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Perceptions of Microaggressions and Consequences Differ by Political Orientation

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Abstract

Women rated whether discrimination occurred in a vignette depicting one of several types of gender microaggressions. Political liberals were more likely than moderates and conservatives to perceive discrimination. Liberals were also more likely to perceive more negative consequences from sexist behavior.

Introduction

Overt sexism may not be as commonplace now as in the past, but it still occurs subtly and leads to negative outcomes for victims (Basford, Offermann, & Behrend, 2014; Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995), as demonstrated in the recent Supreme Court vetting of Justice Kavanaugh that has elicited comments such as “boys will be boys.” One type of subtle sexism occurs as microaggressions, which are small, almost ambiguous acts or comments that intentionally or unintentionally convey hostility or the belittling of the target (Sue et al., 2007).

Women are more likely than men to perceive gender microaggressions (Basford, Offermann, & Behrend, 2014), and perceptions of microaggressions can also be affected by political orientation (Harper, 2017). In this study, we assessed whether political orientation would affect how women viewed microaggressions against a person of their gender. We hypothesized that political liberals would be more likely than political conservatives to perceive actions as microaggressions or discriminatory behavior and to anticipate negative outcomes for women targeted by these microaggressions, especially when the sexist actions were more subtle.

Method

Participants (N = 402)

- 242 female online workers and 160 undergraduate students (*overall*: 79.4% Caucasian; *M*_{age} = 33.07, *SD* = 15.13, ages 17-72; 51.4% liberal, 27.9% moderate, 20.7% conservative)

Procedure

- Amazon Mechanical Turk participants completed the study online. UNI student participants completed the study online or in a computer lab on campus with a researcher.
- Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions where they read vignettes depicting:
 - Microassault, Microinsult, Microinvalidation, or No microaggression/control (Basford, Offermann, & Behrend, 2014)

Measures

- Perceived microaggression scale revised (Basford, Offermann, & Behrend, 2014; 4 items; $\alpha = .89$)
 - “David’s actions were discriminatory.”
- Projected negative work outcomes scale revised (Basford, Offermann, & Behrend, 2014; 4 items; $\alpha = .85$)
 - “This interaction will have no negative consequences on Janice’s work performance.”
- Political Orientation scale (Inbar & Lammers, 2012; 4 items; $\alpha = .96$)
 - “How would you describe your political orientation?”
- Other measures not used in this analysis (e.g., Propensity to See Prejudice, Benevolent Sexism Inventory, Protestant Work Ethic, Enjoyment of Sexualization Scale, Revised Racial Microaggression Scale, Revised Gender Microaggression Scale)
- Demographic questions (e.g. sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, religious affiliation, and level of education or academic major)

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Vignettes

Microassault

Janice works as a client sales representative. During her performance evaluation, her manager, David brings up this issue: “Janice, you’re doing a great job here at our firm, but I wanted to talk to you about something. You see, some of our clients have expressed concern about your appearance...more particularly your clothing style, and how it might not convey the right message of professionalism that this firm stands for.” Janice says, “I don’t understand. I am not wearing anything inappropriate, they’re just fashionable skirt suits...” David replies, “Well, that’s just it, it’s a little too...feminine” (Basford, Offermann, & Behrend, 2014).

Microinsult

Janice, an associate within the finance department, is discussing her performance appraisal ratings with her boss, David. During the meeting, Janice was reporting back on her accomplishments for the quarter. They discuss a formal presentation that Janice had single-handedly developed and delivered to a group of key potential clients. After Janice briefs David on the outcome of this presentation, David asks, “So, who helped you with your presentation?” (Basford, Offermann, & Behrend, 2014).

Microinvalidation

Janice is an HR associate at Pendlebrook, waiting to meet with her boss, David. Janice is eager to discuss her work on a recent presentation about the “State of the Company,” meant for a senior-level audience at the firm (including the CEO). When her boss looks at the first few slides of Janice’s presentation, he notices a great deal of focus on the statistics associated with women advancing in corporate America. David says, “I’m not sure we need to focus on this aspect. I don’t see how it’s a problem. Let’s just take these slides out” (Basford, Offermann, & Behrend, 2014).

Control

Janice is a first-year associate at Pendlebrook, working in the human resources department. She has gained a great deal of experience so far at the firm. Janice’s boss, David, is about to give Janice her first performance review. The boss starts off the meeting, “Janice, we’re really happy to have you on our team. In order to help you move along in the company, I’d like to offer you additional opportunities for training. I know you’ve learned a lot from your colleagues, but we all have some room for improvement” (Basford, Offermann, & Behrend, 2014).

Results

Liberals perceived actions as microaggressions more than did conservatives or moderates, $F(2, 389) = 7.816, p < .001, \eta^2 = .039, 90\% \text{ CI } [.0113, .0718]$. Participants also correctly viewed the control condition as depicting less discrimination from the other vignettes, $F(3, 389) = 62.522, p < .001, \eta^2 = .325, 90\% \text{ CI } [.2608, .3779]$. There was no interaction, $F(6, 389) = 1.303, p = .255, \eta^2 = .020, 90\% \text{ CI } [.0000, .0327]$ (Fig. 1).

Liberals perceived that more negative work outcomes would result from the interaction depicted in the vignette than did conservatives or moderates, $F(2, 389) = 4.730, p = .009, \eta^2 = .024, 90\% \text{ CI } [.0034, .0511]$. Participants viewed the control condition as less likely to result in negative work outcomes than other conditions; they also viewed the microinsult condition as less negative than the other two conditions, $F(3, 389) = 44.988, p < .001, \eta^2 = .258, 90\% \text{ CI } [.1942, .3108]$. There was no interaction, $F(6, 389) = 1.60, p = .146, \eta^2 = .024, 90\% \text{ CI } [.0000, .0396]$ (Fig. 2).

Discussion

These results suggest that liberals are more likely to view gender-related discrimination as a problem and as having consequences for the women involved than are moderates or conservatives, and that these differences may be especially apparent with more obvious forms of discrimination. Women’s perceptions of discrimination and consequences may be more influenced by their political orientation than their gender; this also may reflect the current political climate (e.g. controversies surrounding the Kavanaugh hearing).

Discrimination as a Function of Condition and Political Orientation

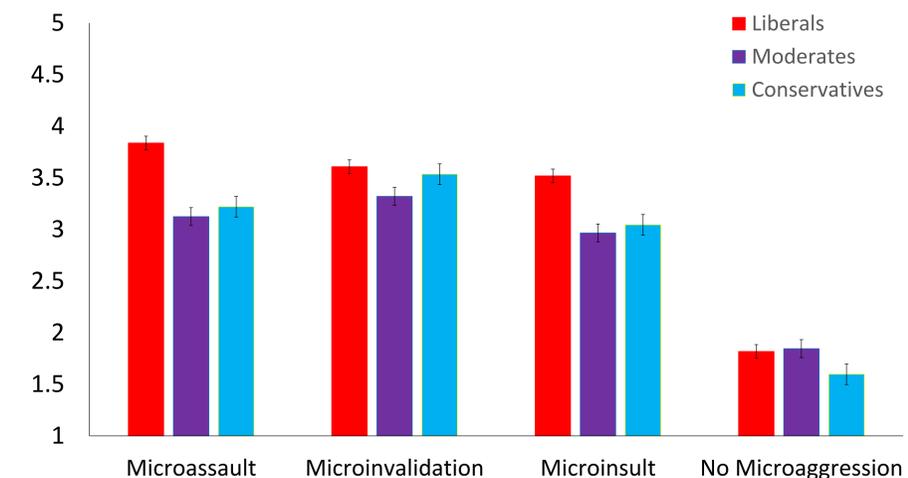


Figure 1. Note: The error bars represent the standard error for each condition.

Work Outcomes as a Function of Condition and Political Orientation

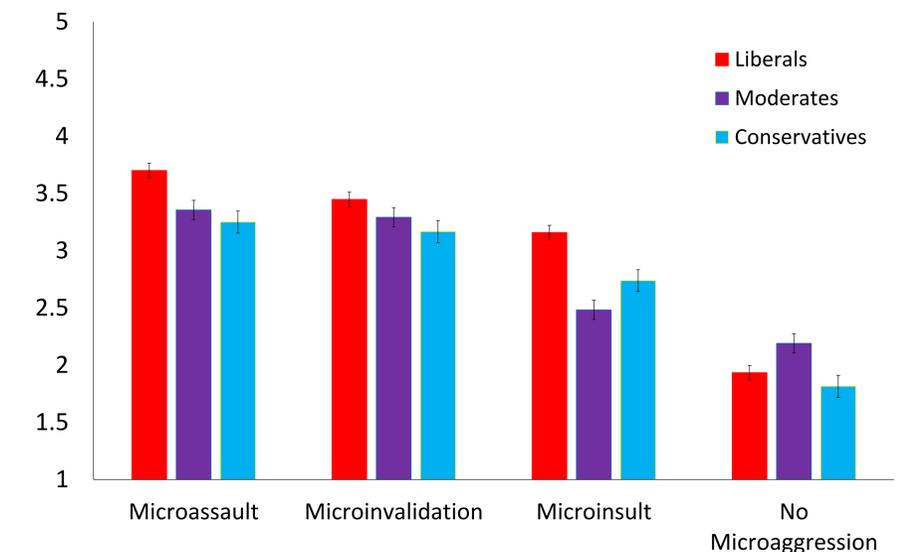


Figure 2. Note: The error bars represent the standard error for each condition.