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**Microaggression and Changing Moral Cultures**

By Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning

These days, if you have spent much time on a college campus, you have probably heard of microaggressions. The term dates to the 1970s, but only in recent years has it become prominent among campus activists and others on the political left. Microaggressions are remarks perceived as sexist, racist, or otherwise offensive to a marginalized social group. Those popularizing the concept say that even though the offenses are minor and sometimes unintentional, repeatedly experiencing them causes members of minority groups great harm, which must be redressed.

Some students publicize microaggressions, often through such websites as the [Microaggressions Project](http://www.microaggressions.com/) and individual sites at Oberlin, Carleton, Willamette, St. Olaf, and other colleges. On these sites people have complained about, for example, a non-Hispanic person using the word *futbol*, a mother asking her daughter if she’d met any nice boys at college, someone telling a woman in her 30s that she looks too young to be a professor, and someone asking the white mother of a black daughter if the child is hers.

Some colleges have moved toward an institutionalized recognition of microaggression. The student government of Ithaca College, for example, passed a bill calling for a campuswide online system through which students could anonymously report microaggressions. The University of California system has issued [guidelines](http://www.ucop.edu/academic-personnel-programs/_files/seminars/Tool_Recognizing_Microaggressions.pdf) for faculty members warning that statements such as "America is a melting pot" or "I believe the most qualified person should get the job" could be microaggressions.

In response to that document, the UCLA law professor Eugene Volokh [wrote](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2015/06/16/uc-teaching-faculty-members-not-to-criticize-race-based-affirmative-action-call-america-melting-pot-and-more/), "Well, I’m happy to say that I’m just going to keep on microaggressing." Clearly not everyone is on board with these kinds of policies.

We can better understand complaints about microaggression and the reactions to them if we understand that each side of the debate draws from a different moral culture. Those calling attention to microaggressions have rejected the morality dominant among middle-class Americans during the 20th century — what sociologists and historians have sometimes called a dignity culture, which abhors private vengeance and encourages people to go to the police or use the courts when they are seriously harmed. Less serious offenses might be ignored, and certainly any merely verbal offense should be. Parents thus teach their children to say, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me."

Microaggression complaints make clear that this is no longer settled morality. Those who see microaggressions as a serious problem and who bring up minor and unintentional slights reject the idea that words can’t hurt, that slights should be brushed off, that even overt insults should be ignored. This attitude reveals the emergence of a new moral culture, one we call victimhood culture, since it valorizes victimhood.

Microaggression complaints are just one manifestation; from the same circles of campus activists also come calls for trigger warnings to alert sensitive students to course material that might disturb them, and the creation of "safe spaces" to shield students from offensive ideas.

But what accounts for microaggression complaints and the emergence of victimhood culture? Moral cultures are the products of social conditions. Donald Black, a sociologist at the University of Virginia, argues that acts of social dominance — such as belittling someone with insults — are more offensive in places or relationships where people are relatively equal. Likewise, acts of cultural intolerance, such as disparaging another ethnic group or gender, are more offensive in settings that have a high degree of cultural diversity.

Extending these ideas, offenses against historically disadvantaged social groups have become more taboo precisely because different groups are now more equal than in the past, such as in the days of Jim Crow or when homosexual behavior was a crime. And sensitivity to any act that might be perceived as racist, homophobic, and so on is greater in locations that have more diversity of such groups and equality among them, such as in college-student populations. Ironically, the sensitivity to oppression that leads so many students to condemn even implicit and unintentional slights develops because they participate in one of the most egalitarian and tolerant social milieus in human history.

Today, those whose morality is rooted in the ideals of dignity see microaggression complainants and others who highlight their victimhood as thin-skinned, uncharitable, and perhaps delusional. Those who draw from the newer morality of victimhood, meanwhile, see their critics as insensitive, privileged, and perhaps bigoted.

Surely each side would benefit from a better understanding of the other. Debates might be more fruitful, and relationships on campus more collegial, if we more carefully considered the moral concerns of those who disagree with us. That does not mean the conflict engendered by this moral divide won’t or shouldn’t go on.

The conflict is important because its outcome will determine the fate of higher education. Victimhood culture and its manifestations on campus threaten the goals of the academy. Honest inquiry and communication are bound to offend someone, and, if colleges are to continue, they must have a climate in which people are less — not more — prone to outrage than elsewhere.

Still, although our sympathies are with the older culture of dignity, we see merit in the concern for victims and the sensitivity to suffering that undergird victimhood culture.

What will be the fate of the dignity and victimhood cultures? One might triumph over the other, but another possibility is that this culture clash will result in a new kind of morality — perhaps one that will enable colleges to function as places where diverse scholars can freely pursue the truth and work peaceably alongside one another, even while disagreeing profoundly.

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