingsworth et al. (2017) used self-assessments to evaluate the psychological impact of microaggressions on African American high school students, and found that frequent microaggressions were strongly associated with increased perceptions of self-burdensomeness and thoughts of suicide. Similar methodology found that the daily microaggressions experienced by children of Latino immigrants were strongly correlated with social isolation, poor health outcomes, and internalized oppression (Ayón & Philbin, 2017). Whether intentional or unintentional, there is a clear need to address the significant negative impact of racial microaggressions.

Many communities have turned to diversity training as a means to reduce the frequency of microaggressions. Diversity training is broadly defined as programs geared toward reducing discrimination and increasing positive intergroup relations (Anand & Winters, 2008). These programs initially began in the 1960s when employment discrimination became illegal. Businesses convicted of discrimination were given court-mandated diversity training, which were typically lectures (Anand & Winters, 2008). Contemporary methods

have shifted away from compliance to fostering an environment of sensitivity (Anand & Winters, 2008) and vary widely, from lectures and videos to simulation exercises (Bezrukova, Spell, Perry & Jehn, 2016). Despite widespread usage, with nearly two thirds of companies implementing some form of diversity training (Lindsey, King, Hebl, & Levine, 2014), there is little empirical evidence to support their effectiveness. In fact, diversity training programs have the opposite reputation, with notoriously low success rates (Bezrukova et al. 2016). Subotnik (2016) argued that this is because the current structure of diversity training works against itself. In practice, the trainer speaks as the ultimate authority by outlining politically incorrect phrases which are discouraged. However, by limiting what the participants can and cannot say, the ability to have truly open and honest racial conversations is impeded—the very thing necessary to progress. Given that political correctness is a polarizing term strongly correlated with political affiliation (Batchis, 2016), and given that certain diversity training methods overtly employ principles of political correctness (Subotnik, 2016), the following should be considered: does an individual's opinion of political correctness mediate the efficacy of various diversity training methods?

To date, very few psychometric assessments measure individual opinions of politically correct speech, with the exception of Strauts and Blanton's (2015) Concern for Political Correctness (CPC). Using the CPC to assess baseline political correctness opinions, the present study aimed to compare the effectiveness of different diversity training programs and whether their efficacy was dependent on participants' opinions of political correctness. Participants were randomly assigned to either a prescriptive training session, where a trainer explained what the participants could and could not say in regard to racial conversations, or a perspective-taking session, where participants imagined themselves as a racial minority and wrote a short story about the challenges they might experience. The efficacy of diversity training was measured by the participants' change in awareness of microaggressions, using the Perception of Microaggressions Scale (POMS), which was developed by the authors. We hypothesized that participants with a positive opinion of political correctness would be more aware of microaggressions than participants with a negative opinion of political correctness. We also hypothesized that posttraining, participants who undergo a perspective-taking training would be more aware of microaggressions than those who undergo a prescriptive training. Additionally, we hypothesized that participants with a negative political correctness opinion who undergo a prescriptive training session would have a backfire response, in which they would be less aware of microaggressions after training.

Method

Design

This study used a 2 x 2 experimental design with one quasi-independent variable. The true independent variable was the diversity training program the participants attended, either prescriptive, where a trainer outlined types of microaggressions, or perspective-taking, where participants wrote a short narrative. The quasi-independent variable was the participants' opinions of political correctness, measured by the CPC, and the dependent variable was their change in perception of microaggressions, measured by the difference between pretraining and posttraining scores on the POMS. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the diversity training conditions via a coin flip.

Participants

Sixty participants, all of whom were enrolled in an Introductory Psychology course at North Central College, were recruited through SONA. The sample consisted of 43 women and 17 men, with 29 in the prescriptive group and 31 in the perspective-taking group. Participants responded that they were White (85%, $n = 51$), Hispanic or Latino (15%, $n = 9$), Asian (6%, $n = 4$), Native American or Alaska Native (6%, $n = 4$), Middle Eastern or North African (2%, $n = 1$), and Jamaican (2%, $n = 1$). Each participant was compensated with 1 credit for their psychology class.

Materials

A revised version of the CPC (Strauts & Blanton, 2015) was used to measure participants' opinions of political correctness. Criterion validation studies have confirmed that the CPC accurately predicts negative responses to politically incorrect speech (Strauts & Blanton, 2015). However, the original measure was left-leaning because all nine questions were indicative of a positive political correctness perspective. The revised version added three questions indicative of a negative political correctness opinion and altered the phrasing of three original questions, creating six questions leaning toward a positive political correctness opinion and six

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leaning toward a negative political correctness opinion (see Appendix). Participants responded using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*).

The POMS was created by the authors using Pixton, an online comic book creator. The 20-question measurement was developed by compiling examples of microaggressions, coding each example by theme, and creating comic strips to depict the scenarios. The POMS consisted of 16 comics depicting microinvalidations and microinsults, two comics depicting microassaults, and two control comics. The comics used in the present study can be accessed via Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/k3wz4. For each question, a comic strip was displayed on a Smart board for 15 seconds along with the question, "Do you perceive anything about this situation to be harmful or offensive?" Participants answered using a 5-point Likert scale and were asked to remain silent so as not to influence other participants. Two versions of the POMS were created in order to measure microaggression perception before and after diversity training. It was randomly decided via a coin flip before each experimental session which version of the POMS would be taken first, to ensure reliability between the versions.

Those in the prescriptive condition were given a condensed handout from the University of Southern California's academic affairs ("Recognizing Microaggressions," n.d.). The handout was adapted from Sue (2010) and gave information about the messages that microaggressions send. For the perspective-taking condition, participants were given a worksheet with a writing prompt and space to write. The prompt was modeled after Lindsey et al. (2015), where participants were asked to imagine themselves as a member of a marginalized ethnicity and write about the challenges that person might face.

Procedure

The North Central College institutional review board provided approval (#2017-60) for research with human subjects. Initially, participants were randomly assigned to one of the diversity training methods based on a coin flip. Upon arrival, participants were seated with at least one empty seat between each other. They were given an informed consent form and asked to carefully read through it before voluntarily signing. A manilla folder was placed in the center of the table and participants were told they would personally place their packets

in that folder after the experiment. Each participant was then given a packet of materials for the experiment, faced down.

When prompted, participants flipped over their packets and had 2 minutes to complete the CPC (see Appendix). Next, they were given detailed instructions on how to take the POMS. Comic strips were projected onto a whiteboard, with a number in the lower right-hand corner indicating the question number. They were directed to observe each storyboard carefully and answer the question in their packets, "Do you perceive anything about this situation to be harmful or offensive?" Responses were recorded using a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*definitely not*) to 5 (*definitely yes*) and each storyboard was displayed for 15 seconds. After completing the POMS pretest, participants underwent a diversity training session.

In the prescriptive condition, participants followed along in their packets as a handout was read aloud. Going through this handout took approximately 5 minutes. Participants in the perspective-taking condition were asked to imagine themselves as a member of a marginalized race, religion, or ethnicity. Then, they were given 5 minutes to write a short story about the challenges this person might experience in everyday life. After the training session, all participants took a posttest of the POMS and answered a brief demographic questionnaire. Once completed, participants placed their packets inside the manilla folder in the center of the table, given debriefing forms, thanked, and dismissed.

Results

A two-way Analysis of Variance was performed to evaluate the influence of two independent variables (diversity training method, opinion of political correctness) on participants' change in perception of microaggressions. There were two levels for the diversity training method (prescriptive, perspective-taking) and three levels of political correctness opinions (positive, neutral, negative). CPC scores were converted into discrete categories, with scores above zero categorized as *positive* ($N = 25$, $\mu = 9.96$), scores below zero categorized as *negative* ($N = 27$, $\mu = -7.41$), and scores equivalent to zero categorized as *neutral* ($N = 8$, $\mu = 0$). Given the current climate of bipartisan polarization, the authors made CPC scores categorical as a means to detect distinctions between groups associated with political affiliation. The main effect of political correctness opinion was not significant, $F(2, 54) = 0.11$, $p = .900$, $\eta_p^2 = .004$,

with similar results among positive (M = 7.40, SD = 8.54), negative (M = 6.67, SD = 9.39), and neutral (M = 7.00, SD = 10.43) CPC scores. Consequently, there was no significant difference between political correctness opinions, and the first hypothesis was rejected.

A one-way Analysis of Covariance was performed to evaluate the influence of diversity training method on participants' perceptions of microaggressions while controlling for political correctness opinion on a continuous scale. The main effect of diversity training method was statistically significant, $F(1, 54) = 10.03$, $p = .002$, $\eta_p^2 = .150$, with a higher change in perception for those in the prescriptive condition (M = 10.72, SD = 9.67) than those in the perspective-taking condition (M = 3.55, SD = 6.88; see Figure 1). Thus, a significant, opposite relationship was found regarding the second hypothesis. Finally, those with a negative political correctness opinion in the prescriptive training session had a mean increase in awareness of microaggressions (M = 9.40, SD = 11.46). Therefore, the predicted backfire response did not occur and the third hypothesis was rejected.

Discussion

The aim of this experiment was to evaluate the impact of various diversity training methods and political correctness opinions on perceptions of microaggressions. It was initially hypothesized that those with a positive political correctness opinion would experience a greater increase in awareness after diversity training than those with a negative

political correctness opinion. Results failed to find a significant difference in awareness of microaggressions based on one's opinion of political correctness. It was also hypothesized that those with a negative political correctness opinion in the prescriptive group would be less aware of microaggressions after the training. This hypothesis was also rejected, as these participants experienced an increase in perception similar to that of the other conditions. These findings suggest that the efficacy of diversity training does not depend on political correctness opinion, but it is also possible that the prescriptive condition was not an exact representation of political correctness. The prescriptive handout did not explicitly tell participants that they could not say, or act upon, the listed microaggressions; rather, it explained the subliminal messages which they send to members of marginalized races and ethnicities. Political correctness implies some type of restraint on expression (Loury, 1994); the handout merely suggested the elimination of certain phrases, but did not require it. It is also possible that the statistical significance was a fluke—a reflection of conformity in the social environment of the experimental session. Many of the examples listed in the handout were very similar to some of the comics on the POMS, so that by the posttest it was fairly clear to participants that the comics were portraying microaggressions. This, along with the knowledge that the trainer perceives microaggressions as detrimental, could lead participants to label situations as harmful or offensive even if they did not personally believe so. Indeed, political correctness can lead group members to self-censor if their beliefs differ from the majority, for fear of backlash or social ostracism (Loury, 1994).

It was also hypothesized that the perspective-taking training group would be more effective than the prescriptive group. The opposite was found; participants in the prescriptive training condition experienced a significant increase in their perceptions of microaggressions, while those in the perspective-taking condition did not. Perhaps our initial categorization was inaccurate because the prescriptive group might be more adequately described as a perspective-taking group. For those in the prescriptive condition, becoming aware of the metacommunications of microaggressions was a driving force to push them outside of their own experiential thoughts. In a sense, they were taking on the perspective of those with different life experiences. Meanwhile, the initially named perspective-taking group might be more accurately

FIGURE 1

Error bars: 95% CI
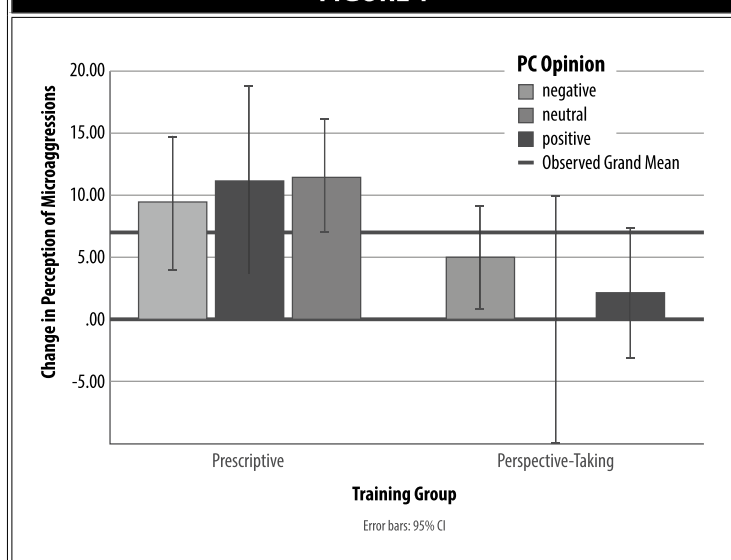
described as an introspection group. The logic behind this condition's diversity training method is that, by pondering the experiences of those with different life experiences, social comparison occurs, thereby reducing the confines dividing in-groups and out-groups (Lindsey et al., 2015). However, these participants only had access to their internal thoughts, rather than outside perspectives, leading to circular thinking, which was represented in many of the responses reinforcing stereotypes. One participant wrote that the most common challenges facing the African-American community were "single parent homes . . . Black on Black crime . . . and gangs." Another wrote, "I have a heavy Indian accent because I only know life on the reservation." These statements are as perplexing as they are problematic. They could easily be perceived as microaggressions, but may also reflect the miseducation that led to these conclusions in the first place. Regardless, the attitudes of these participants will not alter if they do not travel outside their own sphere of thinking.

It is important to note that the vast majority of participants in this study were White, and no participants self-identified as Black. This study occurred at a predominately White institution, which may have made participants particularly prone to perpetrating racial microaggressions. These results indicate the impact of diversity training on primarily White students, and may not be representative of other communities. It would be beneficial for future studies to evaluate the efficacy of diversity training in communities with majority people of color. Another limitation of this study was the method of communicating microaggressions. Comic strips are two-dimensional, unable to fully depict something as nuanced and multifaceted as microaggressions. For example, it would be difficult to create a clear comic strip portraying a White person speaking extra slowly to a person with a Chinese accent. This occurrence is common yet tricky to accurately illustrate via this medium, thus limiting the types of microaggressions which could be included on the POMS. Portraying microaggressions realistically and also within a controlled environment has emerged as one of the leading issues with their measurement. Previous studies have used role playing (Boysen, 2012), interviews (Ayón & Philbin, 2017), and even memes (Williams, Oliver, Aumer, & Meyers, 2016) to measure people's perceptions of microaggressions. However, the method does not matter if the assumptions made about microaggressions are unfounded to begin with.

In a critical review of microaggression research, Lilienfeld (2017) brought to attention the issue of mono-source bias. By definition, microaggressions lie in the eyes of their beholder, with their existence resting on a singular perspective. This is the exact opposite of critical multiplism, where a construct is examined from a variety of viewpoints in order to gain a broader understanding (Lilienfeld, 2017). Everyone's perception is valid, but there needs to be some sort of consensus on what constitutes a microaggression if it is to scientifically investigated. To date, only one study (Constantine, 2007) has examined interrater reliability in judgement of microaggressions, finding moderately high agreement ($r = .76$) between White counselors and African American clients. Future studies should investigate differences in perception between various communities, in order to come closer to answering the question—who, or what, determines if something is a microaggression?

Regardless of political correctness opinion, all people carry conscious and unconscious internal biases. These findings suggest that in order for perceptions of subtle bias to change, individuals must be exposed to differing perspectives. This line of thinking is consistent with intergroup contact theory, or the idea that forming positive, interdependent relationships with multiple members of an out-group leads to more positive attitudes of that community. It is one of the most effective and applicable methods of improving cross-cultural relations; for example, Bohmert and DeMaris (2015) found that having more interracial friendships is strongly associated with more positive racial attitudes. Then, in order to reduce internal racial biases, cooperative bonds must be formed with many people of various different backgrounds. The changes in perception detected in this study are a step in the right direction but should not be confused with altered internal biases. Future studies should examine whether changes in perceptions of microaggressions actually lead to fewer microaggression occurrences. Although it is unlikely that a one-time diversity training class will truly change deeply rooted racial schemas, exposing students and employees to the underlying messages that microaggressions send lays the groundwork for understanding. Because culture shapes reality, authentic intercultural relations will inevitably lead to misunderstandings. These differences in perception can be uncomfortable, but should be embraced and worked through in order to facilitate a better understanding of those

with different life experiences. Perhaps then the veil will be recognized and, eventually, begin to lift.

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Author Note. Nicole L. Smith, ⬤ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5833-2062, Department of Psychology, North Central College; Elise J. Percy, Department of Psychology, North Central College.

Nicole L. Smith is now at the School of Social Service Administration at University of Chicago.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Nicole L. Smith, School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, 60637. Contact: nlsmith1@uchicago.edu

APPENDIX

Concern for Political Correctness

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements by circling the number that corresponds with your answer.
(* denotes reverse-scored)

1. I get anxious when I hear someone use politically incorrect language.
2. *I dislike political correctness because it limits what I can and cannot say.
3. *I do not educate people around me about the political meaning of their words.
4. The use of politically incorrect language makes me very uncomfortable.
5. *Language other people deem "politically incorrect" does not bother me.
6. I get mad when I hear someone use politically incorrect language
7. *People get too sensitive about what other people say.
8. When a person uses politically incorrect words, I point it out to them to help educate them about the issues.
9. When people show political ignorance in their choice of words, I call this to their attention.
10. *Political correctness undermines my freedom of speech.
11. *I get angry when someone tells me I can't say something because it offends them.
12. Even if no harm was intended, I correct people if they say something that is politically incorrect.