MICROAGGRESSIONS AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

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By

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I answer three central questions: What are microaggressions? In what ways are they morally significant? What should our responsibility-holding and responsibility-taking practices be regarding microaggressive conduct? Politically and morally, these questions gain their importance because of the role that microaggressions play in sustaining unjust, oppressive social conditions and the impact they can have on individual microaggressees.

I argue that microaggressions should be defined as interpersonal behaviors that implicitly signal the microaggressor is biased in a way that supports a larger pattern of unjust prejudice and oppression in a broader social context. The dissertation carefully details some of the most profound moral harms associated with microaggressions by focusing on the ways they can challenge self-respect, self-trust, and the moral health of interpersonal relationships. I defend a set of communicative norms detailing responsibility-holding and responsibility-taking practices between microaggressors and microaggressees. This account of responsibility focuses on reactive attitudes and their dialogical, interactive nature. Working within this framework, I explain what I take to be a minimally decent approach to taking responsibility for microaggressive behavior as well as outlining possibilities for supererogatory responses. To conclude, I respond to popular objections microaggressors face and show that, even according to the
understanding of moral responsibility that these objections presuppose, these objections are less powerful than generally assumed.

Overall, the dissertation helps give voice to microaggressees by validating their experiences with microaggressive behaviors. Finally, this dissertation provides us with an understanding of moral responsibility that avoids reproducing and supporting systems of oppression.
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# Table of Contents

Introduction                                                                                           .................................................. 1

0.1. Chapter Overviews                                                                                      ........................................ 5

0.2. Central Takeaways                                                                                       .................................... 13

Part I                                                                                                      .................................................. 16

Chapter 1: What are Microaggressions? A Conceptual Analysis                                               ........................................ 16

1.1. Defining “Microaggression”                                                                                ........................................ 19

1.2. “But I’m Not Racist!”: Depsychologizing Microaggressions                                               ........................................ 30

1.3. Problems with Dominant Accounts of “Microaggression”                                                ........................................ 36

1.4. Do Microaggressions Promote Victimhood Culture?                                                       ........................................ 48

Chapter 2: The Moral Harms of Microaggressions                                                            ........................................ 52

2.1. Microaggressions and Internalized Oppression                                                          ........................................ 53

2.2. Microaggressions and Self-Respect                                                                     ........................................ 58

2.3. Microaggressions and Self-Trust                                                                       ........................................ 66

2.4. Microaggressions and Moral Damage to Relationships                                                  ........................................ 75

Chapter 3: Microaggressions, Moral Concern, and Responsibility                                              ........................................ 81

3.1. Affectability Imbalances and Invisibility in Narratives                                               ........................................ 83

3.2. Models of Responsibility and Affectability Imbalances                                                 ........................................ 85

3.3. Responding to Microaggressions: Communicating Moral Concern                                          ........................................ 91

3.4. Microaggressions and Minimal Decency                                                                  ........................................ 98

3.5. Microaggressors Un-Sutured                                                                          ........................................ 104

Part II                                                                                                      .................................................. 113

Introduction                                                                                           .................................................. 113
Chapter 4: Responsibility, Control, and Awareness .................................................. 117

4.1. Don’t Resent Me! ................................................................................................. 117

4.2. Is Feeling in Control Necessary for Being in Control? ..................................... 120

4.3. “I Did What?”: The Argument from Awareness ............................................. 132

4.4. Conclusion ......................................................................................................... 139

Chapter 5: Epistemic Negligence and Microaggressions......................................... 141

5.1. Epistemic Negligence Condition ....................................................................... 144

5.2. An Objection: Sher’s Partial Epistemic Condition .......................................... 156

5.3. Microaggressions and Epistemic Negligence .................................................... 161

Conclusion ............................................................................................................ 181

References ............................................................................................................. 183
Introduction

It is Friday night and Jerome is going on a date to the movies. Eager for his big night out, he arrives at the theater a few minutes early. He sits on a bench waiting for his date to show up and a white couple walks over to him. “Where are the bathrooms?” they ask. Jerome replies that he does not work at the theater and is not sure where the restrooms are located. The couple apologizes for their mistake and moves on. Jerome is a black man, and this is not the first time he has been mistaken for a service worker. Whenever this happens he feels conflicted. On the one hand, Jerome feels frustrated, embarrassed, and a bit indignant. In this case, the couple’s behavior reinforces the idea that, because he is black, he must be there to serve them rather than be a paying customer. Not only is this message inaccurate, it is also insulting and fits into a larger pattern of racial injustice and discriminatory practices. Thus, while these behaviors are interpersonal, they are related to systemic white supremacy and social structures that devalue and oppress black people both socially and economically. Yet, Jerome also realizes that the couple means no offense. They were not explicitly racist towards him. They were polite and courteous and even apologized for their mistake. But, to Jerome, it seems nonetheless that the couple has done something morally troubling and failed to properly take responsibility for their behaviors.

In the past decade, researchers and social justice activists have come to call behaviors like the couple’s question “microaggressions.” While psychiatrist Chester Pierce was the first to coin this term in the 1970s, it was not widely taken up until after 2007 when Derald Sue and colleagues published a paper that popularized the concept.1 Sue’s definition of the term is currently the most used:

Microaggressions are the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group.\textsuperscript{2}

Since 2007, microaggressions have been the focus of an ever-growing body of research that investigates the psychological and health impacts of microaggressive conduct on microaggressees.\textsuperscript{3}

In this dissertation, I, too, am concerned with the impact of microaggressive behaviors; however, my research departs from existing literature in a few key ways. First, the project focuses on the \textit{normative} implications of microaggressive behaviors and the \textit{moral} effects that microaggressive behaviors have on microaggressees. Second, I ask, “what are the communicative norms detailing responsibility-holding practices between microaggressors and microaggressees?” For example, how is Jerome justified in responding to the white couple? How should \textit{they} respond to him if he lets them know their behavior is morally troublesome? And what if the couple dismisses the significance of their behavior by saying they do not intend offense or did not know the moral implications of their actions? Given the subtle nature of microaggressions—\textit{viz.} the couple did not say, “because you are black we assume you work here and are here to help us”—these sorts of potentially exculpating responses are common in exchanges regarding microaggressions. Do rejoinders like this let the couple off the hook, morally speaking, for their microaggression? This moral question is well outside the scope of

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\textsuperscript{2} Derald Wing Sue, \textit{Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation} (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010), 5.

empirical research that is focused on the psychological and health impacts of microaggressions. Ultimately, I will argue these kinds of responses are not exculpating.

I argue that microaggressesee are often justified in voicing their concerns about microaggressive conduct to microaggressors, and I outline what both minimally morally decent and supererogatory responses look like from microaggressors in response to these concerns. Along the way, I defend a novel account of “microaggression,” and detail the ways in which exposure to microaggressive behavior can impact microaggressesee’s experiences of their own moral agency. Furthermore, I argue that microaggressive behavior can disrupt morally rich relationships—often based on shared expectations for trust and hope—between microaggressors and microaggressesee. I assert that in many cases, we can hold microaggressors morally responsible for their microaggressions even if they are unaware of their behaviors, do not experience a sense of control over their behaviors, or do not know the significance of their behaviors. To argue this last point, the dissertation presents a novel account of epistemic moral negligence.

The dissertation’s focus on microaggressions relates to a trend in the philosophy of racism and the psychology of racial cognition in which researchers focus on covert or subtle forms of racism undertaken by those who do not consciously endorse racist beliefs. Literature on implicit racism, implicit bias, and moral responsibility for these phenomena make up this ever-growing body of work. The discourse in this literature tends to center on the underlying,
cognitive mechanisms that cause automatic, biased judgments. And, as such, debates are framed in such a way that makes holders of implicit biases (and similar cognitive phenomena) the center of attention and scrutiny. If we think about the bulk of microaggressive behavior as representing a symptom of implicitly held biases, this dissertation can be seen as focusing on the products of implicit biases.

The project, however, departs from mainstream philosophical investigations into covert and unconsciously perpetrated forms of racism (and other forms of oppression) in a couple of ways. First, it clearly delineates a focus on behaviors as opposed to mental states. While the literature on implicit bias focuses mostly on responsibility for particular patterns of cognition that can result in biased behaviors, the focus of this dissertation is on the behaviors that these psychologies can produce. By emphasizing behavior rather than mental states, the project takes what I find to be the most morally troubling part of implicit biases as a focal point: the fact that they can lead to racist, sexist, or otherwise oppressive conduct.

Second, this project puts the needs and concerns of microaggressees front and center by asking whether microaggressees are justified in voicing concerns about microaggressions. This framing departs from the literature on implicit bias that tends to take the perspective of those who possess implicit biases as central and thus as dictating what sorts of questions get posed. My framing prioritizes the experiences of oppressed and marginalized people and makes the project fit in line with literature in feminist theory and critical race theory that often takes liberatory or empowering goals as a central aim. The project thereby tackles familiar questions in the

responsibility literature from a different perspective than is normally taken. In this way, the project pushes work in analytic philosophy to be more responsive to the needs and realities of women, racial minorities, sexual minorities, and those oppressed in other pervasive and systematic ways.

0.1. Chapter Overviews

The dissertation is divided into two parts. In part one—chapters one, two and three—I forward my positive arguments. In part two—chapters four and five—I respond to objections.

Chapter one has three objectives. Broadly speaking, the first is to forward social justice aims, the second is to aid in empirical research, and the third is to identify microaggressive forms of racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression that have not yet been well-articulated in the literature.

In order to understand the first objective (forwarding social justice aims), consider what I call the “Campbell-Manning view” of microaggressions. This view holds that publicly drawing attention to microaggressions will foster “‘moral dependence’ and an atrophying of the ability to handle small interpersonal matters on one’s own.”5 “Moral cultures of victimhood,” they argue, “create a society of constant and intense moral conflict as people compete for status as victims or as defenders of victims.”6 Because of this, they argue that a focus on microaggressions is morally misguided and works to perpetuate “cultures of victimhood” which stand in stark contrast to

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past, more desirable “cultures of dignity.” The Campbell-Manning view thereby rejects the idea that microaggressions deserve the attention they get in social justice movements and social scientific research that place microaggressions at the forefront of discussions on racism, sexism, and homophobia. Instead, they argue, microaggressions should be handled interpersonally like other minor conflicts that arise between parties without public scrutiny.

I offer a novel account of “microaggression” that represents a response to the Campbell-Manning view. My account differs from Derald Sue’s dominant understanding of the term. I argue that a microaggression is an interpersonal behavior that implicitly signals the microaggressor is biased in a way that supports a larger pattern of unjust prejudice and oppression in a broader social context. By showing that microaggressions are behaviors that gain their meaning and significance by connecting up to larger, socio-historical facts and contingencies, I expose a major flaw in the Campbell-Manning view: it treats microaggressions as standalone, discrete acts and fails to adequately recognize microaggressions as part of a larger social picture. Defining microaggressions as I do allows us to see the importance and significance of having public conversation about microaggressions, since the definition makes it clear that microaggressions are part of a larger pattern of injustice that cannot be tackled merely by interpersonal interventions. The first chapter therefore functions to debunk the Campbell-Manning view and repositions a public focus on microaggressions as morally laudable and worthwhile for those seeking to combat important forms of prejudice, injustice, and disadvantage.

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8 Sue et al., “Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life,” June 5, 2007; Sue, Microaggressions in Everyday Life.
Along with exposing where the Campbell-Manning view goes wrong, the first chapter offers a formal and philosophically rigorous definition of what microaggressions are. This account paves the way for more conceptually sound research on microaggressions. Social scientists who have investigated the psychological effects of microaggressions on microaggressees have based much of their work on Sue’s account of the concept. I argue that this account is imprecise, and, ultimately, not fine-grained enough. In addition, my definition’s focus on context encourages research that utilizes a multilevel research approach. Researchers have flagged multilevel analyses as the most effective when it comes to future microaggressions research.\footnote{Anthony D. Ong and Anthony L. Burrow, “Microaggressions and Daily Experience: Depicting Life as It Is Lived,” \textit{Perspectives on Psychological Science} 12, no. 1 (January 1, 2017): 173–75.} I therefore offer a definition that I hope can support effective and conceptually sound future research on microaggressions.

The third and final significant upshot of the first chapter is the one I take to be the most philosophically fruitful. Concepts such as “implicit bias,” “aversive racism,” and “implicit racism” all exist in the literature on racism. What is salient, distinctive, and defining about these concepts is the \textit{unconscious} or \textit{implicit} nature of prejudices. According to the literature, the perpetrator’s psychological state therefore plays a significant role when it comes to fleshing out what is distinctive about these kinds of racism. Did the perpetrator know he was biased? Was he unconscious of his prejudice? In contrast, by defining a microaggression as an act or behavior that \textit{implicitly signals} bias, my view carves out a new way to categorize and group oppressive behaviors. Specifically, the perpetrators’ psychological state is not what does the work when it comes to distinguishing microaggressions from other kinds of oppressive behavior. Instead, I argue that what conceptually divides microaggressions from other forms of racism is the \textit{way} in
which information is communicated (via implicit signals) regardless of the psychological state of the perpetrator. The chapter therefore forwards a new way of distinguishing between different kinds of oppressive behavior.

The overarching task of chapter two is to highlight some of the ways in which microaggressions are morally damaging. I argue that the particular structure of microaggressions makes them especially harmful when it comes to microaggressesee’s self-experiences as moral agents. In particular, I make plausible the thesis that exposure to microaggressions can lead to internalized oppression. I contend that this, in turn, can cause microaggressesees to develop a diminished sense of self-respect and an increased level of self-distrust. Both self-respect and self-trust are necessary for maintaining a positive appraisal of oneself as a moral agent. Thus, microaggressions can threaten microaggressesees’ sense of belonging in the broader community of moral agents. Furthermore, a miscalibrated sense of self-trust makes it easier for patterns of microaggressions to go uninterrupted, since it makes it more difficult for microaggressesees to obtain the self-confidence needed to speak out against oppressive treatment. The fact that microaggressions can cause serious moral harm to individuals helps us to more fully comprehend that, no matter how innocuous or unimportant they may seem, microaggressions can have alarming ethical ramifications. Furthermore, this widespread effect of microaggressions helps to undergird large-scale patterns of injustice that thrive when oppressed individuals view themselves as less deserving or less capable moral agents.

In chapter two I also argue that microaggressions can threaten relationships, since they have the capacity to negatively affect our normative expectations and moral appraisals of others and of ourselves. Thinking about moral damage to relationships encourages us to think more broadly about how oppression affects entities beyond simply those who are “oppressed.” To
many people, close relationships—between spouses, family, friends, coworkers, etc.—are what matter most. Highlighting the messy complications that microaggressions can pose for these types of relationships also helps to destabilize the view the microaggressive behaviors are insignificant.

By focusing on the interpersonal effects that microaggressions can have, chapter two encourages us to think about the insidious ways that structural oppression can creep into our most intimate relationships and gnaw at their foundations. While social scientists have documented some of the ways in which microaggressive behaviors can negatively affect the mental health of microaggressees, this analysis fails to capture subtle yet significant shifts in relationships that can occur due to microaggressions. Overall, then, chapter two emphasizes the moral effects of microaggressions, and reminds us that structural oppression can lead to interpersonal behaviors that can shape us, as well as our relationships, in intimate and deep cutting ways.

In chapter three I consider what responsible agency entails in the wake of microaggressive behavior for both microaggressors and microaggressees. Specifically, I ask, “As microaggressees are we presumptively justified in voicing moral concern to microaggressors in the face of microaggressions?” After answering this question affirmatively, I ask, “What constitutes a minimally decent answer to microaggressees’ justified, voiced moral concerns?” To help flesh out what a minimally decent response looks like, I begin by outlining some of the ways in which microaggressors can fail to appropriately answer microaggressees’ concerns. I argue that a minimally decent answer to these moral concerns must recognize and respect the microaggressees’ moral agency, treat their moral concerns as moral concerns, and engage in a type of communicative exchange that is “co-reactive.” Co-reactive exchange between
microaggressor and microaggressee involves both parties responding normatively to expressed reactive attitudes such as anger, resentment, or forgiveness, in such a way that sets them on a trajectory toward moral repair. To conclude, I suggest what good answers from microaggressors can look like—i.e., ones that go above and beyond microaggresses’ justified expectations.

By focusing on the communicative norms associated with microaggressions, I provide an account of microaggressions and moral responsibility-taking practices that highlight the dialogical and social nature of “holding responsible” and “taking responsibility.” I also aim to avoid producing a narrative that erases or minimizes the important role that microaggresses play in microaggressive exchange. The chapter is meant to empower microaggresses to express moral concerns in response to microaggressions and to supply microaggressors with the resources to proceed responsibly in the wake of their microaggressive behaviors.

Voicing one’s frustration with microaggressive conduct also represents a challenge to the prejudice and biases signaled by microaggressions, and thus this chapter exposes a point of intervention into cycles of oppression that perpetuate such biases. Finally, by focusing on the dialogical expression of moral concern and reactive attitudes, the chapter reminds us that concepts relating to moral responsibility matter philosophically because they can help guide our interpersonal interactions and relationships.

Unfortunately, microaggresses’ voiced concerns about microaggressions are sometimes met with denial and other kinds of responses that reinforce the idea that microaggresses are not entitled to feel the way that they do. While the picture of responsibility-holding practices I forward in chapters one through three of the dissertation works to cut against these objections, I adopt an alternative approach to responding to these objections in part two of the dissertation (chapters four and five); namely, I work within the framework of moral responsibility
presupposed by these objections in order to respond to them. I take this approach for two central reasons: First, I want my responses to be compelling to those forwarding the objections, even in cases where objectors do not agree with the view of responsibility-holding practices I outline in part one. By working within the general framework of responsibility that these objections presuppose, I show that, by their own lights, these objections are less powerful than often assumed. Second, by working with this alternative approach to understanding moral responsibility, I forward an interpretation of this approach to responsibility that helps liberate it from some of its troubling, racist, and otherwise oppressive implications. Lastly, this overall strategy helps add to and inform microaggresses’s strategies for answering responses that they will likely encounter.

In chapter four I consider objections that imply that certain phenomenological experiences related to one’s behaviors—including the experience of control and awareness of one’s actions—are necessary conditions for holding microaggressors morally responsible. Consider microaggressors who claim that they did not feel a sense of control over their behaviors or that they were not aware of their behaviors. For these reasons, microaggressors may argue that microaggresses’s moral concerns are unfounded, and that microaggressors should not have to take responsibility for their actions via the pattern of co-reactive exchange I delineate in chapter three. These types of objections tend to short circuit the patterns of communication I argue are needed to repair relationships between microaggresseses and microaggressors.

To respond to these objections, I begin by reconstructing them, putting them in more philosophical and formalized terms. I then answer the objections by working with Fischer and Ravizza’s account of “guidance control.” I adopt this method because their account is prominent in the field and represents the sort of account to which those forwarding the objection would
likely be sympathetic. By showing that, according to Fischer and Ravizza, these objections tend to fail, I construct a response to these objections that I hope will seem plausible to likely objectors. I show that guidance control, and thus moral responsibility-holding practices, do not require the sensation of control or awareness that are regularly cited as absent when it comes to microaggressive behaviors. Because microaggressors who do not feel like they are in control of their microaggressions can nonetheless possess guidance control, I argue that we can justly press forward with responsibility-holding practices, despite objections to the contrary.

This chapter thereby extends and clarifies Fischer and Ravizza’s explanation of guidance control. By making explicit just how this theory can accommodate actions over which we lack a sense of control or of which we are unaware, this chapter helps make theories of “guidance control” more effective tools for resisting racist behavior. Theories of responsibility that fail to carve out unintentional racism as something for which we can be held morally responsible perpetuate racism and white supremacy. It is no coincidence that the structures that produce and sustain white supremacy often make these racist behaviors seem uncontrollable, inevitable, or just plain unnoticeable. When behaviors that sustain white supremacy (or other unjust and oppressive social configurations) feel uncontrollable or unnoticeable to perpetrators, the system can continue uninterrupted. Theories of moral responsibility that allow for these behaviors to continue therefore represent yet another site in which white dominance, racism, and other forms of oppression are enacted.

By explicating Fischer and Ravizza’s account of guidance control in this chapter, I highlight the theories’ ability to support anti-racist efforts to hold unintentional or accidental racists accountable. This move helps to make more of the moral responsibility literature, and, more generally, more of the ethics literature, useful for efforts to resist racism. Given the
historical tendency of professional philosophy to erase, ignore, and justify racism, this chapter therefore helps push back against patterns of racism that are reproduced by philosophical theory.

In the fifth and final chapter, I consider another popular objection used to halt co-reactive exchange between microaggressor and microaggressee: that microaggressors who do not know the negative moral significance of their behaviors cannot be held responsible for their microaggressions. By adopting the general framework of responsibility this objection presupposes and introducing a novel understanding of epistemic negligence that works within this framework, I show that, in some cases, microaggressors can be held morally responsible for their microaggressive conduct despite not knowing the moral significance of their behaviors. To support my claim, I defend a novel set of conditions for epistemic negligence. By explaining how microaggressors sometimes meet these conditions, I show that they can be held responsible for their behaviors even when the moral significance of such behaviors is unknown to the microaggressor.

Chapter five demonstrates how ignorance about white supremacy is, in many cases, an example of moral negligence. For this reason, we can often be held morally responsible for our actions that stem from such ignorance. As with chapter four, chapter five therefore produces moral arguments and principles within a tradition of the moral responsibility literature that has seldom been used to pursue anti-racist (or otherwise anti-oppressive) objectives.

0.2. Central Takeaways

Overall, the dissertation leaves us with several concrete payoffs. It offers a refined definition of “microaggression” that can help conceptually strengthen the literature on microaggressions. The definition helps show why microaggressions are effective tools for sustaining oppressive social conditions and makes obvious the connection between these interpersonal behaviors and large-
scale patterns of injustice. By depsychologizing the concept, the definition avoids relying on an assessment of either the microaggresssee’s or the microaggressor’s mental state in order to make judgments about what behaviors count as microaggressive.

The project also presents readers with a (non-exhaustive) catalogue of the moral harms that can result from microaggressive behavior. This list helps support larger efforts to acknowledge and address marginalization and oppression. The project therefore provides these political efforts with more philosophical backing and makes the case that interpersonal behaviors should not be ignored when it comes to tackling systemic injustice.

In addition, this dissertation offers a framework for thinking about responsibility-holding and responsibility-taking practices related to microaggressive behavior that foregrounds a communicative, dialogical approach. This narrative about microaggressions and moral responsibility is focused on both microaggressors and microaggressseees and aimed at facilitating moral repair. This approach helps support a radical shift in how we think about moral responsibility and reactive attitudes.

The project works to interpret a popular account in the moral responsibility literature in such a way that supports anti-oppressive aims. And I offer a view of moral negligence that helps show that, in many cases, ignorance about oppression can be culpable. The result is a formalized account of moral negligence that helps support political efforts to resist phenomena such as white ignorance that perpetuate structural racism and other forms of oppression. On one hand, my account of epistemic negligence exposes the fact that many microaggressors who do not know the moral significance of their behaviors really ought to understand this. On the other hand, the account highlights the ways in which systematic, oppressive epistemic barriers can prevent people from acquiring the evidence and interpretive tools necessary for understanding that their
microaggressive behaviors are morally impactful. The argument thus helps us get a firmer understanding of the role that epistemic barriers play in promoting oppression.

Aside from these tangible takeaways, the dissertation helps give voice to microaggresses by validating their experiences with and expressions of reactive attitudes in the wake of microaggressive behaviors. The project as a whole thereby helps to legitimize these feelings, and, as such, I hope microaggresses can walk away from the project feeling recognized and affirmed. The project stands in contrast to critics of the microaggressions literature who work to delegitimize microaggresses’ reactive attitudes. Instead, what readers get in this dissertation is a philosophical argument in support of the idea that their experiences as microaggresses matter and are justified.

Taken as a whole, this dissertation shows that we can be held responsible for reproducing racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression even when we do so unwittingly and without fully understanding just how. Responsibility literature that lets people off the hook for this sort of “accidental” racism or sexism ultimately helps support oppression. With this in mind, this dissertation articulates and develops an alternative way of understanding moral responsibility that avoids reinforcing oppressive systems of power. Finally, the dissertation gives us insight into how to engage in moral repair after microaggressive conduct.
Part I

Chapter 1: What are Microaggressions? A Conceptual Analysis

Credit Card: Two colleagues, Patrick and Trent, go out for lunch. Patrick is black and Trent is white. As they finish their meal, their server brings the bill and then leaves to attend to another table. Since it is Patrick’s turn to pay for lunch, he pulls out his credit card and places it with the bill. The server returns, takes the card back to the register, and processes the transaction. When she returns to the table, she turns to Trent and hands the receipt and card to him as she thanks him for his business.

Sidewalk: Jennifer considers herself to be a straight ally. She has often been known to defend the idea that gays and lesbians are morally on par with straight people. Nonetheless, when she walks down the street and passes two men holding hands, her pulse quickens and she feels an uncomfortable pit at the bottom of her stomach. She grimaces at the couple and then looks away quickly as she steps to the far side of sidewalk.

Interruption: A small company is having a staff meeting. The boss asks each employee to share the progress he or she has made on the current project. All of the employees are men except one, Sarah, who is a woman. Each employee talks for about five minutes without interruption before it is Sarah’s turn to talk. Sarah begins her update and is interrupted a few moments later. A male colleague interjects to explain what Sarah is saying. He wants to make sure their boss gets the most accurate understanding of how the project is going. After he finishes, Sarah continues to speak, only to be interrupted yet again by another male coworker.

Over the past decade, college campuses across the United States have embraced a “new language of protest” which, among other things, includes talk of “microagressions.” Recently, this term has gotten so much attention that, in 2015, the Global Language Monitor decreed “microaggression” the top word of the year. The concept—which has been used to describe subtle or casual instances of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression—has proven useful to

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many. For instance, instead of calling an incident “that-sort-of-racist-thing-my-boss-did” people are able to name their encounters with oppression using the concept of “microaggression.” This language has thus been powerful in providing people with a new interpretive framework through which to make sense of their personal experiences with oppression. As such, many find the concept of “microaggression” liberating and empowering, since it helps them to isolate and point to injustice that affects them on a very personal level.

Not surprisingly, this heightened focus on microaggressions, and, more generally on exposing instances of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, has received pushback. These criticisms take multiple forms. Some maintain that focusing attention on microaggressions is misguided when there are other, more pressing forms of oppression and trauma to address; many of these critics think that “policing” microaggressive behavior is a useless form of political correctness that does more harm than good. Others think that publicly drawing attention to microaggressions will promote moral cultures of “victimhood” which foster “‘moral dependence’ and an atrophying of the ability to handle small interpersonal matters on one’s own.” Moral cultures of victimhood, they argue, “create a society of constant and intense moral conflict as people compete for status as victims or as defenders of victims.” Others

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problematize the “shaky science of microaggressions,” questioning the methodological soundness of microaggressions research.\textsuperscript{15}

Here I take it as an assumption that racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression are morally wrong and ought to be resisted in all forms and manifestations. Thus, I reject the idea that microaggressions and other forms of injustice ought to be ignored. I also take issue with the notion that drawing attention to microaggressive behavior will promote a culture of victimhood. However, I side with critics who find dominant accounts of the concept ill defined and theoretically impoverished. While this body of research can empower individuals from marginalized groups and also help provide valuable insight into how oppression is manifested, sustained, and generated, it ultimately suffers from weak understandings of what microaggressions are.

I first introduce and defend a more conceptually adequate account of “microaggression.” In my view, one of the central, defining features of microaggressions is the way in which they convey bias. In addition, I argue that attention to patterns of prejudice and oppression in the broader social context is necessary for understanding what acts qualify as microaggressions.

Next, I go on to defend my view against some important objections. In the second-to-last section of the chapter, I explain the merits of my view over three influential accounts of “microaggression” that are dominant in the social scientific literature.\textsuperscript{16} I close by putting my


account in conversation with critics who dismiss the importance of publicly discussing microaggressions. Ultimately, my discussion seeks to clarify why these phenomena deserve public attention and to respond to those who argue that a focus on microaggressions is misguided because it promotes a moral culture of victimhood.  

1.1. Defining “Microaggression”

I will argue that the three examples at the beginning of the chapter all represent instances of microaggressive behavior. First, note that we could interpret each example as involving an expression of bias. In Credit Card, the assumption that Trent, rather than Patrick, paid for lunch suggests that the server has a bias against black people—perhaps that black people lack credit, are financially unreliable, dependent on white people, or that they are not welcomed customers in the same way that white people are. In Sidewalk, Jennifer’s body language and facial expression suggests disgust towards gay men. In Interruption, Sarah’s colleagues’ actions intimate that they take coworkers who are women to be less competent than those who are men.

But these interpretations of behavior might not be correct. For instance, perhaps Patrick and Trent’s server does not have a racial bias and simply hands the card back to Trent out of a habit to always thank people on the left side of the table. Or maybe she does possess a bias against black customers, but is unaware that her behaviors are motivated by this bias. Additionally, what if Patrick is not offended by the server’s actions? In these cases, do the server’s behaviors count as microaggressive conduct? Later I will argue that neither the psychological state of the perpetrator nor of the recipient should determine whether a behaviors

counts as microaggressive. Defining the term in this way will allow the concept to better illuminate how oppression is sustained and maintained.

First, however, I will present and explain my proposed definition of “microaggression”:

Microaggression: A microaggression is an interpersonal behavior that implicitly signals the microaggressor is biased in a way that supports a larger pattern of unjust prejudice and oppression in a broader social context.

Immediately from this definition it should be clear that microaggressions consist in behaviors that occur in the context of interpersonal social interactions, that is, interactions between agents. Social scientists often distinguish between “micro,” “meso,” and “macro” levels of analysis. While this distinction differs between disciplines, the general idea is that “micro” refers to an analysis of acts or relationships between individuals whereas the “macro” level has to do with understanding social systems and large-scale patterns of interaction. Meso-level analysis falls somewhere in between micro and macro and tends to focus on communities, organizations, and other mid-sized entities or social arrangements. With these distinctions in mind, restricting microaggressions to interactions that occur between individuals makes sense, especially given the term’s currency in social science research.

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18 The term “signal” does not necessitate that the microaggressor is biased. My usage of this term is inspired by Mitchell Green’s work in *Self-Expression*. I will unpack what exactly I mean by this term and how it differs from Green’s usage later in the chapter. Mitchell S. Green, *Self-Expression* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).


20 This interpretation of the prefix “micro” contrasts with those that take it to refer to the small or innocuous amount of harm that microaggressions purportedly have on individuals. As I will explain later in the chapter, there are good reasons against making the status of a microaggression contingent on the psychological state of microaggressees. In section 1.3 I will say more about why microaggressions might seem “small” or subtle, and I will explain more fully how my definition captures this intuition without relying on the notion that microaggressions are always “small” in terms of the amount of harm they cause or their significance.
Additionally, while I define microaggressions as interpersonal phenomena, this does not preclude the fact that they derive their meaning from the surrounding cultural context(s). In contrast, the significance of microaggressions is determined by the larger, social world. This reliance on social context to gain meaning is partially explained by the fact that microaggressions function as signals. But what are signals and why should we think that microaggressions ought to be conceptualized as such?

I will define “signal” as the following:

Signal: (1) A signal is any feature of an entity that conveys information (including misinformation) about the signaler that has been shaped by context specific mechanisms such as natural selection or sociocultural processes to convey the information that it does. (2) A signal can be sent without being received, and a signal can be received without being interpreted properly.\textsuperscript{21}

To help explain the first part of this definition, consider some species of frogs. In certain habitats poisonous frogs have evolved to be vibrantly colored. These colors serve as signals to potential predators that the frog is not to be eaten.\textsuperscript{22} And, since this reliable connection between color and poison is the result of natural selection, this meaning is highly context specific. For instance, if you take a poisonous frog from its home to an entirely different environment where none of the brightly colored frogs are poisonous, its bright color will not have the same meaning that it does in its natural habitat where predators have come to recognize a reliable, non-accidental pattern between bright colored frogs and poison.

Thus, signals can change over time, and are context dependent due to the fact they are shaped by context specific mechanisms such as natural selection or social convention.

\textsuperscript{21} This definition of “signal” maps on closely to the definition Mitchell Green offers in \textit{Self-Expression}—see Green, \textit{Self-Expression}, 212. While Green’s definition is restricted to signals shaped by natural selection, my definition allows for the fact that signals can come to have the meaning that they do via soci-cultural processes as well as evolutionary ones.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 5.
Furthermore, they can have varying degrees of reliability depending on how likely it is that the signal corresponds with what it is signaling in any given context. For instance, in an environment where 95% of the brightly colored frogs are poisonous, predators will take bright color to be a very reliable signal that a frog is poisonous. In contrast, in an environment where only 70% of brightly colored frogs are poisonous, bright color is a less reliable signal that a frog is poisonous. That a signal can convey misinformation simply refers to the fact that the information signaled might not be accurate. A brightly colored frog might signal that it is poisonous to predators when in fact it is not, since there is not a 100% reliable connection between bright color and being poisonous.23

In the case of humans, our signals are not only shaped by natural selection but also by sociocultural processes that are highly context specific. Because of this, the meaning of our body language, the ways in which we speak, our clothing, and our behaviors can morph to mean various things over time and in different social contexts due to social conventions, norms, and unspoken social rules. In this case, it is social processes as opposed to natural selection that work to tie specific meaning to various forms of behavior, and these meanings can differ in varied social contexts. For instance, gazing into another person’s eyes has socially evolved to mean different things depending on the context:

Film-makers and advertisers know this, using direct gaze to signal threat (e.g. the ‘Kubrick Stare’ in ‘A Clockwork Orange’) and to attract social interest (e.g. underwear advertisements) in different contexts. Decades of research into the use of gaze in natural interactions…shows how gaze can signal attentiveness, competence and social dominance…Direct gaze can be used to regulate conversation shifts and to signal social interest. Prolonged gaze or staring leads to

23 Ibid., 6.
avoidance behaviours, but in other contexts prolonged mutual gaze can be a sign of love and attraction.\textsuperscript{24}

The information a gaze conveys is context dependent and largely the result of social norms and conventions. To take another example, the social meaning of wearing baggy pants changes as fashions, norms, and values within a particular social context shift. Because of this, wearing baggy pants might signal entirely different things in different neighborhoods, cities, and countries, as well as across different time periods. Thus, a person could signal something very particular about himself by wearing baggy pants in one place but not in another, and this is determined largely by social context and circumstances over which a person might not have any control or knowledge.

Returning to the definition of “microaggression,” we are now in a better position to understand what it means to “signal a bias.” First, to signal a bias is simply to engage in behavior that, due to repeated, reliable connections between the behavior and the bias, has come to suggest that, more often than not, the microaggressor has a bias. Types of behavior that have not demonstrated a reliable connection to a bias will not qualify as a microaggression in my view. Crucially, these signals must have the meaning that they do as the result of context specific, sociocultural mechanisms.

And, as the definition states, microaggressions must signal not just any bias, but, more specifically, biases that support a larger pattern of unjust prejudice and oppression in the broader social context. It is this social context of oppression, in particular, that links certain behaviors to the idea that the microaggressor is biased. For example, in \textit{Credit Card}, it is imperative that we turn our attention to the broader social context in which the scenario takes place in order to see

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that the waitress is signaling a racial bias. It is with a history of white supremacy, racial
discrimination, and racial economic disparity in mind that the problematic nature of the server’s
actions derive their meaning. The waitress’s assumption that Trent paid for the meal signals
something beyond an expression of her individual idiosyncrasies when one examines her actions
through this broader social lens. Specifically, her actions suggest something more when
examined in light of the larger backdrop of systematic prejudices and biases against black people
in the United States. Without a view to this wider context of oppression, we will fail to
comprehend any meaning beyond an expression of an individual’s arbitrary assumptions. So,
while we might still initially infer that the server thinks Trent is the one paying for lunch—we
might miss out on the totality of what this signals if we ignore the larger social context. It is
within this larger context of oppression and injustice that one’s actions and behaviors come to
signal morally problematic biases and thus qualify as microaggressions. If the cultural context
were different, say, white supremacy were no longer the prevailing social arrangement, the
server’s behaviors might not signal the bias they do.

Microaggressions are therefore acts that gain their meaning through the wider social
world despite the fact that they are interpersonal in nature. Furthermore, this meaning has
evolved along with particular, larger-scale, oppressive cultural and social contexts. In other
words, the meaning of handing the credit card to a white customer as opposed to a black
customer has come to signal, via sociocultural processes, that, in this case, the server has a bias
against black customers. Of course, the reliability of this signal will vary depending on the
specifics of the context. Does this scenario take place in Selma in the 1970s or in Manhattan in
2030? Nonetheless, the larger social context of white supremacy helps to determine whether this
behavior is a signal of bias or not and, subsequently, whether it qualifies as a microaggression or not.

To take another example, *Interruption* takes place in a professional setting, where professional norms help make it the case that interruptions signal a failure to view others with esteem. This failure to view Sarah with respect is signaled by her colleagues’ actions; however, the larger social context in which women are routinely denied the kind of respect that men are given in the workplace makes it so that Sarah’s coworkers’ actions convey additional meaning: that they are biased against Sarah because she is a woman. In a culture where sexist biases are common, actions such as the ones in *Interruption* gain their meaning from this larger, oppressive cultural context and therefore qualify as microaggressions in my account.

It is the social context that enables acts to qualify as microaggressive in my view. To help explain this condition further, take the following case as an example of an action that does not qualify as a microaggression:

*The Fast & the Furious*: Tyler and Tom, both white college students, are best friends. They have decided to spend a night hanging out together without their girlfriends. Looking forward to their time together, Tom asks Tyler what he wants to do. Tyler says he wants Tom to come over and watch the film *Fast Five*.25 Without knowing it, Tom rolls his eyes—he much prefers *Furious 7*.26 Tom’s reaction makes Tyler feel an embarrassed pang of social shame for preferring the less cool movie.

By rolling his eyes, Tom implicitly signals his bias against *Fast Five* to Tyler without knowingly doing so or realizing the impact of his actions. However, this case is importantly different from others discussed. Specifically, Tom’s individual dislike or bias against *Fast Five* does not support larger patterns of injustice or oppression in the broader social context. Because of this,

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while Tom might signal a bias in this case, this biased behavior does not count as a microaggression, since it does not support larger patterns of oppression.

In contrast, Jennifer in *Sidewalk* signals that she has homophobic biases precisely because of the way her behaviors fit in line with and gain their meaning from the larger, homophobic, cultural context. This is unlike in *The Fast & the Furious* where the bias signaled against *Furious Five* does not link up to larger patterns of oppression in the broader social context.

At this point, someone might wonder whether Jennifer’s behaviors qualify as microaggressions in cases where her facial expressions are motivated by some other reason aside from a bias against gay people (e.g., sun in her eyes caused her to glare). This question is answered by the fact that signals can convey misinformation and still qualify as a signal. Thus, just so long as there exists a contextually contingent reliable (i.e., more often than not) connection between glaring at gay people and possessing a homophobic bias, Jennifer’s behaviors still qualify as microaggressive despite her lack of bias.

To better understand how signaling need not be an expression of the signaler’s cognitive, affective, or experiential state, take the example of a person who wears a green bandana in a particular neighborhood. While the bandana-wearer might be oblivious to the fact that it signals a particular gang allegiance, he might still signal this gang affiliation to passersby despite his lack of affiliation. Thus, while he indeed signals that he is a gang member to those around him, in this case the bandana wearer is a bit like the brightly colored frog that is not really poisonous: both convey misinformation about the state of the signaler and nonetheless still function as signals.

Similarly, even if Jennifer’s glare is the result of the sun as opposed to motivated by bias, her action still signals a bias that supports a larger pattern of unjust prejudice. However, while
not all microaggressions are motivated by bias, many will be. Without a reliable enough connection between the behaviors in question and the bias, the behaviors will no longer qualify as signals of bias. The takeaway point here is simply that it is not necessary for the behavior to be motivated by a bias in order to qualify as a microaggression.

But what if the gay couple does not notice her glare? Or what if they interpret her expressions to mean something else? Does this still count as a signal of bias and thus a microaggression? The second part of the definition of “signal” (a signal can be sent without being received, and a signal can be received without being interpreted properly) helps us to see that, even in these cases, Jennifer’s behaviors will still qualify as microaggressions. Thus, microaggressions can occur regardless of the impact they have on the microaggressee.

So far, I have discussed what it means to signal a bias that supports a larger pattern of unjust prejudice and oppression in a broader social context. But what does it mean to say that microaggressions involve implicit signals? Are all signals implicit? In the case of human communication, I will suggest that some are not. Thus, the notion of implicit signaling helps to further specify which kinds of behaviors qualify as microaggressions in my view. We can think of human communication as being made up of signals. In the case of language, the words that we say and the way that we say them are designed to carry specific meaning in a particular context. Signals can be explicit, then, if they directly and unambiguously communicate via language that the sender has a bias. In contrast, signals will implicitly convey a bias in the sender if this sentiment is signaled in a way that does not clearly spell out the bias using direct language.

Distinguishing between implicitly and explicitly expressed biases is not always easy. To help make the contrast clearer, take the following two cases:

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Broken Wrist: Kevin, a white male, is waiting in the emergency room with a broken wrist. A nurse comes out to take him to get an X-ray. The nurse is Chinese-American. Kevin refuses to go with him, saying, “I will not accept treatment from a ‘foreigner.’ I will accept treatment only from white nurses and doctors.”

Eye Contact: Dr. Foreman is a white, middle-aged surgeon. In addition to performing surgery, he often meets with his patients in his office. Sharron, a black, female transplant recipient comes in for an office visit and brings her husband, Rick, along. Rick is white. During the appointment, Dr. Foreman makes very little eye contact with Sharron and directs his comments and attention towards Rick, despite the fact that Sharron is the patient.

Broken Wrist represents a paradigmatic instance of an explicitly signaled prejudice and is therefore not an example of a microaggression in my view. Kevin voices his prejudices and directs them toward his nurse. The message is clear and in no way hidden or difficult to grasp: Kevin prefers an American, all-white medical team. In contrast, in Eye Contact Dr. Foreman never tells Sharron directly that she is incompetent because she is a black woman, nor does he tell her directly that he prefers talking with a white man (Rick). Rather, Dr. Foreman’s lack of interaction with Sharron suggests that he thinks Sharron is not able to understand his orders or is not worthy of his attention. Because of the larger racist and sexist social context, Rick therefore signals a bias against black women. This tacit expression of bias exemplifies what it is to implicitly signal a prejudice or bias and qualifies as microaggressive in my view.

Similarly, in Credit Card the server does not explicitly say that she assumes Trent paid because he is white and Patrick is black. In Interruption Sarah’s colleagues never explain that their interruptions have to do with her gender. And in Sidewalk Jennifer does not tell the gay couple that their handholding makes her uncomfortable. However, all of these microaggressors
interpersonally, implicitly signal these sentiments. And, because these biases support larger systems of oppression, these behaviors all qualify as microaggressions in my view.

The definition that I have laid out here also makes room for the fact that one can behave microaggressively toward someone who is not present at the moment. For example, two colleagues might implicitly signal a sexist bias about a third coworker who is elsewhere. This sort of behavior qualifies as a microaggression according to my definition, since it is interpersonal—committed by a couple of individuals—and supports a larger pattern of unjust prejudice and oppression in a broader social context. Thus, microaggressions, while interpersonal in nature, do not require that a microaggressee is always present.

Taking this a step further, the definition I propose does not necessitate that behaviors need to be directed toward specific individuals in order to qualify as a microaggression. For example, imagine a conversation between white neighbors where one person, Stewart, expresses outrage: “I can’t believe another bodega is opening down the block!” Given the context, Stewart’s comment implies that he is dissatisfied with the influx of Latinx people into the neighborhood. He thus interpersonally, implicitly signals a bias against Latinx people that supports patterns of oppression in the larger social context, thereby meeting all of the conditions laid out in the definition of “microaggression.” Similarly, a person can use a racial slur without directing it toward a specific individual and still have that word qualify as a slur. Of course microaggressions are often directed toward specific individuals; however, according to my definition microaggressions can occur even when there is no microaggressee.

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28 And this will all still be true even if the microaggressors do not in fact possess these biases.
29 Thank you to Alisa Carse for this example.
A controversial part of the definition I have laid out is the fact that, since signaling can occur absent the signaler’s intention, a person can behave microaggressively without intending to do so. For instance, we can imagine one version of Sidewalk where Jennifer grimaces at the gay couple she passes without meaning to signal any kind of bias. Also controversial is the idea that microaggressions can occur even when behaviors are not motivated by bias. Finally, the fact that one need not receive a microaggressions in order for it to qualify as such might strike some as indefensible. Put more generally, some might take issue with the fact that neither the microaggressor’s nor the microaggressee’s cognitive and emotional state matters when it comes to establishing whether a behavior qualifies as a microaggression. In the next section I will defend why I think the definition of microaggression ought to be depsychologized in this way.

1.2. “But I’m Not Racist!”: Depsychologizing Microaggressions

It might seem unfair to someone that her actions could be classified as microaggressive even when she does not have any intention to signal a bias or to discriminate, or if she does not, in fact, have a bias in the first place. To put this first concern in more legalistic terms, one might wonder why mens rea, or intent to act wrongly, is not necessary on the account of microaggressions I have outlined here. After all, the objection goes, it seems unlikely that we could hold someone morally responsible for something they did not intend, so what good will it do to classify unintentional expressions of bias or prejudice as microaggressions? The fact that many microaggressive behaviors are committed without conscious malice or a desire to express a pernicious bias is significant and brings up many pressing questions. Yet, these questions should not prevent us from calling these sorts of behaviors “microaggressions.”

Note that the question of whether a behavior constitutes a microagression is separate from the question of whether one can be held morally responsible for their microaggressive behaviors. I do not address this second question in this chapter.
To see why, consider the fact that patterns of microaggressive behaviors across many individuals promote and undergird oppressive patterns of social organization. These hierarchical social arrangements systematically disadvantage certain groups of people based on factors that ought to be arbitrary when it comes to levels of advantage. Take, for example, the case of racial microaggressions in healthcare contexts. Research suggests, “White doctors interacting with minority group patients are likely to behave and respond in ways that are associated with worse health outcomes.”\(^\text{31}\) Body language that signals disengagement on behalf of the doctor—sitting far away from patients, fidgeting, clock checking, etc.—can decrease patients’ sense of trust in their physicians. This decreased sense of trust can result in patients withholding key information necessary for successful diagnoses or symptom reduction.\(^\text{32}\) Healthcare providers’ microaggressions therefore play a role in maintaining healthcare contexts in which minority patients receive subpar care and are accordingly put at a disadvantage over white patients. Healthcare disadvantages have rippling effects, since one’s health can affect one’s employment and educational opportunities, among other things. In this way, racial microaggressions help sustain larger systems of white supremacy.

As well as promoting systemic injustice, consider the fact that part of what is important about this class of behaviors is that they can cause psychological harm, regardless of the intent of the perpetrator and even regardless of whether the perpetrator has a bias at all. For example, Sarah’s colleagues’ actions reinforce sexist ideology whether her colleagues intend to do this or not, or whether Sarah has a bias or not. And the waitress’s actions in Credit Card might cause


\(^{32}\) Levine and Ambady, “The Role of Non-Verbal Behaviour in Racial Disparities in Health Care.”
Patrick distress regardless of the waitress’s intentions or whether she actually has a bias. For the gay couple in Sidewalk, Jennifer’s behaviors rearticulate and make salient the pain and difficulties of being gay in a homophobic community. Microaggressions, then, reinforce oppressive ideologies and structures and can be psychologically distressing regardless of the mental state of the perpetrator.

In some cases, recipients of microaggressions might begin to internalize the prejudices and biases that microaggressions implicitly suggest.\(^{33}\) While being the target of a single microaggression could perhaps result in a person internalizing biases about their group, repeated exposure to implicitly conveyed stereotypes and prejudices would seem to increase the likelihood that one will internalize these prejudices. Researchers have linked internalized oppression to physical violence, depression, and intragroup discrimination.\(^{34}\) Internalized oppression can also cause self-hatred, self-dislike, shame, and distrust of the self.\(^{35}\) In addition to negatively affecting a person’s relationship with oneself, internalized oppression also causes people to degrade others in their group or to perpetuate the prejudices and biases that they have internalized.\(^{36}\)

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\(^{36}\) Pyke and Dang, “‘FOB’ and ‘Whitewashed.’”
Looking back to the objection that the intent of the microaggressor matters and ought to be a necessary part of the definition of “microaggression,” we are now in a better position to see that all of the negative effects of microaggressions discussed here will persist regardless of whether the perpetrators intend to signal a bias or not and even regardless of whether they have a bias. For this reason, I argue that it is best not to restrict the concept of “microaggression” to only those who intend to act maliciously or to those who possess certain biases. Restricting the concept in this way would cause us to ignore many behaviors that result in negative psychological and material effects on recipients as well as behaviors that promote oppressive ideology and undergird systemic oppression.

One additional benefit of not including a mens rea requirement to the definition of “microaggression” is the fact that it can open up space for microaggressors and microaggressees to engage in dialogue about microaggressions without necessitating an initial presumption that the microaggressor intended to harm the microaggressee. By defining microaggressions in this way, identifying microaggressive behavior becomes less about accusing someone of malicious intent, and more about highlighting instances of a practice that can contribute to social oppression. Acknowledging that microaggressions can occur without intent or the genuine presence of an implicit bias can help to make the process of acknowledging that one has acted microaggressively less threatening to microaggressors. Lowering the social stigma related to microaggressive behaviors can help to encourage productive, honest dialogue about ways to resist oppressive social patterns.

The second major objection I will address has to do with the definition’s lack of criteria surrounding the psychological state of the recipient in the aftermath of microaggressive behavior. If, as I argue above, microaggressions are important in large part due to the negative effect they
can have on microaggressees, then it might seem strange to categorize behaviors as “microaggressions” when they do not consciously disturb microaggressees. The objection, then, is that the definition of “microaggression” should exclude behaviors that do not bother or upset recipients.

However, while it might seem counterintuitive to count an individual behavior as “microaggressive” when the microaggressee does not consciously feel perturbed in its wake, I think there is good reason to do so. First, the fact that an individual might not consciously feel any form of negative emotion in the wake of microaggressive behavior does not rule out the fact that the behavior might play a role in negatively impacting one’s psychology. For instance, even if Sarah does not consciously feel any kind of negative emotion after being repeatedly interrupted in her meeting, the experience might still unconsciously reinforce a general sense of inferiority, a lack of self-esteem, or a sense of “impostor syndrome” in Sarah. 37

This point helps illuminate another important point about microaggressions: while some microaggressions could potentially be quite devastating to a person, it is unlikely that any single microaggression will have a significant effect on one’s psychological state or impact on larger social patterns of oppression. However, repeated exposure to behavior that implicitly signals a bias against one’s identity or group membership can, over time, have negative effects on one’s psychology. It is these larger patterns of biased behavior that extend across multiple people and over a span of time that work to sustain oppressive norms on a wider scale. Thus, failing to include behaviors that do not have immediately recognizable effects on the recipient as “microaggressions,” would obscure the overall pattern of problematic behavior, thus making it

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difficult to pin down. Research on microaggressions is largely motivated by a commitment to the fact that patterns of microaggressions can have profound effects on individuals’ psychologies. Failing to name acts and behaviors that contribute to these patterns of oppression as “microaggressions” would hinder, as opposed to support, research on the effects of microaggressions. Given that one of the constraints on constructing an adequate definition of “microaggression” is providing insight and guidance for the purposes and aims of research, it would be counterproductive to place constraints on the recipient’s response to the microaggression. Doing so would thwart achieving a better understanding of the overarching effects of implicitly signaled biases.

For philosophical as well as practical reasons, then, a definition of “microaggression” is better when it does not make appeals to either the perpetrator’s or the recipient’s psychological state. Of course, this fact does not exclude the possibility that there might be some utility in naming and more rigorously defining specific kinds of microaggressions which do reference the individual parties’ intentions or reactions. Indeed, what I have offered here is a more precise definition of the term “microaggression,” and I have not ventured to discuss what other, more specific kinds of microaggressions might be. This project, I would imagine, could help researchers narrow in on even more fine-grained phenomena.

Finally, I should make it clear that just because, by definition, microaggressions do not need to have any particular effect on the psychology of microaggressees to qualify as microaggressions, they still have the potential to profoundly affect microaggressees in negative ways. For instance, many report that exposure to microaggressions can be painful, deeply
insulting, and a reminder of one’s marginalized or oppressed status within society.38 For the reasons I discuss above, the definition of “microaggression” I offer here does not make this a necessary part of the phenomenon; however, we ought not let this lead us to forget that microaggressions can be painful indignities. The fact that microaggressions can have this effect is not ruled out by the way I have defined the term here. To be clear, what I have proposed here is that, while any particular instance of a microaggression may or may not cause psychological damage to the microaggressee, each instance is part of a practice that helps to sustain oppressive social conditions. Thus, microaggressions not only support ideologies that lead to marginalized social identities, they also represent a way in which those in marginalized groups are reminded daily of their oppressed status within society.

1.3. Problems with Dominant Accounts of “Microaggression”

The definition of “microaggression” that I have outlined here represents a departure from how the term is typically defined in the literature. Harvard psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce first introduced the term “microaggression” in the 1970s. Pierce defined “microaggression” as “subtle, innocuous, preconscious, or unconscious degradations, and putdowns.”39 While Pierce originally coined the term to capture a class of racial indignities that specifically affected black people, the term is now applied to the treatment of other oppressed social groups, for example, people who are LGBT or people with disabilities.40

38 For some first person testimonials about the insulting and harmful nature of microaggressions, readers can go to the online project Microaggressions: Power, Privilege, and Everyday Life, which can be found at www.microaggressions.com.

39 Pierce et al., “An Experiment in Racism: TV Commercials.”

It was not until the mid 2000s that the term “microaggression” made its way into the academic mainstream. This popularity corresponded with the publication of a piece by Derald Sue and colleagues (2007) that introduced a taxonomy of the concept and has provided the conceptual underpinnings of nearly all subsequent psychology research on microaggressions since. Sue et al. (2007) has been cited 2,142 times as of June 2017 and what gets counted as a microaggression and subsequently what gets investigated in this wide body of research is, by and large, a direct result of Sue et al.’s theoretical work towards defining the concept. Thus, while a great many scholars from different fields (e.g., psychology, nursing, public health, and education) have contributed to the ever-growing body of research on microaggressions, much of this research draws from Sue’s account.

Sue says the following about microaggressions:

In reviewing the literature on subtle and contemporary forms of bias the term “microaggression” seems to best describe the phenomenon in its everyday occurrence.

Microaggressions are the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group.

Like Pierce, part of what Sue finds distinctive about the concept “microaggression” is its ability to capture what Sue calls “subtle” instances of racism, sexism, ableism, etc. Sue does not define what precisely he means by “subtle,” but the contrast seems to be blatant expressions of

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42 Statistic found using “Google Scholar” on June 12th, 2017; Wong et al., “The What, the Why, and the How.”
44 Ibid., 5.
45 Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*.
prejudice that are uncontroersial, obvious, and direct. Research about microaggressions also tends to stress the “subtle” nature of microaggressions and often takes itself to be measuring behaviors that can be characterized in this way.46

While Sue’s account is heavily cited, the tendency to describe microaggressions as “subtle” indignities or insults is found even in the places that do not draw directly from Sue’s framework. For instance, Solórzano and his colleagues have published a number articles focused primarily on microaggressions in educational contexts, and they have based their definition of “microaggression” off of Pierce’s original definition.47 They state that microaggressions are:

(1) Verbal and non-verbal assaults directed toward People of Color, often carried out in subtle, automatic or unconscious forms; (2) layered assaults, based on race and its intersections with gender, class, sexuality, language, immigration status, phenotype, accent, or surname; and (3) cumulative assaults that take a psychological, physiological, and academic toll on People of Color.48

Thus, across fields, microaggressions tend to be characterized as “subtle” in nature. However, because the term is not defined in such a way to include only subtle forms of marginalization, more blatant forms of oppression are allowed to qualify as microaggressions. In other words, there can be discrepancies between what these studies purport to measure (subtle instances of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression) and what they technically measure given the definitions that they use to identify what they are measuring. The result is a body of literature that often claims it is measuring “subtle” expressions of oppression; however, the literature can

46 Wong et al., “The What, the Why, and the How.”
end up counting more blatant or obvious forms of bias as falling under the “microaggressions” umbrella.

For example, one study investigates the experiences of adopted children with sexual minority parents. The study explained microaggressions as capturing subtle expressions of stigma and, since the study was focused on microaggressions, it purported to measure these sorts of subtle phenomenon. However, since the study utilizes Sue’s taxonomy and understanding of the term “microaggression” it ends up including blatant and direct expressions of prejudice—such as “since you have two moms, you’re going to go to hell”—as microaggressive behavior. While it is unclear exactly how these studies define “subtlety,” it seems likely that any viable definition of the term would exclude statements like this from counting as subtle.

Sue, Solórzano, and Pierce’s accounts of “microaggression” all stress their subtle nature. This is problematic in that they all forward conceptions of microaggressions as being subtle without explaining what exactly they mean by this. Furthermore, Sue and Solórzano technically allow for actions or behaviors that are far from subtle (on any reasonable understanding of the term) to qualify as microaggressions. For instance, Solórzano and colleagues (2015) write, “in our definition of microaggressions, we state that they are ‘often subtle,’ but argue they can also be blatant.” Similarly, Sue allows what he calls “microassualts”—explicit racial derogations

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50 Ibid., 86.
51 Ibid., 94.
characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt an individual—to qualify as microaggressions.\textsuperscript{53}

Given the far ranging scope of these definitions, we are left to conclude that, in its most general sense, researchers use “microaggression” to refer to acts of prejudice, discrimination, or bias between individuals. For instance, calling someone a racial slur would count as a microaggression in the same way that calling on students of color less frequently than white students would. When defined this broadly, the concept becomes a catchall for interpersonal acts of oppression, and, as such, the concept is not very fine grained. This contrasts with how research on the term construes its purpose, which is to capture subtle expressions of prejudice.

Scott Lilienfeld (2017) has voiced a similar critique to the concept as it stands in the literature.\textsuperscript{54} He characterizes the concept as an “open concept” with “intrinsically fuzzy boundaries” that are so indistinct that they leave one to wonder: just “which actions fall under the capacious microaggression umbrella?”\textsuperscript{55} Lilienfeld shares my concern that this lack of conceptual clarity hinders the efficacy of research on microaggressions. Gina Garcia and Marc Johnston-Guerrero (2015) have also voiced concern over this tendency to include blatant expressions of oppression as falling under the microaggressions concept.\textsuperscript{56} Their concerns echo other scholars—for instance, Julie Minikel-Lacocque—who have cautioned against the use of Sue’s framework, which allows explicit and violent verbal attacks to qualify as microaggressions.\textsuperscript{57} The overarching criticism of the term, then, is that it is defined too loosely.

\textsuperscript{53} Sue, \textit{Microaggressions in Everyday Life}.
\textsuperscript{54} Lilienfeld, “Microaggressions.”
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 143.
\textsuperscript{56} Garcia and Johnston-Guerrero, “Challenging the Utility of a Racial Microaggressions Framework through a Systematic Review of Racially Biased Incidents on Campus.”
One way to modify Sue, Solórzano, and Pierce’s definitions and make them less expansive would be to restrict microaggressions to include *only* subtle expressions of bias. But how, we might wonder, ought we make sense of the subtle/blatant distinction to which these scholars gesture?

One possibility would be to define the term such that it draws on a larger trend in the literature to focus on *unconscious* or *implicit* bias. Psychologists have developed a robust literature on implicit biases. The general idea here is that we have biases that manifest in specific circumstances and environments, often without our awareness of having the bias in the first place. The result is that while today many people might not consciously hold biased beliefs (e.g., women are inferior to men, black people are less intelligent than white people, etc.), these same people’s actions and behaviors nonetheless suggest a prejudice against women, racial minorities, and other marginalized groups.

With this in mind, we could define microaggressions as behaviors motivated by implicit—unconsciously held—biases. Thus, the subtlety of microaggressive behavior would be captured by the fact that unconscious biases, as opposed to explicit ones, are behind microaggressions. For

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example, in *Credit Card* the server’s action would qualify as a microaggression only if her
decision to hand the credit card back to Trent was caused by a bias (or biases) she was unaware
of having. This definition would thereby clarify what is distinctive about microaggressions and
what differentiates them from other forms of oppressive behaviors. The definition would also
result in a concept that, by and large, fits in line with what current research on microaggressions
aims to measure.

However, there are strong reasons against defining microaggressions as behaviors
motivated by unconsciously held biases. First off, this redefinition seems redundant in the face of
research on aversive racism and implicit bias that already puts unconsciously held biases at the
focal point. Redefining the concept in this way would make the term less distinctive and novel
in terms of the work it can do with regard to understanding how oppression operates and is
maintained. Doing so would also require researchers to determine the underlying cause of
specific behaviors and verify that they were motivated by implicit bias in order to classify them as
microaggressive. Given the challenges with determining this, this redefinition of the term would
make it difficult to study microaggressions.

More generally, the overall strategy of making a behavior’s microaggressive status
contingent on the psychological state of the perpetrator has drawbacks. Redefinitions of the term
along these lines would alter the focus of research on microaggressions to be less about the
impact of microaggressions—both systemically and on individual microaggressees—and more
about the psychological state of the perpetrator.

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59 Samuel L. Gaertner and John F. Dovidio, “Understanding and Addressing Contem-
porary Racism: From Aversive Racism to the Common Ingroup Identity Model,” *Journal
of Social Issues* 61, no. 3 (September 1, 2005): 615–39; Daniel Kelly and Erica Roedder, “Racial
As it stands now, the term is a useful tool for oppressed people to make sense of their experiences with oppression. This shift in focus to the psychology of the perpetrator does not seem to capture what many people find helpful about the concept, which is that it makes space for conversations about the ways in which these behaviors can be harmful to oppressed people and sustain patterns of injustice.⁶⁰ To be able to identify a behavior as “microaggressive” helps individuals clarify and talk about their experiences with oppression.

Furthermore, restricting the term such that it only refers to behaviors caused by unconsciously held biases would place a burden of proof on microaggresses to establish that behaviors were in fact motivated by an unconsciously held bias. Not only would this shift attention to the psychology of the microaggressor, it would distract focus away from the negative impact of the behaviors and would help microaggressors avoid thinking about how their actions contribute to oppression. For instance, we can imagine Sarah in *Interruption* confronting her coworkers about their behaviors. If one of the defining features of a microaggression is that the behavior is motivated by an implicit bias, her colleagues need simply deny that their behaviors were motivated by a bias in order to place the burden of proof back on Sarah. If Sarah wanted to be taken seriously, she must then prove that their actions were the result of an implicit bias, which, of course, would be virtually impossible for her to do. This would also divert attention away from any disadvantages or harms Sarah might have endured, and would further perpetuate the idea that *Sarah* was the one off base or in the wrong.

These concerns suggest a different way of making sense of what it means for a microaggression to be “subtle.” One way of understanding “subtle” has to do with the difficulty associated with perceiving or understanding something. So, in this view, a microaggression

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⁶⁰ Amenabar, “The New Language of Protest: What College Students Mean When They Ask For ‘Safe Spaces.’”
might signal a bias in such a way that makes it difficult to perceive or understand. For instance, we can imagine Sarah’s coworkers in *Interruption* or the waitress in *Credit Card* having a difficult time detecting anything wrong with their behaviors. In this sense, microaggressions might be understood to be subtle as in hard to perceive or detect.

While it is true the perpetrators of microaggressive behavior might have a difficult time analyzing their behavior and understanding what sort of bias or prejudice it communicates, defining microaggressions as “subtle” in this sense ignores the fact that microaggressive behavior can sometimes be quite obvious, not difficult to perceive, and readily analyzable to both microagressees and to some microaggressors. To define microaggressions as subtle in this sense would have the tacit effect of privileging the experience of (oblivious) microaggressors. This seems problematic, especially given that a focus on microaggressions is thought to help draw attention to the unfair biases against certain groups.

Perhaps, then, the subtlety associated with microaggressive behaviors has to do with the kind of impact the behaviors have on others. Here, we might take subtle behaviors to be those that do not have much of an impact or are relatively inconsequential for those they affect. However, defining microaggressions in this way would make the term practically difficult to use in daily life, since a behavior’s status as a microaggression would be contingent on its effects. An identical set of behaviors might qualify as a microaggression on one day but not on the next depending on, say, the psychological state of the microaggressee. For example, one day Sarah might not take offense or be negatively affected by her colleagues’ interruptions. However, a few days later this behavior might seriously, negatively impact her. Defining microaggressions in this way would therefore pose practical challenges that I believe are not worth taking on.
I have argued that popular definitions of “microaggression” leave us with an overly general understanding of the term. This results in the concept being less helpful than it could be when it comes to capturing a distinctive way in which prejudices and biases operate and are sustained. While these definitions allude to a more specific meaning of the term—that it involves some sort of subtlety—it is unclear what exactly they mean by this specification. Given that several plausible interpretations of this “subtlety” produce morally objectionable or impracticable understandings of the concept, the merits of my definition begin to stand out.

By defining microaggressions as “interpersonal behaviors that implicitly signal that the microaggressor is biased in a way that supports a larger pattern of unjust prejudice and oppression in a broader social context,” my definition: (1) hones the concept so that it refers to a more specific class of actions; (2) proposes a class of behaviors that are (relatively) easy to identify from a third person perspective; and (3) captures many of the actions and behaviors that people tend to associate with the term.

The fact that the biases signaled in microaggressions can be difficult for some to pick up on stems from the fact that they implicitly as opposed to explicitly signal these biases. The meaning of implicitly communicated sentiments can be difficult to discern if you do not possess certain interpretive tools that microaggressors (and sometimes even microaggressees) can lack.\(^6\) The fact that microaggressions are implicitly signaled biases might make them appear to be less psychologically or materially impactful than perhaps they are, since they are not as directly expressed as other oppressive behaviors, which can be easier to trace to psychological damages or material disadvantages.

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Moreover, the “implicit/explicit signaling” distinction that I have introduced here helps make microaggressions represent a distinctive form of oppression that is not fully captured by research on implicit bias or aversive racism. Proposing this distinction therefore helps to enrich our understanding of how oppression operates and also provides us with new conceptual tools to think about phenomena that affect many people’s lives yet are difficult to talk about given the lack of relevant concepts available.

Overall, my proposed definition represents a narrowing of the concept in such a way that helps put firmer boundaries around what behaviors constitute microaggressions. However, despite my proposed definition’s narrower understanding of the term, the definition still requires some thought when it comes to its application. For instance, reasonable people might disagree about whether one’s actions really do signal a bias that supports patterns of prejudice and oppression in the broader social context. Alternatively, someone may signal a prejudice or a bias in a way that falls on the border between implicit and explicit signaling. I do not take these tough cases as objections to my view. Rather, I think they highlight the complexity of the phenomenon at hand.

With regard to empirical investigations, the definition of “microaggression” I propose aligns with Anthony Ong and Anthony Burrow’s recommendations for future microaggressions research. Ong and Burrow suggest longitudinal studies that utilize multilevel frameworks and argue that these kinds of studies will be best equipped to capture the rich complexity of microaggressions as they unfold in daily life. They state:

The potential of microaggressions as a bridging concept thus hinges on multilevel analyses that link individuals to their proximal social contexts. When situated within a multilevel framework, the study of microaggressions may also offer a

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62 Ong and Burrow, “Microaggressions and Daily Experience.”
63 Ibid.
rich descriptive base from which to explore a number of central but as yet unresolved issues raised in Lilienfeld’s review, including the role of personality in shaping individuals’ perceptions and reactions to microaggressions, the impact of microaggressions above and beyond overt acts of prejudice and discrimination, the degree of correspondence between “recipients’ and deliverers’” judgments of microaggressions (i.e., vis-à-vis analysis of dyadic diary data), and other factors that may be strongly identified with or theoretically collinear with microaggression experiences (e.g., vigilance and anticipatory stress). 64

Multilevel analyses allow researchers to investigate differing levels of sampling. 65 Data can be nested in such a way that the relationships between different levels of analysis can be isolated. A research perspective that takes multiple levels of sampling into view can therefore measure variances, covariances, and means simultaneously across different levels of analysis to produce a fuller picture. For instance, imagine you are interested in the relationship between productivity and microaggressions in the workplace. One level of sampling might be individual workers, the next might be business locations, and the next might be specific industries. At the industry level of analysis, data might reveal no statistically significant relationship between microaggressions and work productivity. However, without examining multiple levels of analysis, this research may fail to account for how employees in specific offices are impacted by microaggressions. For example, a multilevel analysis could reveal a finding that suggests that at the office-level of analysis, there is a positive relationship between productivity and microaggressions. This kind of information would be lost without appropriately taking into account the role that varying contexts can play in shaping phenomenon.

The multilevel approach thus helps avoid producing research that confounds levels of analysis to produce inaccurate explanations of complex phenomenon. By conceptualizing

64 Ibid., 174 (italics added).
microaggressions as dependent upon and inextricable from context, my definition lends itself well to multilevel analyses. Generally speaking, by forwarding a contextually sensitive understanding of microaggressions, my definition encourages the thought that one must take into account the varying, nested contexts in which microaggressions take place and that contexts can have an impact on behaviors. Thus, adopting my view of “microaggression” going forward can help encourage empirical investigations that follow Ong and Burrow’s guidelines for microaggressions research.

1.4. Do Microaggressions Promote Victimhood Culture?

With my definition of “microaggression” on the table, I can now respond to critics who have voiced worries about drawing public attention to microaggressive behavior. First, consider critics who argue that microaggressions are minor offenses that do not justify the “fuss” people are making over them.66 After all, being the recipient of a microaggression is a far cry from the sorts of atrocities people have endured throughout history.67

While it is true that microaggressions are nowhere near as devastating as the kinds of oppressive behaviors present during the Holocaust or under Jim Crow laws, the definition of “microaggression” I have introduced helps to expose the fact that microaggressions play a role in perpetuating Anti-Semitic, white supremacist, and other morally objectionable ideologies. Microaggressions get their meaning from larger patterns of oppression in a broader social context, and they help to support these systems of injustice. Because of the role they play in sustaining oppressive ideologies, those who wish to resist oppression have reason to place their attention on microaggressive behaviors.

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67 Ibid.
Of course, this conclusion does not imply we should ignore more explicit forms of oppression, nor does it suggest that focusing on microaggressive behavior is the only or best way to resist oppression. Rather, microaggressions represent one kind of behavior that can contribute to oppression and, as such, deserve recognition for those who seek to understand and resist white supremacy and other forms of unjust domination. Ignoring microaggressive behavior, as critics suggest, allows a mechanism of oppression to continue unchallenged. For this reason, microaggressions deserve attention.

Others have argued that a focus on microaggressions represents a turn towards a moral culture of “victimhood.” The main worry is that naming and pointing out behaviors as microaggressive “valorizes victimhood” and encourages people to “appeal for help to powerful others or administrative bodies, to whom they must make the case that they have been victimized,” instead of working out interpersonal conflicts on their own. This need for institutional redress, critics say, fosters an inability to overcome personal trauma or insult without the support of external intervention and as such “weakens individuals.”

First, as Regina Rini notes, the claim that publicly drawing attention to microaggressions represents a turn toward a culture of victimhood relies on a narrow understanding of history and of what microaggressesees are doing when they publicly discuss microaggressions:

The new so-called ‘culture of victimhood’ is not new, and it is not about victimhood. It is a culture of solidarity, and it has always been with us, an underground moral culture of the disempowered. In the culture of solidarity, individuals who cannot enforce their honor or dignity instead make claim on recognition of their simple humanity. They publicize mistreatment not because they enjoy the status of victim, but because they need the support of others to

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70 Ibid.
stand strong, and because ultimately public discomfort is the only route to redress possible.\textsuperscript{71}

While some might choose to call a culture in which oppressed people have public and institutional support for identifying and redressing unfair treatment a “culture of victimhood,” I agree with Rini’s assessment that this description is misleading. Providing spaces for discussing microaggressions fosters a culture in which members of oppressed groups are able to name and draw attention to patterns of behavior that constitute and entrench large-scale oppression. Asking others to bear witness to injustice is not the same as valorizing victimhood. Creating spaces and structures that allow people to call attention to the ways in which oppression impacts them on an interpersonal level can empower people to stand up to racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, as opposed to weakening them, as critics imply.

Second, with regard to the suggestion that appealing to third parties for support in the aftermath of microaggressive behavior somehow weakens microaggressees, I will point out that attempting to resolve these conflicts privately can have serious drawbacks. Specifically, this approach places a burden on microaggressees who may be placed in a vulnerable position if they voice concerns about microaggressive behavior. For instance, college students who receive microaggressions from their professors are put in a precarious position if students’ only two options are either ignoring microaggressions or approaching their professor on their own: either students remain silent and accept treatment that implies their inferiority (or other pernicious stereotypes about their identity group) or they engage in a risky interaction that could lead to retaliation and unfair treatment such as biased grading. Given this bad set of options, it does not

seem unreasonable for institutions that value social justice and the success of their constituents to provide support to those who are treated microaggressively.

By defining “microaggression” as inextricably linked to a larger pattern of unjust prejudice and oppression in the broader social context, my account helps elucidate why publicly addressing microaggressive behavior can help empower oppressed people. While they may seem insignificant to some, microaggressions play a role in sustaining large-scale patterns of injustice and, for this reason, deserve attention.
Chapter 2: The Moral Harms of Microaggressions

In this chapter I canvas some of the ways that microaggressive behaviors can cause moral harm. I argue that the particular structure of microaggressions contributes to their harmful nature. Recall that microaggressions are interpersonal behaviors that implicitly signal microaggressors are biased in a way that supports a larger pattern of unjust prejudice and oppression in a broader social context. Because microaggressions are structured like this, they are especially at risk for harming microaggressees’ self-experience in morally troubling ways. Moreover, the structure of microaggressions predisposes them to damage relationships that are built on the presumed trustworthiness of each member.

In this chapter, I first defend the claim that microaggressions can contribute to internalized oppression. I then draw on Robin Dillon’s work to help show some of the ways that this internalized oppression can threaten microaggressees’ sense of self-respect.72 Next I outline how microaggressions can contribute to a miscalibrated sense of self-trust. I base my account on Karen Jones’ work on self-trust.73 Briefly, the fact that microaggressions implicitly signal oppressive biases can make microaggressees uncertain about how to interpret microaggressive behavior. This uncertainty can undermine both microaggressees’ sense of self-trust, and make it challenging for microaggressees to interrupt patterns of microaggressive behavior. I close out the chapter by outlining some of the ways microaggressions can morally damage relationships. For this section I use Margaret Walker’s concepts of “moral damage” and “moral repair” to ground

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my analysis. In a nutshell, this section argues that microaggressions challenge normative expectations. In doing so, microaggressions jeopardize the sense of trust and hope on which many relationships are built. As a whole, this chapter emphasizes the moral effects of microaggressions. It reminds us that structural oppression can affect us, and our relationships, in intimate, destabilizing ways.

2.1. Microaggressions and Internalized Oppression

In sections two and three I will explain some of the ways that exposure to microaggressions can damage a person’s self-conception qua moral agent. This section lays the foundation for these arguments by supporting the following hypothesis: exposure to microaggressions can contribute to the internalization of oppressive biases, prejudices, stereotypes, values, and worldviews about one’s identity group. My claims, however, are not based on empirical findings about the link between microaggressions and internalized oppression. Rather, my arguments provide theoretical scaffolding for future empirical investigations of the topic.

Internalized oppression occurs when a person comes to internalize oppressive ideology about the identity group(s) to which he or she belongs. There are distinct types of internalized oppression. Internalized racial oppression, for example, is the “individual inculcation of the

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75 In some cases, people can internalize oppressive ideology about a group they are misidentified as belonging to or about a group to which they have a complicated relationship. For example, imagine a person who identifies as mixed race and has a white mother and a black father. This person might internalize oppressive ideology about black people, although not identify as black. Cases like this raise conceptual questions about whether to understand this phenomenon as “internalized oppression” or not. While I do not have space to discuss this complex issue here, I recommend further research on this topic.
racist stereotypes, values, images, and ideologies perpetuated” about one’s racial group.\textsuperscript{76} Internalized skin tone bias is one example of internalized racial oppression.\textsuperscript{77} The internalization of skin tone bias can cause those with dark skin to prefer lighter skin, and, more generally, to devalue their own racial group.\textsuperscript{78} All forms of internalized oppression, racial or otherwise, involve coming to believe, either consciously or unconsciously, that one’s group is inadequate, inferior, or undesirable when compared to the dominant group (or groups).

One can internalize oppressive norms about one’s group to varying degrees. In some cases, the internalized norms might be the only values one recognizes (both consciously and unconsciously) as legitimate. Take the case of a woman of color who has internalized a bias in favor of light skin. Here, her actions (lightening her skin, applying sunscreen to avoid tanning, etc.) and her explicit commitments (she openly acknowledges that she finds light skin more attractive than dark skin) support the idea that dark skin is inferior. In other cases, a person can internalize oppressive norms while also consciously believing that these norms are false. Imagine a woman who has internalized the idea that female scientists are inferior to male scientists. She \textit{consciously endorses} the idea that women are just as capable as men, while her behaviors suggest an unconscious bias in favor of male scientists.\textsuperscript{79} Implicitly held values, endorsements, or associations can therefore conflict with those that are explicit.\textsuperscript{80} Regardless of whether biases are explicitly or implicitly endorsed, the general idea is that exposure to oppressive ideologies


Research in social psychology supports the idea that mere exposure to oppressive ideology can contribute to our adoption of biased attitudes.\footnote{Huebner, “Troubles with Stereotypes for Spinozan Minds.”} Gilbert and colleagues provide evidence that supports the idea that exposure to a claim can cause a person to believe that it is
true.\textsuperscript{85} Study participants supported this finding even when researchers told participants that the claims they were exposed to were false. Furthermore, participants were even more likely to believe false claims when they were under an increased cognitive load at the time of exposure to the claims.\textsuperscript{86} Findings like this support the argument that mere exposure to oppressive ideology can cause us to believe it—or internalize it—especially when our attention is pulled in different directions at the time of exposure. Importantly, this phenomenon can occur even when we consciously believe the messages we encounter are false.

Ross Gay narrates a first-person account regarding his experiences with internalized oppression. He explains how repeated exposure to stereotypes linking black masculinity and criminality have led him to adopt a view of himself as a criminal, even though he knows he has done nothing wrong:

I’ve been afraid walking through the alarm gate at the store that maybe something’s fallen into my pockets, or that I’ve unconsciously stuffed something in them; I’ve felt panic that the light skinned black man who mugged our elderly former neighbors was actually me, and I worried that my parents, with whom I watched the newscast, suspected the same; and nearly every time I’ve been pulled over, I’ve prayed there were no drugs in my car, despite the fact that I don’t use drugs; I don’t even smoke pot. That’s to say the story I have all my life heard about black people—criminal, criminal, criminal—I have started to suspect of myself.\textsuperscript{87}

Internalized oppression, which is the result of exposure to oppressive ideas about one’s own identity group, can thus negatively affect a person’s view of him or herself. As in Gay’s case, this internalization of stereotypes can occur even when a person consciously knows that this view of the self is false or inaccurate. Ross Gay’s writings fit in line with a “legacy of personal,


\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.

often anecdotal, accounts of struggles with internalized racial inferiority that span the twentieth century.\footnote{Pyke, “What Is Internalized Racial Oppression and Why Don’t We Study It?,” 553.} With this legacy in mind, it is not surprising that researchers have found that exposure to stereotypes, bias, and prejudice can lead to the internalization of oppressive norms and biases. It is equally unsurprising that they have found positive correlations between internalized oppression and a number of health setbacks such as depressive symptoms, eating disorders, metabolic health risks, and substance abuse.\footnote{Earle C. Chambers et al., “The Relationship of Internalized Racism to Body Fat Distribution and Insulin Resistance among African Adolescent Youth,” \textit{Journal of the National Medical Association} 96, no. 12 (December 2004): 1594–98; Brown, Rosnick, and Segrist, “Internalized Racial Oppression and Higher Education Values The Mediational Role of Academic Locus of Control Among College African American Men and Women.”} Of course, not everyone who internalizes pernicious stereotypes about their identity group will experience these negative consequences. But, the fact that internalized oppression can lead to social and medical setbacks places those who have internalized oppressive norms at a disadvantage.

But how do microaggressions, in particular, lead to the internalization of oppressive ideologies, values, and norms? The argument from here is fairly straightforward. Since microaggressive behaviors signal oppressive biases, exposure to microaggressions also constitutes exposure to these biases. As discussed earlier, mere exposure to bias and prejudice can contribute to the internalization of oppressive ideas about one’s identity group. From this, it follows that exposure to microaggressions can contribute to internalized oppression among microaggressees.\footnote{See Ong et. al for empirical research grounding the idea that exposure to microaggressions is correlated with higher negative affect and somatic symptoms. Their work also suggests that microaggressive incidents (or experiences of these incidents) tend to “follow on the heels” of others in such a way that can ramp up negative affect and somatic symptoms in microaggressees. Their work thus supports the idea that repeated exposure to microaggressive conduct over time negatively influences a person's health. It also supports the idea that exposure to microaggressions can make you more sensitive to microaggressions in the future. Anthony D.}
Besides negatively affecting a person’s mental or physical health, internalized oppression can harm individuals by way of threatening their self-respect. Next, I draw from Robin Dillon’s work on self-respect and how it “can be lost, or otherwise lacking, damaged, or compromised.” I show that the biases that microaggressions communicate can, when internalized, promote a loss of self-respect among microaggressees.

2.2. Microaggressions and Self-Respect

In “Self Respect: Moral, Emotional, Political” Dillon discusses three different types of self-respect. All three, I will argue, can be damaged by internalizing the biases that microaggressions communicate. The first two types of self-respect that Dillon considers—recognition self-respect (R-self-respect) and evaluative self-respect (E-self-respect)—were first introduced by Stephen Darwall. Briefly put, “we R-respect ourselves by developing, assessing, and striving to live in accord with an appropriate self-ideal; we merit E-self-respect insofar as we do that well.”

R-self-respect entails explicitly recognizing oneself as deserving a particular kind of self-regard in virtue of one’s personhood. This kind of self-regard includes recognizing the self as having equal fundamental moral worth and standing in the moral community as compared to other persons. This recognition entails explicitly believing that treatment by others that falls below what one is owed in virtue of one’s personhood is degrading and morally problematic. Put more generally, to have R-self-respect:

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92 Dillon, “Self-Respect.”
93 Ibid.
95 Dillon, “How to Lose Your Self-Respect,” 134.
…is to have a keen sense of what we might call one’s ‘fundamental interpersonal worth,’ the intrinsic worth one has as a person among persons. This understanding of one’s moral status and worth contains the conviction that as a person one is owed the equal respect of others, including their respect of basic rights.96

In addition, R-self-respect involves recognizing one’s agency and one’s responsibility to preserve one’s own dignity. Lastly, R-self-respect includes “properly appreciating the moral significance of being one’s own person” and viewing the self as an individual with particular projects, pursuits, and commitments.97

R-self-respect, then, is threatened when one consciously holds a view of the self as unworthy of respect, recognition, or fair treatment in virtue of one’s personhood. To see how this can play out, Dillon presents Thomas Hill’s example of a person who fails to regard himself with the consideration he deserves due to a sense of servility. The archetype of the “Uncle Tom,” for example, lacks R-self-respect because “he accepts the idea that as a black [sic] he occupies a lower position in the moral community than whites and hence has no right to expect better treatment.”98 When he faces discrimination due to his race, he accepts this as justified, since he believes that his race grants him a lower place in the moral community than white people. The “Uncle Tom” thus views himself as undeserving and fails to see that he merits equal treatment and has self-worth in virtue of his personhood, regardless of his race.

Microaggressions can reinforce a diminished sense of R-self-respect when their messages are internalized. Here are some examples:

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96 Ibid., 126.
Break-Room: A boss asks a female employee to clean the break-room, even though it is not in her job description. Other, more junior, male employees are available to do the job.

Hands: In a high school class, a teacher ignores students of color who have their hands raised and only calls on white students.

Coming Out: Samad tells his colleague that Samad is gay. The colleague tells Samad, “I don’t think of you as gay. I think of you as a wholesome guy.”

All of these examples convey messages that, if internalized, can cause a person to believe that they lack dignity or self-worth. In Break Room, the boss’s demeaning request signals that the female employee is subservient to male employees, even in cases where she outranks them. This message reinforces the idea that, despite her position in the company, she is not worthy of the same level of respect as male employees. Given the larger social context in which Break Room occurs, the boss signals the idea that women are inferior, less valuable, or unworthy when compared to men. Internalizing messages of this sort can contribute to an explicit belief in one’s inferiority and a lack of self-worth, which promotes a loss of R-self-respect.

The microaggressions in Hands reinforce the message that students of color are invisible, insignificant, or unimportant. Students of color who internalize these messages could come to view themselves as second-class citizens in the classroom and to believe that they have less to offer than white students. To view one’s own thoughts or contributions as unworthy and believe that one’s needs are not as important as white students’ represents a loss of R-self-respect, since students fail to view themselves as deserving of the kind of treatment they are owed.

Coming Out is related to Derald Sue’s category of “microinvalidations.” Microinvalidations are microaggressions that “exclude, negate or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of certain groups, such as people of color, women, and
LGBTs." In Coming Out, the colleague implies that there is something “unwholesome” about being gay. Furthermore, by refusing to recognize Samad’s gay identity, the colleague nullifies and negates Samad’s experiences as a gay man and implies that these parts of his identity are best left invisible. To be treated as invisible, unseen, or insignificant can lead one to lack R-self-respect. Furthermore, internalizing the idea that an integral part of one’s identity is impure or indecent can cause Samad to cease recognizing himself as possessing the value and self-worth that he in fact has. Because of this, Samad might come to accept the idea that being gay threatens key aspects of his dignity. “I am gay, which is despicable,” Samad might think, “so I deserve poor treatment.”

Microaggressions can also contribute to a loss of E-self-respect. With regard to the difference between R-self-respect and E-self-respect, Dillon explains that:

As (recognition) self-respecting persons, we embrace and endeavor to live in accord with norms of character and conduct that configure a life appropriate to ourselves as persons among persons, agents, and individuals. But we also stand back to reflect on ourselves, asking whether we have merit: are we living congruently with our normative self-conceptions? E-self-respect thus occurs when a person believes they have lived up to their self-ideal. So, a person can lose their sense of E-self-respect when they feel as though they have failed to meet the normative expectations they have cultivated for themself. A person who is ashamed thus experiences a loss in E-self-respect, since they feel as though they have not lived up to their own self-ideals:

The Ashamed individual regards herself as having failed in some significant way: failed to achieve some aspiration that is central to her self-conception; or failed to live up to some ideal to which she has committed herself and in terms of which

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99 Sue, Microaggressions in Everyday Life, 37.
100 Dillon, “Self-Respect,” 231.
101 Ibid.
she defines herself; or, more generally, failed to be the kind of person she wants to be, thinks she should be, or thought or hoped she was.\textsuperscript{102}

Thus E-self-respect is rooted in one’s sense of adequacy with regard to how well one meets one’s self-expectations as a moral agent.

Internalizing messages like the ones conveyed in \textit{Coming Out} can cause Samad to feel as though his gayness makes him fail as a morally decent person. This might cause him to think that he has failed to live up to the standards and values he holds dear. In \textit{Hands}, students might feel ashamed by their lack of participation, thinking it represents an area where they failed to live up to their own standards and normative expectations.

Both R- and E-self-respect depend on the agent having a set of explicit beliefs about oneself: namely, that one sees oneself a having self-worth and dignity as well as living up to one’s self-ideals. Internalizing oppressive biases signaled by microaggressors can thus threaten R-self-respect \textit{and} E-self-respect by causing a person to view themselves as lacking or failing in these areas.

While R- and E-self-respect have to do with one’s explicit or “intellectual understanding” of their self-worth and self-evaluations, “basal self-respect” involves a person’s \textit{implicit} understandings of these things.\textsuperscript{103} In some cases, while a person might rationally conclude that they are deserving of self worth or that they have lived up to their set of normative standards, they might nonetheless \textit{feel} as though this is not true. In these cases, agents might maintain their sense of R- and E-self-respect but lack basal self-respect. Dillon describes basal self-respect as “a prereflective, unarticulated, emotionally laden pre-suppositional interpretive framework, an

\textsuperscript{102} Dillon, “How to Lose Your Self-Respect,” 126.
\textsuperscript{103} Dillon, “Self-Respect.”
implicit ‘seeing oneself as’ or ‘taking oneself to be.’”\textsuperscript{104} The Ross Gay example I introduced earlier represents a case in which a person (Gay in this instance) internalizes stereotypes about criminality and his identity group in such a way that threatens his sense of basal self-respect. By suspecting himself of criminal activity, Gay evaluates himself negatively on an emotional or implicit level—as one who cannot live up to the moral norms and values he endorses. However, when asked “are you a criminal?” he understands rationally that he is not and that he has fulfilled all of the standards and normative expectations he has set out for himself. Gay therefore lacks a feeling that he measures up morally, despite knowing, rationally, that he does.

Microaggressions can threaten “basal self-respect” by reinforcing an implicit view of the self as lacking self-worth. Microaggresses in Break Room, Hands, and Coming Out might all have an “incessant whispering below the threshold of awareness” that says “you’re not good enough, you’re nothing.”\textsuperscript{105} This feeling that one lacks self-worth can thus be caused by an exposure to microaggressive conduct.

Dillon argues that the damage of basal self-respect is further reinforced by a phenomenon called “mystification.”\textsuperscript{106} Sandra Bartky defines “mystification” as the following:

> The systematic obscuring of both the reality and agencies of psychological oppression [internalized oppression] so that its intended effect, the depreciated self, is lived out as destiny, guilt, or neurosis.\textsuperscript{107}

“Mystification” occurs when individuals source their perceived inadequacies in themselves, as individual character flaws, shortcomings, or flukes, as opposed to the result of oppressive, systematic, external forces. Microaggressions, I will argue, can add to a sense of mystification and can thus bolster a lack of basal self-respect in microaggresses in this way too.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 241.
\item \textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 242.
\item \textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 246.
\item \textsuperscript{107} Bartky, Femininity and Domination, 23.
\end{itemize}
For an example of mystification, consider the case of a Latino high school student who attends a California public school that is a part of a failing educational system. Though interested in learning and hungry for academic engagement, the student has not received adequate preparation or support needed to succeed on standardized tests. The student is also exposed to stereotypes about Latinos and academic inferiority that he internalizes. When faced with a problem he cannot answer on a test, the student blames his own mental “inadequacies”: “If only I weren’t so stupid, I could solve this problem; there’s something wrong with me. I’m not able to score well on this test.”

In this case, the student finds fault with himself and he locates his deficiencies solely in the shortcomings of his own capacities for learning despite the fact that there are external reasons for his academic failings. Furthermore, cultural rhetoric promoting the idea that all students are treated equally and can achieve success simply through hard work can reinforce this student’s self-perception as “stupid” or “lazy,” when in reality his education system is holding him back.108

The student is exposed to simultaneous contradicting tropes: He is explicitly told that, if he works hard enough, he can succeed. At the same time, no one tells him that the media he consumes propagates stereotypes about Latinos and academic inferiority. And he does not know that public education spending on his education will be $4,380 less than that of students at schools in the same state that have 90% or more white students.109

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Because microaggressors *implicitly* signal prejudices and biases, they can help mystify a major source of one’s perceived inadequacies: oppressive social conditions. The subtle, implied nature of the messages carried by microaggressions makes it easier for a person to internalize these messages without realizing that he or she has been exposed to an expression of bias in the first place. A woman who receives explicit messages that she is capable can simultaneously come to lack self-confidence due to exposure to microaggressive messages that reinforce the feeling that she cannot succeed or act reliably on her own. Because microaggressions are subtle and implicitly signal biases, they represent a mechanism by which people can come to internalize stereotypes about themselves without even realizing this process is occurring. Because of this, microaggressions lend themselves well to the process of mystification, which relies on obscuring how oppression is sustained and perpetuated. This, in turn, can aid in a decrease of basal self-respect where a person feels deeply inadequate and like they lack self-worth; however, explicitly they believe this is not the case.

To review, I have made a conceptual argument for how microaggressions can lead to internalized oppression that can, in turn, negatively affect a person’s sense of R-self-respect, E-self-respect, and basal self-respect. A person can therefore internalize the messages that microaggressions communicate in varying ways. Sometimes these messages infiltrate a person’s intellectual, conscious, and explicit understanding of oneself. Other times these messages get internalized such that they remain implicit in microaggresses, at an emotional or non-propositional level of understanding. And, of course, losing self-respect in these various ways are not mutually exclusive: a person can lack all three kinds of self-respect at once—R, E, and basal. Finally, because microaggressions implicitly signal bias, they lend themselves to processes of
mystification that help maintain oppressive conditions and can further contribute to a loss of basal self respect.

2.3. Microaggressions and Self-Trust

_Sorority:_ Tiffany is a 19-year-old, second generation, Chinese American university student. She is a recent sorority pledge and is attending a mixer event at her new sorority. As she stands in a social circle, a friendly, white-fourth year asks her where she is from. Tiffany, having grown up in San Francisco, states that she’s from California. Upon hearing her response, her sorority sister laughs, “No…” she states, “Where are you really from?”

In the last sections I outlined some of the ways that microaggressions can contribute to internalized oppression and thus support a diminished sense of self-respect. I also argued that the structure of microaggressions promote mystification. In this section I argue that the structure of microaggressions makes it difficult to ascertain microaggressors’ commitments to the biases they signal. I show that this ambiguity can lead microaggressees to experience a reduction in self-trust. This lack of self-trust represents yet another way that microaggressions can harm microaggressees’ views of themselves _qua_ moral agents. As I will explain, part of what diminishes microaggressees’ sense of self-trust is the possibility that microaggressors can react dismissively when confronted by microaggressees about microaggressions. In “The Politics of Self-Trust” Karen Jones lays out an account of self-trust.\(^{110}\) I will outline this account, and explain how microaggressions can contribute to a lack of self-trust.

Jones argues that the capacity for self-trust is grounded in our ability to take a step back from the epistemic methods that allow us to arrive at our conclusions. We can say to ourselves “it seems to me that-p, but is that really a reason to believe that-p?”\(^{111}\) That (many) humans can think about the connection between their assessments and the methods they used to arrive at


\(^{111}\) Ibid., 239.
these assessments allows for us to exercise epistemic agency. In contrast, infants, those with certain severe cognitive impairments, and many non-human animals may not have possibility of evaluating their epistemic processes. Of course, most who can do so do not evaluate their epistemic methods in every instance; however, Jones states that “a well-regulated agent is disposed to step back and question” his or her epistemic mechanisms when there are grounds to do so.

According to Jones, intellectual self-trust is best understood as the level of optimism we have about our cognitive competence in a particular domain. She writes, “self-trust is appropriate if and only if one’s domain-relativized optimism matches one’s domain-based competence.” The definition hinges on the notion of “optimism.” Optimism serves as a “place-holder for a set of dispositions” such as confidence and security with regard to a particular domain. So, self-trust with regard to a domain is a disposition to feel, among other things, confident and secure about one’s competence with regard to that domain. Self-distrust occurs when one lacks feelings of confidence and security regarding one’s competence with regard to a particular domain.

Jones goes on to argue that unjust social relations can undermine oppressed people’s sense of self-trust. In essence, unjust social relations promote stereotypes and biases that can lead us to treat those from oppressed social groups as less credible than they really are. Miranda Fricker terms this phenomenon “testimonial injustice.” Since self-trust is affected by how others respond to us, when people experience testimonial injustice, they can internalize the idea

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112 Ibid.
113 Ibid., 240.
114 Ibid., 243.
115 Ibid.
that they lack credibility or that their view of the world is inaccurate. This can, in turn, cause a person to grow less confident or optimistic about their epistemic mechanisms. In this way, oppressive social conditions can lead to epistemic injustices that can promote a sense of self-distrust in those who are socially oppressed. Unwarranted self-distrust is harmful in part because it causes someone to have an inaccurate self-conception, but also because it can damage a person’s sense of confidence and “foster near endless rumination on the possibility of error, making it difficult for the agent to reach a conclusion as to whether p or not p.”

The structure of microaggressions lends itself to promoting self-distrust in the microaggressee. (1) First, recall that microaggressions signal bias. Because these signals vary in their reliability, it is difficult to know whether they are in fact manifestations of bias in the microaggressor or whether they are simply misrepresentations of the microaggressor’s mental state. (2) Given that microaggressions implicitly signal biases, it can be difficult to know whether one’s interpretation of the meaning of a microaggressive behavior is accurate.

To illustrate the first epistemic challenge, consider Sorority (presented at the start of this section). Here, it is unclear whether Tiffany’s sorority sister harbors a bias that Asian Americans are outsiders or “un-American” or whether her actions simply signal this without linking up to any actual bias or prejudice of the sorority sister’s. So, while Tiffany might trust her assessment that the sorority sister’s actions support and contribute to racist ideology, a question still remains about whether her sorority sister endorses (either consciously or unconsciously) the biases she signals. Tiffany can come to question the link between her epistemic methods and her conclusion.


that her sorority sister has a bias: “it seems to me that-p, but is that really a reason to believe that-
p?”\textsuperscript{119}

To illustrate the second point (about not knowing whether one’s interpretation of the microaggression is accurate), consider a version of the case in which Tiffany comes to distrust her assessment of the meaning of the microaggression. This type of uncertainty is relatively easy to slide into, since the question “where are you really from?” does not explicitly state a bias. Here, Tiffany wonders, “Is my sorority sister’s question racist? Or am I misreading her behaviors and the context here?” To make her assessment, Tiffany must rely on her assessment of the larger, social context to arrive at her interpretation. Because implicit signals can sometimes be tricky to grasp the meaning of, this represents a key place that self-distrust can creep in.

On one hand some amount of uncertainty is appropriate with regard to microaggressive behavior. This is because, since microaggressors implicitly signal biases, some degree of interpretation will always be necessary to determine whether a microaggression occurred, and this interpretation is fallible. With regard to the first point, it will never be completely certain whether the microaggressor possesses the bias he or she signals given the fact that signals are not 100\% reliable (see 1.1.).

On the other hand, this does not lead to the conclusion that microaggressors should enter into a state of radical self-distrust when it comes to interpreting microaggressions. While signals are not always reliable, this fact in and of itself should not foster the “near endless rumination on the possibility of error,” that sometimes plagues self-doubters, and can inhibit microaggresses

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 239.
from trusting their assessment of microaggressions to the appropriate degree given their evidence and interpretive skills.\textsuperscript{120}

By analogy, imagine I sometimes mistake person X for person Y. This does not mean that when I see X walk through the door it would be appropriate for me to enter a state of endless rumination about the possibility that perhaps it is really Y. That my visual perception tends to be reliable more often than not should be enough to generate (at least some) optimism in my own competence with respect to identifying X—and thus harbor some degree of self-trust in my abilities with regard to this particular domain. Furthermore, just because I sometimes misinterpret body language does not mean that I ought to endlessly question what others’ body language means. In both of these analogous cases, it is clear that the mere possibility of error should not throw someone into a debilitating state of distrust in most cases. So why, then, might some microaggresses experience a lack of self-trust to a big enough extent that they decide to refrain from interrupting or drawing attention to microaggressive behavior?

The answer lies in the fact that it is not simply the mere possibility that microaggressees can be wrong in their assessments of microaggressions that can cause them to have inappropriate levels of self-distrust. Because the meaning of microaggressions are implied and not stated explicitly, it is easy for microaggressors to deny that they signal biases or prejudices. Furthermore, the fact that microaggressions rely on a larger, oppressive social context to gain their meaning can make those who are unaware of (or have limited knowledge of) the context unable to grasp the meaning of the microaggression. Thus, when confronted about their microaggressive behaviors, those who lack a broader understanding about the larger, socially oppressive context can easily deny that their behaviors have the meanings that they do.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 244.
These denials support and foster self-distrust in the microaggressee. Even if microaggressees begin with an appropriate level of confidence in their epistemic assessments, encountering denials from microaggressors can diminish one’s sense of competence with regard to the domain of assessing bias. As Jones reminds us, “epistemic calibration” is largely a social endeavor and we “engage in it when we challenge, accept, or reject assertions and arguments, and are ourselves challenged, and believed or not.”121 When met with denials—especially repeated denials—microaggressees can enter a state of miscalibrated self-trust in which they lack appropriate confidence levels with regard to their epistemic methods in particular domains.

In Sorority, if Tiffany’s sorority sister lacks the contextual understanding of racism against Asian Americans in the United states and of how positioning Asian Americans as foreign supports and produces white supremacy, she will have a difficult time understanding her behaviors as biased or as morally troubling in any way. This lack of understanding can cause her to deny that Tiffany’s assessment of the situation is accurate. In doing so, she questions Tiffany’s competence when it comes to her epistemic methods, and she reinforces an inappropriate sense of self-distrust for Tiffany.

Moreover, by first denying that microaggressions signal a bias, microaggressors are able to flip and reorient the conversation, making it appear as if it is the microaggressee who is “attacking” the microaggressor. For example, Tiffany’s sorority sister could accuse her of “oversensitivity” or “extreme political correctness.” This reorienting strategy further promotes a sense of self-distrust in the microaggressee. With it, not only are microaggressees made to question whether their assessments of microaggressive behaviors are accurate, they are also made to question whether their decision to express these assessments is appropriate. These sorts

121 Ibid., 247.
of challenges from microaggressors can work to destabilize a sense of security in one’s competence regarding the domain of bias interpretation.

In the case of white microaggressors and racial microaggressions, this move to reorient, flip, and reframe the conversation can be understood as part of a larger pattern to resist and avoid experiences of racial stress. Robin DiAngelo calls this phenomenon “White Fragility.” She argues that white people in North America live in a social environment that largely shields them from race-based stress. This social environment builds up white people’s expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering their ability to tolerate racial stress. White Fragility is “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves.” These defensive moves include displays of emotions like indignation, anger, rage, fear, guilt, and disdain. Behaviors like combativeness, defensiveness, shutting down, and leaving the situation or conversation are also symptoms of White Fragility. These behaviors and emotional responses position white people as victimized. More generally, defensiveness about racism, sexism, or homophobia can trigger behavior that repositions the microaggressor as the victim.

These dismissals and reframings allow microaggressors to avoid critically engaging with their own microaggressive behaviors. By making the moral focus of the conversation the supposed wrongness of the microaggressee’s confrontation, the microaggressor is able to avoid thinking about their behaviors from another perspective or as the possible site of racism, sexism, or homophobia. This deflection and avoidance short circuits deep or meaningful conversations about identity and power, and instead creates a discourse that is thin and one-dimensional. This

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123 Ibid., 54.
allows microaggressors to avoid considering their behaviors from a different perspective and thus can work to perpetuate ignorance.

The microaggressor’s denial coupled with their reframing of the microaggression often works to place the burden of proof squarely on the shoulders of the microaggressee. When put in this position, the microaggressee faces a choice of whether or not to try and convince microaggressors that their behaviors relate to larger systems of injustice and domination. In cases where microaggressors have some understanding about the ways in which oppression and implicit bias function, this might not be a difficult task. However, many microaggressors are ignorant of the ways that oppression operates and is sustained. And, often, this ignorance is no accident, since widespread ignorance plays a vital role in sustaining and reproducing oppressive social structures.

Charles Mills argues that the Racial Contract “prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance” in which, people lack a full understanding of the social realities created by white supremacy.124 This lack of understanding extends to self-awareness, and Mills argues, white people are often unable to understand their own role in sustaining white supremacist social structures. Furthermore, Mills suggests that this epistemology of ignorance is actually a part of what it means to be white—since whiteness comes to carry with it ignorance about how white supremacy functions and is sustained. Mills notes that “white ignorance” or ignorance about white supremacy is not only confined to white people. Instead, nonwhites also share this ignorance to varying degrees because, in a white supremacist society, white values and white ways of seeing and interpreting the world reign hegemonic.

More generally, widespread ignorance about oppression can lead microaggressors to dismiss microaggresses. Circling back to self-distrust, denials and reframing on the part of the microaggressor constitute an unwarranted credibility deficit in the microagresssee. This unwarranted credibility deficit, as Jones argues, can increase microaggresses’ sense of self-distrust.\textsuperscript{125} Thus, self-distrust is fueled by the dismissals and reframing of microaggressors. And, prospectively, the potential for these sorts of responses can discourage microaggresses from drawing attention to microaggressions and can further add to this sense of reduced self-trust.\textsuperscript{126}

Taking stock, I have argued so far that the structure of microaggressions, in particular the fact that they involve implicit signals, can result in microaggresses feeling self-distrust when it comes to their competence in the domain of behavioral interpretation. This, coupled with the prospect of how some microaggressors might react after being confronted about their microaggressive behavior, can dissuade microaggresses from talking with microaggressors about their behaviors. This miscalibrated sense of self-trust makes it easier for patterns of microaggressions to go uninterrupted, \textit{viz.} it makes it more difficult for microaggresses to obtain the self-confidence needed to bring up specific instances of microaggressive behavior with microaggressors. The fact that microaggressions are structured in such a way that promotes an inappropriate level of self-distrust in microaggresses thus helps to reinforce large-scale oppressive social systems, since this self-distrust can prevent the interruption of microaggressive behavior.\textsuperscript{127}

\textsuperscript{126} I will return to a discussion of white ignorance, White Fragility, and unwarranted credibility deficits in chapter 5 where I discuss microaggressions and epistemic negligence.
\textsuperscript{127} Not all microaggresses will experience a reduction of self-trust in the ways I have described here. However, in cases where microaggressions do not affect self-trust, there can still be pragmatic reasons that cause microaggresses to avoid confronting microaggressors. For instance, microaggresses familiar with “denial and “reframing” strategies microaggressors
2.4. Microaggressions and Moral Damage to Relationships

*Book:* Cai and her husband Ken are physicists employed at a major research university. They have invited a close friend, Darius, who is also a physicist, over for dinner. Darius arrives at Cai and Ken’s apartment a few minutes early. Cai answers the door. Darius walks in and notices a copy of a recent book about black holes he has been eager to read. He asks Cai when Ken got the book. Cai explains it’s *her* book, not Ken’s. Throughout dinner Darius questions Ken about the merits of the publication, despite the fact that he has been told the book belongs to Cai.\(^{128}\)

Up until this point I have focused mostly on the ways in which microaggressions can harm microaggresses: they can contribute to internalized oppression, a lack of self-respect, and miscalibrated self-distrust. More generally, all of these effects help sustain larger patterns of injustice. Next I focus on the ways that microaggressions can jeopardize *relationships* between microaggressor and microaggressee. In brief, microaggressions can violate normative expectations and, in doing so, can morally damage relationships by eroding confidence between parties. This type of damage, moral damage to relationships, is the focus of this section.

In this section, when I discuss the various moral harms associated with microaggressions and relationships, I restrict the focus to relationships between competent moral agents who are non-strangers—for example, between friends, colleagues, romantic partners, and family members. Relationships of this sort are fundamental in most adults’ lives. These kinds of relationships are what sustain us and often contribute to making life worth living. Given how

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\(^{128}\) Thanks to Hailey Huget for sharing this example with me.
much these relationships mean to us, and the level of investment we place in them, it is particularly important that we understand the ways that microaggressions can affect them.

Margaret Walker explains that moral relationships are “anchored” in our confidence that others share the same normative expectations that we have. By trusting that others will be responsive to moral standards, we presume that they will do as they ought to because they recognize this as the right course of action, and furthermore that they will accept accountability if they fail. Moral relationships are therefore built on a kind of hopeful attitude, “one that includes a belief in the possibility of responsiveness and a desire for responsiveness” to moral expectations. Moral relationships are therefore gravely threatened when this hope dwindles:

To cease to have hope in the context of moral relations is to cease to believe in the possibility that the norms by which one has been guided are the right ones to live by, that others can and should be trusted to live by them and help sustain them. A loss of hope in the sense Walker outlines here represents a grave threat to moral relationships. This is because it carries with it a termination in trust, which lies at the root of our normative expectations and thus moral relationships. Walker explains that relationships can become “morally damaged” when members experience a decrease in confidence that others will live up to presumed, shared moral expectations. In contrast, the process of restoring hope and trust is what Walker calls “moral repair.” For Walker, “morality is the study of us as beings capable of entering into, sustaining, damaging, and repairing” trust-based relations that are moored in normative expectations.

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129 Walker, Moral Repair, 66.
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid., 69.
“Normative abandonment” occurs when one feels as though others do not recognize presumed, shared norms, and it thus signals that moral repair is needed. The feeling of resentment can act as an alarm that signals ruptures in normative standards, trust, and hope:

What best explains the extent and variety of possible occasions for resentment is that resentment responds to perceived threats to expectations based on norms that are presumed to be shared in, or justly authoritative for, common life. In some cases resentment also responds to experienced threats to one’s standing to assert or insist upon those norms.

But resentment is not the only emotion that one can feel when confronted with normative abandonment. For instance, a person can feel humiliated, insecure, or disappointed in the face of normative abandonment. Just as with resentment, moral repair can occur when these feelings are properly addressed and responded to in the context of the relationship.

Walker’s account provides us with a useful framework for assessing how microaggressions can morally damage relationships. First, microaggressions can cause uncertainty about whether and to what extent normative expectations are shared between microaggressor and microaggressee. This can result in microaggresseees feeling a sense of normative abandonment. Furthermore, this can cause a range of feelings within the microaggressee—resentment, humiliation, insecurity, disappointment—that need to be addressed in order for the relationship to be repaired moving forward.

To see all this more clearly, recall that microaggressions implicitly signal biases that support patterns of oppression in the broader social context. This broader, socio-historical context legitimizes these biases and prejudices by way of social, economic, and material systems of valuation. For example, the idea that women’s time and work is less valuable than men’s is reflected by disproportionate wages, unequal positions of power held, and policies (both explicit

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135 Walker, Moral Repair, 114.
and implicit) that prioritize men’s time and energy over women’s. While these norms are recognized more and more readily as unjust, they continue to exist and have a great deal of power and authority.

The fact that all microaggressions represent acts or behaviors that support oppressive patterns of disadvantage is therefore significant because it illuminates the fact that all microaggressive behavior is supported by existing norms in the broader social context. However, while microaggressive behavior is endorsed by hegemonic systems of power, value, and ideology, it is also challenged by counter norms and standards that work to delegitimize existing power structures and offer an alternative system of ideals.

For example, feminist values and norms challenge sexist social configurations and thus represent an alternative system of values and normative expectations. Microaggressions can prompt questions in microaggressees about what norms microaggressors endorse. Because the biases are implicitly signaled (as opposed to explicitly stated), they invite questions about the values to which the microaggressor is committed, and these signals do not provide definitive answers one way or the other. If we assume that in many cases microaggressees are committed (at least to some extent) to counterhegemonic norms and values, it becomes clearer why microaggressions can threaten moral relationships. First, they can cause microaggressees to feel less confident that microaggressors share the same normative expectations that microaggressees endorse. Second, it can make microaggressees unsure of whether they can rely on microaggressors to live up to these counterhegemonic, normative expectations. According to Walker, this uncertainty represents a decrease in trust and thus moral damage to the relationship.136

136 Walker, Moral Repair.
But, as Walker also points out, damaged moral relationships can be repaired. A significant part of repairing relationships involves responding to moral feelings, such as resentment, in such a way that restores hope and trust in the fact that normative expectations are shared and will be met. When these moral feelings are not properly addressed, moral abandonment can ensue. This suggests that in cases where microagressees voice resentment (or other moral feelings), microaggressors’ responses and the subsequent exchange between microaggressor and microaggressee can either repair or further damage the relationship.

To make all this more concrete, imagine that Cai, in Book, confronts Darius about his microaggressive behavior in such a way that bring attentions to the fact that Darius’s behaviors represent an endorsement of sexist norms. This opens up space within the relationship for distrust and an increased focus on the fact that parties may uphold different sets of normative standards or similar ones to differing degrees. If Darius responds by dismissing Cai’s moral emotions—“My actions were not sexist! You’re making a big deal out of nothing!”—He will effectively fail to show concern about his behaviors or to engage in any kind of reparative work after the fact. By denying that his behaviors have the meaning that they do, he sidesteps supporting Cai. In doing so, he fails to take seriously the ways in which his behaviors might have caused Cai to reduce her sense of trust and hope in the relationship. Of course, not all microaggressors will respond in this way. Darius might very well apologize and try and make amends. This outcome could be beneficial to the relationship. It could restore hope and trust in the fact that both parties find similar norms authoritative, and that Darius, despite his behavior, does value Cai and recognizes her as an intellectual equal (or at the very least realizes that he should recognize her as an intellectual equal).
In the next chapter I will discuss in more detail what recognizing moral concern raised in the context of microaggressive conduct can look like and, more concretely, what minimally decent forms of responsiveness between microaggressors and microaggressesees are. For now, though, suffice it to say that the structure of microaggressions makes them capable of damaging moral relationships between microaggressors and microaggressesees. Earlier, I showed how microaggressions can morally harm microaggressesees by contributing to internalized oppression, a lack of self-respect, miscalibrated self-distrust, and patterns of injustice that oppress microaggressesees. Charting these many setbacks helps expose what is at stake, morally speaking, with regard to microaggressive behaviors and prompts the question of how we should respond to them when they occur.
Chapter 3: Microaggressions, Moral Concern, and Responsibility

In chapter one I defined “microaggression” as the following:

A microaggression is an interpersonal behavior that implicitly signals the microaggressor is biased in a way that supports a larger pattern of unjust prejudice and oppression in a broader social context.

A microaggression thus signals information about the microaggressor and his or her relationship to larger patterns of oppression. Also central to this definition is the idea that microaggressions are context-specific. Finally, microaggressions depend on large-scale, social systems of oppression to derive their power and meaning.

In chapter two, I outlined some of the challenges that microaggressive behaviors can pose for microaggressees. I also explained how microaggressions can damage the relationship between microaggressees and microaggressors. The structure of microaggressions makes these harms inextricably tied to larger systems of oppression that give them their meaning(s). Because of this, social context plays a big part in making microaggressions disadvantageous and harmful. On the one hand, individuals commit microaggressions. On the other hand, these behaviors are made harmful because of the broader social context. Microaggressors contribute to this larger context; however, they are not the sole cause of its existence. Microaggressions thus depend on these larger systems of oppression and contribute to them, yet microaggressors have little control or power over these systems. This interconnection between interpersonal behaviors, the harms they lead to, and a larger social context prompts questions about microaggressions and moral responsibility. The challenge, then, is to provide a discussion of responsibility and microaggressive conduct that remains sensitive to the fact that microaggressions are importantly linked to large-scale systems of oppression while also recognizing their direct, harmful impact on individuals.
This challenge, coupled with my commitment to this project privileging the perspective of microaggressees, shapes the questions at the heart of this chapter. I ask: As microaggressees are we presumptively justified in voicing moral concern to microaggressors in the face of microaggressions? Moral concerns can take the form of a propositional belief or judgment that some action or state of affairs is morally problematic. At the other end of the spectrum, moral concerns can manifest as noncognitive feelings that signal something is morally wrong. Thus, in the wake of a microaggression, one person might form the belief that the behavior was disrespectful in a morally troubling way while another might simply feel unsettled. Both phenomena represent moral concerns in my view, and neither is more legitimate or paradigmatic of a moral concern than the other. Ultimately, I argue that microaggressees are presumptively justified in voicing moral concerns about microaggressive conduct to microaggressors.

Second, the chapter asks: “What constitutes a minimally decent answer to microaggressees’ justified, voiced moral concerns?” In response to this question, I outline some of the ways in which microaggressors can fail to appropriately answer microaggressees’ concerns. Reviewing how these examples go wrong will help to flesh out what a minimally decent response looks like. To conclude, I consider good answers from microaggressors— i.e., ones that go above and beyond microaggressees’ justified expectations—and explain what they can involve.

My hope is that by focusing on the norms of moral responsiveness, this chapter will prove useful to microaggressees in their social encounters with microaggressors. In particular, the chapter elucidates what microaggressees should feel empowered to express in response to microaggressions and what constitutes a minimally decent reply from microaggressors. Overall,

the chapter outlines norms for responsibility-holding and responsibility-taking practices with regard to microaggressive conduct.

3.1. Affectability Imbalances and Invisibility in Narratives

In “Curious Disappearances: Affectability Imbalances and Process-Based Invisibility” Kristie Dotson and Marita Gilbert discuss predictable gaps within public narratives that disproportionately and unfairly affect those in marginalized, “disregarded,” or “villianized” communities (e.g., people of color, immigrants, or the economically impoverished). Dotson and Gilbert use the media coverage surrounding Nafissatou Diallo—a hotel employee who was sexually assaulted in 2011 by former International Monetary Fund director Dominique Strauss-Kahn—as a case study. In particular, they show that narratives about this event tended to focus on Strauss-Kahn—his capacity for agency, his needs, and how the event affected him—while ignoring a similar set of considerations regarding Diallo. Dotson and Gilbert call this dynamic an “affectability imbalance” in the public narrative.

It is my goal in this chapter to avoid presenting a narrative (or the basis for a narrative) about microaggressions and moral responsibility that ignores the needs and roles of microaggressees and thereby creates an affectability imbalance. A constraint on my discussion surrounding moral responsibility and microaggressions is thus that it acknowledges the needs of microaggressees, including their legitimate moral claims and expectations, while also appropriately capturing the role that they play with regard to microaggressive events and their aftermath. To explain this constraint on my account, I will say a bit more about affectability imbalances and why they are antithetical to my project.

139 Ibid., 882.
Dotson and Gilbert explain that affectability imbalances tend to occur when narratives involve those from disregarded communities. Disregarded communities are “those whose needs are often considered unimportant,” and narratives that involve those from disregarded communities often fail to fully recognize their needs as well as the impact they have on shaping narratives. This disregard can result in the disempowerment of individuals within such communities. In Diallo’s case, she is a working class, female, immigrant of color. Her complex identity places her in multiple disregarded communities. Ironically, given that she was the one most wronged by this event, narratives began to villainize her, thus portraying her needs for criminal justice as illegitimate:

Reporting for the *Guardian*, Germain notes sentiments of sympathy in response to images of an unshaven Strauss-Kahn in handcuffs, portraying him as a pitiful victim of political conspiracy. “And yet, nothing has been mentioned about the plight of his victim, or about how hard it is to speak out about sexual violence of seduction. And if we finally start talking about this alleged victim, it’s to suggest she was a honeytrap.”

Media narratives about the assault thus fail to fully recognize the extent to which Diallo was affected by this event and her needs in its aftermath. Overall, while there would be no public narrative about this event without Nafissatou Diallo, the narratives themselves obfuscated, erased, and discounted her life and experience. They did not properly recognize her as the individual person that she is nor as a full player in this event. Instead, she “is taken as somehow interchangeable with any other person who could bring forward such charges” and the specifics about her needs or the impact that she—as an individual—had on the event went largely ignored.

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140 Ibid., 876.
141 Ibid., 882.
142 Ibid., 884 & 874.
143 Ibid., 884.
Dotson and Gilbert’s paper helps to illuminate a metric for judging narratives about responsibility and microaggressions. Microaggresseses often come from disregarded communities. Narratives that produce affectability imbalances by focusing mainly on microaggressors are problematic, since they render the impact, role, and needs of microaggresseses invisible, thus adding to their disempowerment. Accounts of responsibility and microaggressions that ignore microaggresseses’ legitimate moral claims and expectations will therefore fall short according to my view, since they will not fully address the needs of microaggresseses. With this constraint in mind, I next consider two different models for thinking about moral responsibility. Ultimately, I show that each approach is insufficient, since, when applied to the context of microaggressions, they each result in narratives about moral responsibility that feature affectability imbalances. This discussion will help motivate the approach I ultimately take with regard to crafting my narrative about microaggressions and moral responsibility.

3.2. Models of Responsibility and Affectability Imbalances

Given that microaggressions can harm microaggresseses, we might wonder whether or not we can blame microaggressors for their behaviors. One model that lends itself well to discussions about blame for past conduct is the “liability model” of responsibility. The “most common model for assigning responsibility,” the liability model assigns responsibility to “particular agents whose actions can be shown to be causally connected to the circumstances of harm.”

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144 See chapter two for a discussion on this point
146 Young, “From Guilt to Solidarity,” 40. Young explains that, on the liability model, the responsible agent can be a collective (e.g., a corporation) that is treated as a singular agent for the purposes of assigning responsibility.
Some versions of the liability model foreground questions about individual agents’ states of mind in order to determine whether specific forms of responsibility-holding—such as sanctions or expressions of blame—are warranted or justified. Accounts like this often outline a set of conditions—metaphysical and psychological—that moral agents must meet in order to qualify as responsible for their individual behaviors. For example, whether the agent was coerced, acted voluntarily, or intended the outcome can affect responsibility on this view. These kinds of conditions make it so that attributions of responsibility are often tied to what goes on in the heads of particular agents.

Some versions of the liability model—strict liability accounts of responsibility—do not require that agents intend the outcome of their actions. However, a strict liability approach is still importantly similar to other liability models in that all are primarily “backward looking.” This means that they review “the history of events in order to assign responsibility, usually for the sake of exacting punishment of compensation” with regard to past action. Narratives about moral responsibility that utilize the liability approach therefore tend to focus on blaming the perpetrators for wrongs committed. In the case of microaggressions, this would involve an almost exclusive focus on microaggressors and their past behaviors.

While microaggressees might question whether microaggressors deserve blame, this sole consideration fails to capture a myriad of relevant questions microaggressees can reasonably be expected to have which are not raised within the liability paradigm. For instance, microaggressees might wonder what they should feel empowered to do or say in the wake of

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149 Young, “From Guilt to Solidarity,” 40.
microaggressions beyond simply making judgments about desert and blame. They might wonder how to move forward with the interaction, or, more generally, how to move forward with the relationship.

To make this less abstract, consider Cai in Book.\textsuperscript{150} Cai may wonder whether it is all right to bring up Darius’s microaggression with him after the fact. “What are the norms surrounding conversations like this?” she could ask herself. “By what metric should I evaluate my exchange with Darius?” Questions about how to responsibly navigate the relationship between microaggressor and microaggressee and the conversations that take place in response to microaggressions are not fully answered by the liability model of responsibility or the kinds of conclusions it can generate. This model ignores questions about the appropriate shape of communicative exchange between the microaggressor and the microaggressee.

Thinking back to Dotson and Gilbert’s work, their idea that affectability imbalances can lead to invisibilities in narratives can help to further articulate the shortcomings of the liability model in the context of microaggressions. Narratives about responsibility and microaggressions that only draw on the liability model will tend to focus on microaggressors: Did they commit a wrong? Do they deserve blame? To what extent should they be punished? Using the liability model to make sense of microaggressions and responsibility therefore fails to consider the needs and affectability of microaggresseses who also play a role in the exchange between microaggressor and microaggressee. And, I stated earlier, because microaggresseses often come

\textsuperscript{150} I introduced the Book example in chapter two: Cai and her husband Ken are physicists employed at a major research university. They have invited a close friend, Darius, who is also a physicist, over for dinner. Darius arrives at Cai and Ken’s apartment a few minutes early. Cai answers the door. Darius walks in and notices a copy of a recent book about black holes he has been eager to read. He asks Cai when Ken got the book. Cai explains it’s her book, not Ken’s. Throughout dinner Darius questions Ken about the merits of the publication, despite the fact that he has been told the book belongs to Cai.
from disregarded or oppressed communities, the notion of an affectability imbalance is even more apropos. Putting it all together: microaggressees have complex social identities that often place them in oppressed or disregarded communities. Narratives about microaggressions and moral responsibility that are generated by applying (only) the liability model of responsibility often fail to take into consideration the full range of moral claims that microaggressees can have such as their desire to repair relationships moving forward or engage in dialogue about the microaggression. For this reason, when applied to cases of microaggressions, the liability model produces narratives about moral responsibility that render microaggressees and their legitimate moral claims invisible despite the central role microaggressees play in the encounter between microaggressor and microaggressee.

In addition to producing affectability imbalances, the liability model is also ill-suited to fully address the harms that microaggressions represent for another reason. Microaggressions are enacted on the interpersonal level; however, they are made intelligible only through the existence of structural injustice and large-scale patterns of oppression such as white supremacy and patriarchy. Microaggressive behaviors contribute to these structural patterns of injustice, even though individuals do not directly cause or control these structures. Given that no single person or entity is the identifiable perpetrator of this kind of systemic injustice, the liability model seems to fall short when it comes to providing an account of microaggressions and moral responsibility, since it fails to capture the ways in which microaggressions are interwoven into larger tapestries of systemic injustice and oppressive institutions. In short, the liability model cannot do justice when it comes to assigning responsibility for the conditions that make microaggressive behaviors harmful. And since these conditions play a large role in the kind of harms that microaggressions
yield, the liability model cannot create adequate narratives about moral responsibility and microaggressions alone.

Young presents an alternative model of responsibility meant to capture responsibility for harms that have no isolatable perpetrator and are “enabled and supported by wider social structures” which are the “result from participation of millions of people and institutions.”\(^{151}\) She calls this alternative model of responsibility the “political” model of responsibility and later the “social-connection” model of responsibility.\(^{152}\) According to Young, structural injustice involves “social processes [that] put large categories of persons under a systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities.”\(^{153}\) Young argues that those who produce and sustain structural injustice can be held morally responsible even in cases where perpetrators do not personally exercise any control over these unjust structures. For example, a person who buys clothes made in sweatshops helps produce a social and economic structure that unfairly dominates and disadvantages sweatshop workers. Because this person is connected by their own behaviors “to the structural processes that produce injustice” they are responsible in such a way that obligates them to work with others in a process of collective action to alter oppressive structures.\(^{154}\)

According to the liability model, the wrongdoer can be isolated due to the fact that their behaviors deviate from a “baseline” of behaviors that are normally assumed to be morally acceptable. However, in the case of actions that support large-scale systems of oppression or injustice, it can often be difficult to detect one’s connection to these structures as negatively

\(^{151}\) Young, “From Guilt to Solidarity,” 41.
\(^{152}\) Young, “From Guilt to Solidarity”; Young, “Responsibility and Global Justice.”
\(^{153}\) Young, “Responsibility and Global Justice,” 114.
\(^{154}\) Young, “From Guilt to Solidarity,” 42; Young, “Responsibility and Global Justice,” 122.
morally significant, since they fall in step with baseline behaviors often perceived as morally neutral. As such, the political model of responsibility “does not focus on harms that deviate from the normal and acceptable, but rather brings into question the ‘normal’ background conditions.” With this task in mind, the political or social-connection model of responsibility does not aim to blame or punish individuals for past, wrong action (as the liability model would), but instead looks for ways to transform baseline conditions so that they are less harmful: “the main objective is to eliminate future harm.” This “forward-looking” approach to moral responsibility “emphasizes the future more than the past” and looks to collective strategies for structural, systemic change.

Right off the bat, microaggressors seem like apt candidates for the kind of political responsibility that Young outlines. Because microaggressions are inextricable from large-scale, oppressive structures, we can hold those who contribute to these structures responsible in the ways that political responsibility outlines. Specifically, this model helps us argue that we can hold microaggressors responsible for working collectively to challenge baseline conditions and reform institutions and structures that make microaggressive behaviors harmful in the first place.

However, when taken alone (or even in conjunction with the liability model), narratives about microaggressions and moral responsibility that utilize the political model of responsibility still fall short. This is because using this model still fails to capture the moral claims and needs of microaggressees and, as such, renders them “invisible” in narratives about microaggressions and moral responsibility. Engaging in collective action to transform oppressive structures, while important, does not capture the needs of microaggressees with regard to specific past

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155 Young, “From Guilt to Solidarity,” 41.
microaggressions. Even if Darius were to work collectively with his colleagues to dismantle sexist practices within the profession, the relationship between Cai and Darius might still remain damaged and in need of repair. Darius’s forward-looking strategies for resisting and dismantling structures of sexism do not take into account Cai’s central role with regard to the specific microaggression in question. In practice, the engagement that occurs between microaggressor and microaggressee often dynamically pivots between thinking about past behavior, how these behaviors presently affect the relationship in question, and about what can be done to repair the relationship moving forward. In many cases, to repair relationships damaged by a microaggression, both parties exercise their moral agency in a back-and-forth exchange. Questions about this exchange, from the perspective of the microaggressee, may not be addressed in narratives that use only a political or liability approach to moral responsibility or the combination of the two. If microaggresseses are left to make sense of microaggressive behavior and moral responsibility with only these two models of responsibility in hand, they lack a blueprint for the norms governing how to respond to microaggressive behaviors. This chapter seeks to fill this gap, and, in doing so, produces a narrative about microaggressions and moral responsibility that does not lead to the process-based invisibility of microaggressees.

3.3. Responding to Microaggressions: Communicating Moral Concern

In “Co-reactive Attitudes and the Making of Moral Community,” Victoria McGeer sharpens P.F. Strawson’s influential work on reactive attitudes. Reactive attitudes are a subset of moral emotions such as resentment, gratitude, forgiveness, and anger that:

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Express both a sensitivity to how people are regarded and treated by one another in the context of their interactions and a normative demand that such treatment and regard reflect a basic stance of good will, modulated to suit the kinds of interaction in question.\[158\]

McGeer explains that, in Strawson’s work, the question of whether someone is a responsible agent and thus the appropriate target of reactive attitudes hangs on whether “their own attitudes and responses will be normatively sensitive reactions (some better, some worse) to the reactive attitudes of others.”\[159\] Trajectories of co-reactive exchange occur when agents engage in a back-and-forth interaction spurred by both the expression of and responses to reactive attitudes. A person who responds normatively to others’ expressed concerns, and, subsequently, prompts the appropriate reactive response in others therefore successfully engages in responsibility-taking practices in this view. Thinking about responsibility-holding practices as co-reactive, dynamic exchanges offers a view of responsibility that is both backward-looking and forward-looking. Since reactive attitudes respond to past actions, there is a sense in which practices of reactive exchange are backward-looking—they begin when one person reacts to another’s past action. And when co-reactive exchange is successful, the individuals to whom reactive attitudes are directed offer reactive responses. This further scaffolds the exchange between parties and provides this understanding of responsibility-holding with a forward-looking component. Not only are exchanges focused on past wrongs, but since initial reactive attitudes can elicit further reactive responses, they push responsibility-holding practices to be future oriented in such a way that can repair the relationship moving forward. McGeer’s account therefore provides insight into how to think about microaggressions and responsibility, since it is sensitive to both the

\[159\] Ibid., 304.
backward-looking and forward-looking considerations of microaggresseses who want to address past, morally significant behaviors while also moving forward in the context of the relationship.

But, before this narrative can be fully fleshed out, we need to get clearer on what microaggresseses are doing, exactly, when they express their reactive attitudes to microaggressors. I suggest that we understand these reactive attitudes as doing what Elise Springer calls “communicating moral concern.” Communicating moral concern is one way in which we “notice and address what others are doing with their agency.” It is a process in which we engage in a kind of mutual transformation that Elise Springer elegantly and metaphorically refers to as a “social dance.” She states that the aim of communicating moral concern is to get the “character” of our concern to “come across and engage attention” in the hearer.

Communicating moral concern is thus about more than changing the hearer’s behaviors. It is also about affecting the agency of the hearer: “We aim to make a difference not just through the hearer but to her and in some sense for her as well—to get things across, to orient her to a concern as one that bears on her own choices.” A big part of this orienting process often involves the deployment of moral emotions, and in particular, reactive attitudes, which can shape individuals’ attention, desires, judgments, and values. Along these lines, Springer offers what she calls a “dynamic account of guilt,” one in which guilt is part of an active path or “trajectory” to use McGeer’s terminology. This path is:

More or less jointly navigated by participants in a critical encounter. The full path begins with distressed attention to a concern in one party—the critic, we can

160 Springer, *Communicating Moral Concern*.
161 Ibid., 2.
162 Ibid., 3.
163 Ibid., 83.
164 Ibid., 91.
assume for now—and comes to a close with the hearer’s integration of responsive attention for some aspect of that concern. Resentment and guilt are active processes which in parallel (though with shifting weights) contribute to the social process of holding responsible.\textsuperscript{165}

Springer understands the interplay of reactive attitudes between critics and hearers as an “active process,” the aim of which is to “help us transfer, transform, and translate what is salient within the critic’s distressed attention so that it informs the practically effective attention of the hearer.”\textsuperscript{166} Reactive attitudes play an important role in the realm of “holding responsible” and the communication of moral concern. They can help orient hearers to the ways in which concerns bear on hearers’ own choices.

Putting this together with McGeer’s account, we can now see how this process of communicating moral concern via reactive exchange is dynamic, co-reactive, and both forward- and backward-looking. Consider a case in which one housemate, Donna, is not keeping up with her share of the chores. Her roommate, Emmanuel, communicates his moral concern about this by voicing his resentment. We can think of Emmanuel’s expression of resentment as calling attention to the fact that Donna has not been doing her fair share. This thus represents a trajectory along which Donna is spurred into response. Donna recognizes Emmanuel’s call for attention on her lack of chore-doing as him making a claim about her moral agency and about how she should be exercising it; however, at first she is resistant to the idea that she has failed to live up to her duty. She might agree that sometimes she slacks off, but also state that she, by and large, is a great housemate. In response to this, Emmanuel reacts with exasperation and sadness, explaining that Donna is doing a worse job than she takes herself to be doing at living up to the promises she made when they moved in together. This might spur Donna to feel regret or contrition;  

\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 118.  
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid.
maybe she has been doing a worse job than she thought she was after all. And in response to this display of guilt, Emmanuel softens his reaction, and eventually forgives Donna, but he also makes it clear that he needs her to try harder to uphold her promise to do her fair share.

This dynamic example captures a productive trajectory of reactive exchange. While not all reactive exchanges are this productive, “they are psychologically and normatively most satisfying when they serve to restore, maintain or even generate a commitment to uphold the normative demands expressed in the reactive attitudes.”¹⁶⁷ Because taking up moral concern is related to the hearer’s agency and because it involves an engagement of attention on the moral concern itself, it consists of more than simply treating one’s critic sympathetically or scheming about how to get one’s critic “off one’s back.” Instead, to truly engage in moral concern—and thus to have reactive attitudes function successfully—one must first recognize that what is being called to one’s attention is important, and second, one must engage in uptake of that concern with positive regard for the critic’s contribution to one’s moral perspective.

Unlike in the case with Donna and Emmanuel, the transfer of moral concern is not always successful, and here the “dance metaphor” comes in handy. To fail in the uptake of a critic’s communicated moral concern is to fail to accept another’s invitation to dance—or in some cases to accept it, but to execute the steps very poorly.

Yet a failure of uptake—far from closing the episode (as it must on an expressive view)—marks the continuation of the critic’s moral predicament. She faces more and less conscious questions about whether to approach the encounters again in some way, whether to take her concerns to other hearers, where to revisit and reinterpret the signs of difficulty that make her concern.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ Springer, Communicating Moral Concern, 114.
Thus, while the communication of moral concern can be conceptualized as a transfer of attention, these transfers do not free critics of their moral concerns, nor are they always successful. And when they fail, the critic is faced with a decision about how to proceed.

With this picture of what it means to communicate moral concern more fully articulated, I can now return to the initial question posed at the start of the chapter: are we presumptively justified in voicing moral concern to microaggressors in the face of microaggressions? First, note that microaggressions are indeed morally concerning. They signal support of oppressive systems of power such as white supremacy and patriarchy. These oppressive systems unjustly devalue and disadvantage those who deserve better opportunities and treatment. Furthermore, microaggressions can morally harm microaggressees and the relationships between microaggressees and microaggressors (these harms were detailed in chapter two). With this in mind, we can see that moral concerns about microaggressive behaviors are not empty moral concerns; these concerns are not lacking in legitimacy. On the contrary, moral concerns about microaggressions are centered on the fact that they can be damaging to individuals or that they are part of large-scale patterns of injustice.

With this in mind, it becomes clearer why voicing concern about microaggressive behaviors is presumptively justified, since doing so calls attention to a set of morally troubling facts: that the microaggressor signals support of an oppressive ideology, that these systems of oppression exist, that many people are unjustly oppressed, that the microaggressee was morally concerned by the behavior, etc. Furthermore, Springer and McGeer help us to see that by drawing attention to these kinds of considerations, the microaggressee respects the moral agency of the microaggressor by recognizing him or her as a moral agent, capable of appropriate reactive response.
In addition to calling on the moral agency of the microaggressor, the microaggressee also makes salient harms that threaten entire moral communities. The back-and-forth trajectories that communicate moral concern about microaggressive behavior are thus valuable in that they can help repair relationships damaged by microaggressions, and further, can help microaggressors understand the impact of their behaviors and how they are related to larger systems of oppression. Given the fact that microaggressions are interrelated to larger systems of oppression that threaten and morally damage communities on a large scale, Springer would likely go so far as to say microaggresses have a duty to voice any moral concerns they might have about microaggressive behaviors.¹⁶⁹

She offers a Kantian explanation of reasoning to support the claim that often we have a duty to convey moral concern:

Criticism of others is a duty we owe to the moral community as a whole. While we could conceive of a world in which each person has been allowed to remain complacently ignorant about her moral blunders, we cannot will that the world be such. For this state of affairs would hamper nearly all of the projects to which we might turn our will. While it may be inconvenient to expend effort on moral criticism in any particular case—as compared to simply steering clear of troublesome people once we recognize them—there is a hypocrisy in such narrow prudence. For I would still wish to benefit from the fruits of critical efforts among others even while I contribute nothing to this social good myself.¹⁷⁰

Springer’s line of reasoning might lead us to conclude that microaggresses have a duty to voice moral concern, since a failure to do so would represent a failure to protect their moral community. However, this conclusion is stronger than what I need to make the more modest claim I seek to defend: voicing moral concern in light of microaggressive behaviors is presumptively justified. Of course, this does not imply that it will always be a good idea for

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 22.
¹⁷⁰ Ibid.
microaggressees to voice their moral concerns. It simply paves the way for microaggressees to feel empowered when they choose to communicate their points of criticism.

Furthermore, by using Springer’s account to flesh out what communicating moral concern involves, we can see that in voicing moral concern, microaggressees are in fact respecting their microaggressors as moral agents. This is because voicing reactive attitudes to microaggressors signals that microaggressees take microaggressors to be worthy of reactive exchange—the very thing that McGeer argues is needed for moral agency and thus moral responsibility.

3.4. Microaggressions and Minimal Decency

If we as microaggressees are presumptively justified in voicing our moral concerns about microaggressions, what constitutes a minimally decent answer to microaggressees’ voiced moral concerns? In other words, how will microaggressees know their communication of moral concern has not failed? I will provide three example of cases in which the microaggressor’s answer represents a failure to respond in a minimally decent way. These will allow me to argue that microaggressees are justified in their expectation that microaggressors will engage with them as moral agents and that microaggressors will fully recognize microaggressees’ moral concerns as moral concerns. I argue that failure to do so will result in microaggressors disrespecting the moral agency of microaggressees, which represents a type of moral harm.

Recall the following case I introduced in chapter two:

*Sorority:* Tiffany is a 19-year-old, second generation, Chinese American university student. She is a recent sorority pledge and is attending a mixer event at her new sorority. As she stands in a social circle, a friendly, white fourth-year asks her where she is from. Tiffany, having grown up in San Francisco, states that she’s from California. Upon hearing her response, her sorority sister laughs, “No…” she states, “Where are you really from?”
Here are three versions of how this case could unfold. I argue that all three variations represent the unsuccessful communication of moral concern in which the microaggressor fails to answer to the microaggressee in a minimally decent way:

**Dropping the Ball:** Tiffany responds to her sorority sister by saying, “I’m really from California. I think what you’re trying to ask is where my ancestors are from. They are from China. Some Asian Americans actually find this question offensive.” The sorority sister answers by saying, “Whatever, are you going to the football game this weekend?”

**Expressivist Failure:** Tiffany responds to her sorority sister by saying, “I’m really from California. I think what you’re trying to ask is where my ancestors are from. They are from China. Some Asian Americans actually find this question offensive.” The sorority sister answers by saying, “WOW you’re touchy! I didn’t realize you were so politically correct!”

**Objective Stance:** Tiffany responds to her sorority sister by saying, “I’m really from California. I think what you’re trying to ask is where my ancestors are from. They are from China. Some Asian Americans actually find this question offensive.” The sorority sister answers by holding her hands up and saying, “I won’t ever ask the question again.” She makes a mental note to avoid asking Tiffany any personal questions in the future, and decides not to invite her to any parties that involve people the sorority sister thinks might upset Tiffany.

In *Dropping the Ball*, Tiffany’s sorority sister fails to engage with the moral concern that Tiffany presents to her. While Tiffany issues an invitation to engage in a back and forth exchange, this invitation is totally ignored. Instead, the sorority sister is un receptive to Tiffany’s voiced moral concern, and gives it no uptake. At this point, Tiffany will have to decide how to proceed. Should she keep pressing the point? Return to it later? Ignore it and move on? Walk away? Tell someone else what happened? Put differently, this unsuccessful communication of moral concern might not represent the end point of Tiffany’s thoughts, feelings, or actions regarding the microaggression. In addition, in some cases an answer like this can transform microaggressees’ moral concern: at first Tiffany is concerned that her sorority sister did not know about the racist implications of the question. After getting the answer she did, Tiffany
might now have the additional worry: that her sorority sister does not care about her participation or involvement in unjust social patterns.

*Dropping the Ball* represents a more general kind of failure in answering moral concern, namely, a failure of moral uptake. The microaggressor in this case does not give Tiffany’s response any attention. There is no transfer of moral concern. The sorority sister fails to have her engagement “sparked” by Tiffany’s response, and thus the sorority sister fails to publicly recognize Tiffany’s exercise of moral agency with regard to communicating her moral concern.171 In doing so, the sorority sister does not treat Tiffany’s moral concern as a moral concern—or as a concern that requires her attention and critical engagement. McGeers’s account of co-reactivity helps us see that the sorority sister’s behaviors represent a breakdown in the dynamic of co-reactive exchange, since she fails to respond to Tiffany’s voiced moral concern in a way that spurs along the trajectory of reactive exchange. One way of articulating what goes wrong in this case is to say that the dynamic between microaggressor and microaggressee is flawed.

Furthermore, ignoring this exercise of Tiffany’s moral agency is disrespectful in so far as it fails to treat Tiffany with the kind of treatment she is owed as a moral agent. Recognizing and acknowledging another agent’s exercise of agency is a part of treating them well; and it is a “failure of due regard to if we acknowledge a person as a site of interests and activities, but not as a active reshaper of the social world within which these unfold.”172 Because the microaggressor in *Dropping the Ball* does just this—treats Tiffany as a site of interests and activities but fails to recognize her full moral agency—she fails to treat Tiffany in the way Tiffany should be treated *qua* moral agent. In contrast, Tiffany’s expression of moral concern

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171 Ibid., 83.
172 Ibid., 52.
signals that she views her sorority sister as capable of living up to moral ideals and thus as capable of engaging in a trajectory of reactive exchange. Her sorority sister’s failure to reciprocate thus represents a breakdown in reactive exchange and, for this reason, does not represent a minimally decent rejoinder to Tiffany’s response to the microaggression.

In Expressivist Failure, Tiffany’s sorority sister recognizes that her question caused Tiffany to experience moral emotions such as offense or indignation. However, she fails to read Tiffany’s response as a concern about a morally problematic state of affairs. Rather, she treats Tiffany’s response solely as providing information about Tiffany, that is, about her sensitivity to certain kinds of behaviors and about her emotional state. The sorority sister converts the content of Tiffany’s concern into information about Tiffany.¹⁷³ In doing so, the sorority sister fails to recognize the problem that animates Tiffany’s concern—that the sorority sister’s question is offensive and that it is linked to an ongoing pattern of exclusion and devaluation directed at Asian Americans. Put generally: “To fail to hear the world through the critic, reading the expression of the critic instead as an indication of what lies within, is to misunderstand criticism.”¹⁷⁴ In doing so, the critic fails to make contact with the actual moral concern and as such the communication of moral concern fails.

Of course, a part of recognizing moral concern will involve appreciating the communicator’s expressions and realizing what they say about the moral agent in question (e.g., “This person is upset right now!”). However, reading the communication of moral concern as conveying this singular message fails to appreciate the aim of communicating moral concern, which is to have the hearer “recognize the very problem that animates the critic’s response, and

¹⁷³ Ibid., 79.
¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 80.
to focus practical attention on it."\(^{175}\) To interpret Tiffany’s response to the microaggression as simply a statement about Tiffany, rather than to interpret it as also about the microaggression itself will change the sort of practical action the sorority sister will take in response to Tiffany’s concerns. It is unlikely that a sole focus on Tiffany’s sensitivities will result in the sorority sister thinking critically about how her actions feed into patterns of oppression or in her taking steps to avoid further bolstering such systems. By and large, answering communicated moral concern as if it merely highlights something about the communicator’s emotional state causes microaggressors to fail to engage with the full extent of the moral problem at hand and fails to recognize the kind of work that microaggresses are doing with their agency. As such, it does not represent a minimally decent response to microaggresses, since it fails to take seriously or fully the concerns microaggresses voice and fails to give microaggresses the kind of treatment they are due as moral agents.

Lastly, in *Objective Stance*, Tiffany’s sorority sister recognizes that Tiffany has voiced a moral concern. However, instead of engaging with her and taking up the trajectory of exchange Tiffany initiates, she treats her as an object to be regulated in order to achieve the sorority sister’s desired outcome. This approach is an instance of what Peter Strawson calls “adopting the objective attitude” towards someone:

> To adopt the objective attitude to another human being is to see him, perhaps, as an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment; as something certainly to be taken account, perhaps precautionary account, of; to be managed or handled or cured or trained; perhaps simply to be avoided…\(^{176}\)

In *Objective Stance*, the sorority sister’s decision to never ask the question again without any kind of further exchange with Tiffany about the matter, coupled with her decision to treat Tiffany

\(^{175}\) Ibid., 82.
\(^{176}\) Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment, and Other Essays*. 

102
in ways that sidestep communication, are examples in which the sorority sister aims to manage and avoid Tiffany. By treating Tiffany in this way, the sorority sister fails to treat her as a moral agent, or as a participant capable of engaging in co-reactivity or joint engagement with regard to a moral concern. Instead of embarking along a trajectory of shared reactive exchange, the microaggressor in this case fails to engage the microaggressee as a moral agent capable of understanding and responding appropriately to reactive attitudes.

To treat the microaggressee as if they are incapable of living up to the demands of moral agency is a form of disrespect. As such, microaggressors who answer microaggressees in this way fail to treat microaggressees appropriately and instead treat them with moral condescension.\textsuperscript{177} Thus, taking the objective attitude toward microaggressees does not represent a minimally decent answer to communicated moral concern about microaggressive behavior. Instead, it fails to treat microaggressors as moral agents and does not result in microaggressors placing joint attention on the concern \textit{qua} moral concern, which is what is needed for critical responsiveness to get off the ground.

All three of these examples help show that the communication of moral concern regarding microaggressions fundamentally seeks three things: 1) appreciation of the microaggressee’s moral agency, 2) recognition of the microaggressee’s moral concerns \textit{as moral concerns}, and 3) a dynamic, co-reactive trajectory of exchange fueled by an iterative process of reaction and uptake. A failure to meet these requirements results in the disregard of the microaggressee as a moral agent. Microaggressees are justified in the expectation that their moral agency will be respected. When this respect is lacking, something has gone wrong, morally speaking.

\textsuperscript{177} Springer, \textit{Communicating Moral Concern}, 83.
These three constraints help give shape to what a minimally decent response to Tiffany might look like:

*Minimal Decency:* Tiffany responds to her sorority sister by saying “I’m *really* from California. I think what you’re trying to ask is where my ancestors are from. They are from China. Some Asian Americans actually find this question offensive.” The sorority sister answers by saying, “Oh, I did not know it was offensive, oops.” Tiffany responds by saying “Yeah, you might not want to ask that kind of question in the future.” Her sorority sister responds, “Yeah, I guess not. Sorry!”

The kind of reactive exchange highlighted in *Minimal Decency* is successful in so far as the sorority sister treats Tiffany as a fellow moral agent who is capable of engaging in reactive exchange. Furthermore, the sorority sister responds to Tiffany’s communication of moral concern by recognizing it as such and reacting with contrition (“oops”). This allows Tiffany to respond, spurring the trajectory of reactive exchange further, paving the way for the sorority sister not only to apologize but also to pledge to exercise her agency differently in the future.

### 3.5. Microaggressors Un-Sutured

Thus far I have defended two claims in this chapter. First, I argued that microaggressees are presumptively justified in voicing moral concerns about microaggressions to microaggressors. Second, I claimed that a minimally decent answer to these moral concerns must recognize and respect the microaggressee’s moral agency, treat their moral concerns as moral concerns, and engage in co-reactive exchange. However, this answer does not fully capture what a *good* or supererogatory response might look like from microaggressors. The task in this section is to suggest what it might look like for an answer to surpass what microaggressees should be able reasonably to expect in their exchanges with microaggressors about microaggressive behaviors. Of course, I do not mean to suggest that the account I sketch below represents the *only* way a microaggressors’ answer can exceed what microaggressees can justifiably expect from...
microaggressors. Rather, the following discussion simply lays out a single type of response to moral critique and shows how it goes above and beyond what microaggresses can justifiably expect from microaggressors.

My argument in this section takes George Yancy’s concept of “un-suturing” as a jumping-off point.\textsuperscript{178} Yancy introduces this concept in his discussion of “white self-criticality beyond anti-racism.”\textsuperscript{179} His discussion shows that explicitly held anti-racist commitments are important, but can only go so far. Yancy suggests that what is needed are an additional set of tactics for white self-criticality that more fully cut against the everyday “political, economic, social, imaginative, epistemic, aesthetic, axiological, and affective” practices which sustain and produce white supremacy.\textsuperscript{180} Yancy uses the metaphor of “suturing” to help explain how white individuals maintain these everyday practices. Suturing refers to a host of complex processes in which white people “install forms of closure” and “forms of protection” against counter-white norms and epistemologies:\textsuperscript{181}

The process of suturing involves an effort—though I’m sure that for whites it is not recognized as an effort or as a site of active maintenance—to be ‘invulnerable,’ ‘untouched,’ ‘patched,’ ‘mended together,’ ‘complete,’ ‘whole,’ ‘sealed,’ and ‘closed off.’ To be sutured also implies a state of being free from a certain kind of ‘infection.’ In other words, within the context of critically engaging whiteness the concept of suture functions as a site of keeping pure, preserving what is unsullied.\textsuperscript{182}

Suturing practices allow white people to ignore and avoid confronting the brutal, violent, and unjust realities of white supremacy. Suturing helps maintain the supposition of white innocence and purity, which is vital for the continuance of everyday practices that enable white supremacy.

\textsuperscript{178} George Yancy, \textit{White Self-Criticality beyond Anti-Racism: How Does It Feel to Be a White Problem}? (Lexington Books, 2014).
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., xii.
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid., xv.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid.
Suturing is both an epistemic and affective phenomenon that involves willfully closing one’s self off to the surrounding, self-implicating realities of white supremacy. Suturing enables white people—and I would argue others as well—to avoid critically interrogating, let alone beginning to dismantle, structures of whiteness and white power.

In contrast, the metaphor of *un-suturing* refers to a process of increased vulnerability. To un-suture is to face the realities of white supremacy head on and to recognize one’s personal role in these structures. This process can involve actively putting oneself in crisis and through discomfort, much like opening a stitched wound. To un-suture is to be receptive to differing racial perspectives that challenge one’s own. This kind of receptivity and openness to differing perspectives can cause one to rethink things that one holds to be true and good. To un-suture, then, is to enter a state of vulnerability and uncertainty. Additionally:

…un-suturing is a deeply embodied phenomenon that enables whites to come to terms with the realization that their embodied existence and embodied identities are always already inextricably linked to a larger white racist social integument or skin which envelops who and what they are…there is no white self that stands above the fray, atomic, hands clean.\(^{183}\)

To affectively and epistemically allow oneself to be exposed to the realities of white supremacy and to recognize the role that one plays in maintaining and reproducing it is not easy. It demands a kind of vulnerability and discomfort that is difficult to maintain as well as a rethinking of one’s own self-understanding as a moral agent.

My suggestion for what constitutes a good answer to moral concern regarding microaggressive behaviors involves this concept of un-suturing. Recall that recognizing microaggresses’ moral agency, treating their moral concerns as moral concerns, and engaging in co-reactive exchange represents a minimally decent answer to voiced moral concern about

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\(^{183}\) Ibid., xvii.
microaggressions. Taking things a step further, microaggressors who engage in a kind of *inward-looking humility* and *self-examination* with regard to their exercise of agency can respond to microaggressees in ways that exceed what microaggressees can justifiably expect.

All microaggressive behaviors support and get their meaning from oppressive systems of power. Recognizing how one’s exercise of agency helps to support, echo, and maintain oppressive structures involves coming to terms with one’s agential role in larger-scale patterns of injustice. Un-suturing in the face of voiced moral concern about microaggressions thus allows microaggressors to critically examine their exercise of moral agency more realistically than their sutured self would allow. To permit oneself to engage in processes of un-suturing demonstrates a commitment to resisting structures of oppression, and it suggests that the microaggressor is affectively and epistemically open to moral critique regarding their complicity in these structures.

This openness and state of vulnerability is what is needed for a humble and honest discourse between microaggressor and microaggressee about the object of moral concern—in this case about the microaggression. Without it, while microaggressees’ basic needs as moral agents might be met, any larger project of resisting oppressive ideologies fails to fully get off the ground. This is because microaggressors that fail to allow themselves to be vulnerable and open in response to voiced moral concern about microaggressions will fail to realize more fully the role that they play, as moral agents, in perpetuating systems of oppression. Without understanding (at least to some extent) the ways that one’s practical agency is used to harm and disadvantage others, one will have difficulty fully understanding the true nature of the microaggressee’s concern and its implications for one as a moral agent.
Communicating that one is un-sutured or engaging in processes of un-suturing can help the exchange between microaggressee and microaggressor be more successful. This is because communicating a sense of humility and recognition or openness to the idea that one might indeed participate in systems of oppression can affect the reactive exchange between microaggressor and microaggressee. Recall that co-reactivity, the ability to remain sensitive to other’s normatively sensitive reactions and adjust one’s own accordingly, is needed for the successful transfer of moral concern and for a functional reactive exchange to occur between microaggressor and microaggressee. Being sutured can radically restrict one’s sensitivity to others’ normative reactions, since being sutured causes agents to protect themselves from moral viewpoints and realities that reveal structures of oppression and microaggressors’ role in sustaining them.

By conveying that one is vulnerable and open to normatively sensitive reactions about racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, microaggressors can communicate their willingness to un-suture and thus more fully respond to the implications their actions have for them as moral agents. That this affective, emotional, and axiological state is comprehended by the microaggressee can therefore alter the reactive exchange between parties and can aid in the degree to which microaggresseses feel as though microaggressors have taken on microaggressee’s expressed moral concern.

In sum, answers to voiced moral concern that demonstrate un-suturing on the part of the microaggressor exceed what a microaggressee can reasonably expect. This is because these kinds of answers signal that the microaggressor not only regards the microaggressee with the kind of respect they are (minimally) owned as moral agents, but also that the microaggressor is involved in a kind of inward-looking regard and awareness about how his or her exercise of agency
impacts the larger moral community. This openness demonstrates that microaggressors are responsive to microaggressees’ normative sensitivities. This, in turn, can help make the exchange between microaggressor and microaggressee functional and reparative. Communicating one’s process or state of un-suturing, then, represents communication about the responsiveness of the microaggressor to the microaggressee’s concerns. Since joint attention on the source of moral concern is what microaggressees often seek when they communicate moral critique after microaggressions, un-sutured responses by microaggressors exceed what microaggressees can reasonably expect.

Of course, there are many different ways that microaggressors can communicate un-suturing and there is no way to fully catalog all of these possibilities. That being said, I will provide three examples here that might help give readers a better grasp of what an “un-sutured” answer might look like. These examples all extend the Sorority case introduced earlier.

**Self-reflective:** Tiffany responds to her sorority sister by saying, “I’m really from California. I think what you’re trying to ask is where my ancestors are from. They are from China. Some Asian Americans actually find this question offensive.” The sorority sister responds by taking a second to let Tiffany’s words sink in. She feels a range of emotions, not all good. She says to Tiffany, “I didn’t know that. I’ll have to think about it more. I’d be interested to hear more about it if you want to talk about it, but no pressure. I’m sorry if I caused you any distress.”

**Inquisitive:** Tiffany responds to her sorority sister by saying, “I’m really from California. I think what you’re trying to ask is where my ancestors are from. They are from China. Some Asian Americans actually find this question offensive.” The sorority sister responds by saying, “I honestly had no idea that the question was problematic! I wonder why I didn’t know? Why do people find it offensive? Sorry if I offended you!”

**Honest:** Tiffany responds to her sorority sister by saying, “I’m really from California. I think what you’re trying to ask is where my ancestors are from. They are from China. Some Asian Americans actually find this question offensive.” The sorority sister responds by saying, “Shoot! Someone actually told me that before and I still asked you. I wonder why? I’ll have to think more about that. I’m sorry if I offended you.”
All three of these answers not only engage with Tiffany as a moral agent and recognize her moral concern as a moral concern, they also demonstrate a willingness to be open to critique and interested in learning about different perspectives. And, given that the microaggression is a racial microaggression, these responses demonstrate an openness to thinking about, talking about, and learning about racism and white supremacy. They communicate that the microaggressor is vulnerable in such a way that will allow her to honestly interrogate her own exercise of moral agency and how it is related to the larger moral community.

One implication of my argument is that reactive exchange, while often successful and productive when microaggressors allow themselves to un-suture, will not always end with both parties feeling a sense of closure or experiencing a range of positive emotions. However, this does not mean that the exchange and communication of moral concern has not been successful. Instead, because un-suturing can be uncomfortable and feel dangerous, microaggressors might leave exchanges with microaggressees feeling a range of unpleasant and difficult feelings. Ironically, this means that some might walk away from successful or good conversations about microaggressions feeling bad. The implication, then, is that moral repair after microaggressive behavior does not necessitate that all parties feel a sense of closure or comfort.

Another implication of my argument is that microaggressees can do things to help foster or encourage supererogatory reactions from microaggressors. For instance, were Tiffany to respond to her sorority sister by saying, “You’re a racist!” or “WOW! You’re really ignorant, aren’t you?” her sorority sister would likely be more defensive, dismissive, or hostile. When in these states, it can be difficult to meet moral concerns with the kind of respect they deserve or to engage in a productive exchange. With this in mind, we can see that the way in which one points
out another’s microaggressive behaviors can help support and lay the groundwork for good (or at least minimally decent) responses from microaggressors.

By explaining what she took her sorority sister to be asking, “I think what you’re trying to ask is where my ancestors are from. They are from China,” Tiffany demonstrates her willingness to share about herself and also to advance the conversation. By stating, “Some Asian Americans actually find this question offensive,” Tiffany makes the focus about the question as opposed to the sorority sister’s character and thus voices her moral concern in a relatively gentle way. Additionally, by explaining to the sorority sister that some find the question offensive, Tiffany implies that the sorority sister is the kind of person who would want to know whether her question was offensive or not. This implication therefore presupposes a common ground between both parties that can help foster a sense of shared normative expectations. In other words, it assumes a set of shared moral concerns and a shared commitment to address those concerns.

This approach represents an example of what Ngoc Loan Trần terms “calling in.”\textsuperscript{184} Calling in, as opposed to calling out, is “a practice of pulling folks back in who have strayed from us.”\textsuperscript{185} Calling in presupposes a set of shared values and commitments and is a way to compassionately point out when others have said something that supports the oppression of a particular community.

Because calling in is premised on a sense of community and shared understandings, it can make microaggressors feel more comfortable when it comes to engaging in trajectories of reactive exchange. Un-suturing requires vulnerability on the part of the microaggressor and


\textsuperscript{185} Ibid.
calling in can help create a space where the microaggressor feels safe enough to self reflect, be honest, and inquisitive. More generally, this point helps show that, by conceiving responsibility-holding practices as co-reactive, both parties play an active role in the shaping of the moral exchange and thus the process of holding responsible. The process straddles both backward-looking and forward-looking elements and is a dynamic, shared endeavor.

This chapter has laid out an account of what proper normative exchange can look like between microaggressors and microaggressees after microaggressive behaviors. By focusing on an account of responsibility that centers on communicative exchange, I hope to empower microaggressees who might otherwise feel unsure about whether it is all right to say something about microaggressions to microaggressors. By charting what sort of response microaggressees can justifiably expect and how these answers might exceed what is minimally called for, I have produced an account of microaggressions and responsibility that attends to the needs of microaggressees. In doing so, I have provided a narrative about microaggressions and responsibility that avoids affectability imbalances and foregrounds a dynamic relationship and exchange between both parties.
Part II

Introduction

In part one of the dissertation I presented a picture of microaggressions and moral responsibility in which I place very little importance on the metaphysical and psychological state of the microaggressor at the time of the microaggression. For instance, the question of whether a perpetrator had a feeling of control over her behavior is irrelevant not only in determining whether the behavior is indeed a microaggression, but also in terms of the appropriateness of the responsibility-holding practices I have defended thus far. In my view, a process of communicative exchange and repair can occur meaningfully and legitimately, even in cases where the perpetrator lacks a sense of control or awareness over their microaggressive behaviors or an understanding of how what they did was morally salient. In fact, one function of communicative exchange is that it can help microaggressors come to understand the moral salience of their behaviors and can support them in developing an awareness of their actions in such a way that might have been lacking prior to dialogue. I see this feature as a virtue of my account, since it opens up possibilities for moral repair and allows for growth.

However, not everyone will agree with the picture of responsibility-holding practices I have painted here. In the next part of the dissertation, I examine some popular objections that microagressees encounter when trying to incite co-reactive exchange and repair with microaggressors: *viz.* that microaggressors cannot be held responsible for behaviors they do not feel in control of, are not aware of, or for which they do not know the moral significance. Those who forward these objections adopt a notion of moral responsibility in which particulars about the metaphysical and psychological state of the perpetrator are necessary before responsibility-holding practices can ensue. These objections challenge the very notion of moral responsibility I
endorse here in which the metaphysical and psychological state of the perpetrator at the time the microaggressions occurred is irrelevant.

These objections are often introduced with the aim of shutting down or preventing responsibility-holding practices, such as communicative exchange, from occurring. They therefore represent roadblocks when it comes to facilitating moral repair, since they short-circuit attempts to engage in conversation about microaggressive behavior. Because these objections allow microaggressors to avoid critically engaging with their behaviors via a process of responsibility-holding and -taking, they pave the way for repeated, similar microaggressive behaviors in the future. These objections are therefore powerful in the sense that they help protect microaggressive behavior, which can spread and promote oppressive ideology.

Part two of the dissertation is therefore dedicated to addressing objections that try to resist the picture of responsibility-holding I have painted in part one. In essence, these objections state that moral responsibility-holding measures (co-reactive exchange in my view) should only occur in cases where perpetrators meet specific psychological conditions. This understanding of moral responsibility as something that is warranted or achieved via a set of met conditions is what characterizes “merit-based” approaches to moral responsibility. These objections, in essence, state that many microaggressors do not “merit” or deserve responsibility-holding practices. For this reason, these objections work to shut down co-reactive exchange.

Here is an example that illustrates how these objections can operate:

*Sorority Ignorance:* Tiffany is a 19-year-old, second generation, Chinese American university student. She is a recent sorority pledge and is attending a mixer event at her new sorority. As she stands in a social circle, a friendly, white fourth-year asks her where she is from. Tiffany, having grown up in San Francisco, states that she’s from California. Upon hearing her response, her sorority sister laughs, “No…” she states, “Where are you *really* from?” Tiffany responds to her sorority sister by saying, “I’m *really* from California. I think what you’re trying to ask is where my ancestors are from. They are from China. Some
Asian Americans actually find this question offensive.” The sorority sister responds by saying “Look, you can’t be mad at me for this because I didn’t know!” She makes it clear, through her body language, that she is done discussing the matter. Tiffany gets the message and brings up a new topic of conversation.

Here, the sorority sister has “checked out” of the conversation, thus making it difficult to move forward in the back-and-forth exchange outlined in part one. Her comment implies that Tiffany’s moral concern and related reactive attitudes are unjustified and inappropriate. The objection works to halt responsibility-holding practices in their tracks. And it can be difficult for microaggresses to press forward with attempts to engage in co-reactive exchange after this point in the conversation: doing so risks making the microaggressor look like they are being unfair, “beating a dead horse,” or pursuing moral responsibility measures that the objector deems inappropriate and “un-merited.”

Because the dissertation is committed to empowering microaggresseses, in part two I will take on the task of responding to some of these objections. Since these objections only make sense if one adopts a merit-based approach to moral responsibility, I will construct my responses to these objections by working within this merit-based approach. That is, for the sake of argument, I will assume that fulfilling certain psychological and metaphysical conditions are necessary in order to engage in the sort of responsibility-holding practices I articulate in part one. The hope is that by doing this I can provide philosophical backing to show that these objections are often less compelling than they might seem, even to those who endorse this merit-based approach to moral responsibility. The arguments in the following chapters thus represent tools for microaggresseses who encounter these objections yet cannot convince their objector that certain psychological and metaphysical conditions should not matter when it comes to engaging in responsibility-holding and -taking practices. Addressing these objections also shows that, regardless of whether someone takes a merit-based approach to moral responsibility or a
dialogical, communicative one like I do in part one, there is reason to believe these popular objections are less successful than they are often considered to be. Together, parts one and two of the dissertation legitimize the idea that microaggressions are morally significant and, often, something for which perpetrators ought to take responsibility.
Chapter 4: Responsibility, Control, and Awareness

Eye Contact 2: Dr. Foreman is a white, middle-aged surgeon. In addition to performing surgery, he often meets with his patients in his office. Sharron, a black, female transplant recipient comes in for an office visit and brings her husband, Rick, along. Rick is white. During the appointment, Dr. Foreman makes very little eye contact with Sharron and directs his comments and attention towards Rick, despite the fact that Sharron is the patient. Dr. Foreman isn’t aware of his lack of eye contact or lack of attention towards Sharron. He doesn’t experience any sense of control over his eye contact or his focus of attention.

4.1. Don’t Resent Me!

In chapter three I argued that microagressees are *pro tonto* justified in voicing their reactive attitudes to microaggressors, and I built the norms for communicative exchange between microaggressor and microaggressee with this as a grounding supposition. In this chapter, I will introduce and respond to two objections that attack the assumption that reactive attitudes directed at microaggressors are appropriate in most cases of microaggression. Specifically, the first objection holds that, if one lacks a sensation of control over one’s microaggression, moral responsibility practices are inappropriate. Similarly, the second objection claims that, if one is not aware of one’s microaggressive behaviors, one cannot be held morally responsible. Both of these objections result in the notion that dialogical exchange of the sort I advocated for in chapter three would be misguided in these cases.

To see how these objections get off the ground, consider the following claims: moral responsibility-holding measures such as expressions of disapproval in the form of reactive attitudes do not feel warranted if you did not do anything wrong. When you lack conscious awareness of a behavior or the sensation of control over a behavior, it does not feel as though you have done anything wrong. Thus, in these kinds of cases, responsibility-holding measures do not feel warranted (since it feels as though you have done nothing wrong).
For instance, imagine you inadvertently leave the front door ajar while carrying a large package. You are not aware of leaving the door open nor do you experience a sense of ownership or control over this behavior. You make your way inside the house and go about your business. An hour later your spouse resentfully scolds you for letting the cat escape—“It’s your fault Snowball got out!” In this case, if you really did lack a sense of control over leaving the door open and an awareness that you have behaved thusly, the resentment your spouse expresses might feel unfair, unwarranted and unjustified—“I didn’t leave the door open! If I did, it was an accident! I didn’t mean to! You shouldn’t be mad at me!” This response is indicative of a more general set of intuitions regarding the phenomenology of control and norms surrounding reactive attitudes. Broadly speaking, these intuitions hold that specific phenomenological experiences must occur in order for individuals to justly be held morally responsible by way of reactive exchange.

These intuitions are especially relevant with regard to microaggressions, since one can commit a microaggression while lacking certain phenomenological experiences of their behavior. To see this, recall that the definition of “microaggression” I propose places no requirements on the psychological condition or experiences of the microaggressor. The microaggressor need not even be aware of the fact that she is behaving nor experience any sense of ownership or control over her behaviors for them to qualify as microaggressions.

The case that opens this chapter, *Eye Contact 2*, is just one example of many in which the microaggressor lacks certain phenomenological experiences associated with his or her microaggressive conduct. Here, Dr. Foreman is not aware of his lack of eye contact and does not experience any sense of control over his eye contact. To take another illustration, in *Credit Card* (introduced in chapter one), the server might not experience any sense of control as she hands the
credit card to Trent, or she might fail to realize she handed the card back as she does it. Because she lacks these kinds of sensations, the server might answer Patrick’s voiced moral concern with claims meant to exculpate her: “I just automatically handed the card back!” or “I wasn’t even aware that I was handing the card to anyone; I was on ‘autopilot’!” These types of responses are designed to dissipate resentment or anger about microaggressive behavior. They are meant to halt the exchange of moral concern between microaggressor and microaggressee, since the implication is that the microaggressors’ behaviors were not morally salient after all. For this reason, these kinds of dismissive responses pose a threat to the kind of exchanges I advocated for in chapter three, because these responses can short circuit conversations between microaggressors and microaggressees before any transfer of moral concern can take place.

Here are two generic answers perpetrators of microaggressions might give when met with expressed, reactive attitudes from microaggressees:

*Denial of Control*: “I don’t know what came over me” or “It just happened! I didn’t mean to do it!”

*Denial of Action*: “I didn’t do that!” or “You’re making that up!—I did no such thing!”

Underlying each of these answers is a series of arguments, and each argument is about when responsibility-holding practices are appropriate. In this chapter, I reconstruct and then address some of the arguments at the heart of the *Denial of Control* and the *Denial of Action* excuses. In both cases, I conclude that these arguments are not as convincing as they might at first appear. The chapter thus shields the conclusions I reach in chapter three from some common objections. In addition, the chapter argues that microaggressees need not gain special access into microaggressors’ phenomenology of control or awareness in order to feel confident in voicing moral concerns about microaggressions.
4.2. Is Feeling in Control Necessary for Being in Control?

In this section I first reconstruct the Denial of Control excuses (“I don’t know what came over me” or “It just happened! I didn’t mean to do it!”) into a formalized, more philosophically sophisticated form. Later I will show why this argument fails. Here is the basic reconstruction of the argument:

Basic Phenomenology of Control Argument (BPCA)
1. If some agent X is morally responsible for some behavior Y, then X has control over Y.
2. By contraposition, if X is not in control of Y, then X is not morally responsible for Y.
3. If X does not feel like he or she is in control of Y, then X is not in control of Y.
4. Therefore, if X does not feel like he or she is in control of Y, X is not morally responsible for Y.

In order for this argument to succeed, premise one must be true. In this chapter I will assume premise one, because arguments like BPCA gain their philosophical footing from a strand of the literature on moral responsibility that argues responsibility-holding measures are only appropriate in cases where perpetrators “merit” or deserve sanctions. These accounts tend to view control as necessary for moral responsibility.\(^{186}\) Since the Denial of Control objection gets its philosophical grounding from this merit-based approach to moral responsibility, I will assume in this chapter that premise one is true, since this is an important baseline assumption for these views. Doing so will allow me to show that, even if one endorses a merit, control-based account of moral responsibility (of the sort those voicing this objection are likely to hold) the objection nonetheless fails. To be clear, I am not endorsing premise one here. Rather I am simply assuming its veracity in order to present a response to BPCA that its proponents will find more persuasive.

than a response that rejects premise one, a claim objectors likely take as fundamental. To show that BPCA fails, I will instead go after premise three: the idea that one needs to feel like one is in control in order to be in control in the sense relevant for responsibility-holding practices. This, of course, invites the question of how we ought to understand the notion of control in order to create the most plausible and charitable version of BPCA.  

One possibility would be to understand control as the ability to choose to do otherwise. This kind of control has been called “regulatory control.” Applying this understanding of control to BPCA seems initially plausible. For example the limited resource model of regulatory control posits that engaging in self-regulation can deplete a person’s ability to engage in regulatory control. According to this model, we tire out after having to resist things that we desire and, as we fatigue, it becomes more challenging to choose between alternate possibilities. In particular, researchers have found evidence to support the claim that things like interracial interactions can cause those in the dominant racial group to experience fatigue over their regulatory capabilities. A person might argue, using these sorts of findings, that there is a link between feeling like it is impossible to refrain from a certain behavior and the actual inability to resist it. In other words, these findings might be used to support premise three: feeling like one lacks control is indicative of in fact lacking control. With this understanding of control in tow,  

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187 Again, I am not advocating that control is necessary for the type of moral responsibility-holding practices I endorsed in chapter three. Instead, the idea here is to respond to objectors in such a way that shows that, by their own lights, their objection is not as successful they might take it to be.  
microaggressors that feel a lack of control over their behaviors might argue that this corresponds to an actual lack of control, due to regulatory fatigue. Because of this, using BPCA, they might conclude that they are not morally responsible for their microaggressive behaviors.

This argument rests on the idea that regulatory control is a limited resource as well as on the assumption that the sort of control necessary for moral responsibility is best described as the ability to chose otherwise. This first claim has been empirically challenged.\(^{189}\) I will not discuss these findings here; however, they do cast doubt on the limited-resource model of control and, because of this, make this understanding of control less compelling for those hoping to forward a strong BPCA argument using a regulatory control account. Second, the idea that regulatory control is the kind of control necessary for moral responsibility has been challenged.

In 1969 Harry Frankfurt introduced counterexamples designed to dispel the intuition that the ability to have done otherwise is necessary for moral responsibility.\(^{190}\) Here’s one of these Frankfurt-style cases: Consider the case where Steve plans to rob a bank. He has arrived at this decision on his own. Unbeknownst to Steve, Kimberly has created a device that can interfere with Steve’s brainwaves, forcing him to rob the bank even if for some reason he decides not to go through with it. Ultimately, Steve decides to rob the bank and does so, never once wavering. In this case, Frankfurt appeals to the intuition that Steve is morally responsible for the robbery; after all, he decided to rob the bank and then went through with it without interference from any responsibility-undermining factors. However, in this case, Steve lacks the ability to have done otherwise or to regulate between possibilities (because of Kimberly’s device). Thought


experiments of this kind cast doubt on the idea that regulatory control—the ability to have done otherwise—is necessary for moral responsibility.

But, if not regulatory control, what account of control should we employ when using BPCA? One important constraint is that the theory of control we choose should line up with the other commitments a person forwarding the Denial of Control objection will likely have regarding moral responsibility. After all, our interpretation of BPCA is only interesting in so far as it stays true to the commitments someone forwarding the Denial of Control objection might hold—otherwise it would not capture the spirit of actual, real life objections. So what kinds of things can we assume someone forwarding the Denial of Control objection might hold true about moral responsibility? I think it is safe to assume that they will agree that there exist cases in which we can be held morally responsible, that is, that moral responsibility is genuinely achievable. Additionally, the account of control which grounds BPCA should also be prominent in the literature on merit-based views of moral responsibility, since this is the literature that motivates the Denial of Control objection (and thus BPCA) in the first place. For this reason, utilizing a well-regarded account of control in this field will make this articulation of the argument more compelling to those who might forward it.

Fischer and Ravizza’s account of moral responsibility represents a state of the art merit-based account of moral responsibility that fulfills the two constraints outlined above. For this reason, I will flesh out BPCA using Fisher and Ravizza’s account of control which they term “guidance control.” Guidance control is not dependent on a person’s ability to alternate between

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possibilities and is the sort of control that Fischer and Ravizza argue is necessary for moral responsibility.\(^{192}\)

One has guidance control if and only if an action flows from the agent’s “own moderately reasons-responsive mechanism.” Guidance control thus has two different conditions: (1) an action must flow from a moderately reasons-responsive mechanism and (2) this mechanism must be the agent’s “own.” A “mechanism” refers to the psychological process that causally leads to an action.\(^{193}\) Mechanisms can include faculties typically associated with bringing about action such as practical reasoning and deliberation; and they can also include things like externally imposed electric stimulation of the brain.

I will go on to explain presently what each of these two conditions means, but first here is why this explanation matters in the case of the BPCA argument: Since Fischer and Ravizza argue that these two conditions are necessary for guidance control, the phenomenological experience of at least one of these conditions is necessary in order for BPCA to succeed. Put differently, if premise three of BPCA is true using Fischer and Ravizza’s theory of guidance control, then either one must feel as though one possesses a moderately response-responsive mechanism or one must feel that one’s mechanism is one’s own. Breaking this down into two formalized arguments we get the following:

**Moderate Reasons-Responsiveness: Phenomenology of Control Argument (MRR)**

1. If some agent X is morally responsible for some behavior Y, then X exercises moderate reasons-responsiveness over the mechanism that leads to Y.

2. By contraposition, if X does not exercise moderate reasons-responsiveness over the mechanism that leads to Y, then X is not morally responsible for Y.

\(^{192}\) Fischer and Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control*.

\(^{193}\) Ibid., 39.
3. If X does not feel like Y results from a moderately reasons-responsive mechanism, then Y does not result from a moderately reasons-responsive mechanism.

4. Therefore, if X does not feel like Y results from a moderately reasons-responsive mechanism, X is not morally responsible for Y.

One’s Own: Phenomenology of Control Argument (OO)

1. If some agent X is morally responsible for some behavior Y, then the mechanism that leads to Y is X’s own.

2. By contraposition, if Y does not flow from a mechanism that is X’s own, then X is not morally responsible for Y.

3. If X does not feel like Y flows from a mechanism that is X’s own, then Y does not flow from a mechanism that is X’s own.

4. Therefore, if X does not feel like Y flows from a mechanism that is X’s own, X is not morally responsible for Y.

Whether or not the Denial of Control objection succeeds hangs on whether at least one of these arguments succeeds. I will now show that both fail by attacking premise three of each.

I start with MRR. Does one need to feel as if one’s mechanism is moderately reasons-responsive in order for it to, in fact, be moderately reasons-responsive? To answer this question we will need to understand what it takes for a mechanism to be moderately reasons-responsive.

Requiring that a mechanism be strongly reasons-responsiveness would mean that, in order to be in control of an action in the relevant sense necessary for moral responsibility, one’s action-producing mechanism would need to react differently were the agent presented with sufficient reason to do otherwise. But Fisher and Ravizza argue this seems too strong, since it would mean that weak-willed agents could not be held morally responsible since, when presented with sufficient reason to do otherwise, weak willed agents do not always act otherwise; however, it still seems as though we ought to hold these individuals morally responsible. Fischer and Ravizza discuss an alternative to strong reasons-responsiveness that they call “weak reasons-responsiveness.” To be weakly reasons-responsive a mechanism simply must respond to some sufficient reasons to do otherwise. However, they note that this form of reasons-responsiveness
also does not seem right for what is needed for moral responsibility, since, intuitively, you can possess this kind of reasons-responsiveness and not be morally responsible. For example, they have the intuition that those whose actions spring from mechanisms that are only occasionally or erratically reasons-responsive cannot always be held morally responsible. For instance, those who are severely mentally ill could perhaps have mechanisms that are weakly reasons-responsive; however, many have the intuition that these individuals cannot be held fully morally responsible for their behaviors. Fischer and Ravizza conclude that the kind of reasons-responsiveness needed to ground an account of moral responsibility lies somewhere in between strong and weak reasons-responsiveness and so they introduce what they call “moderate reasons-responsiveness.”

Moderate reasons-responsiveness is less demanding than strong reasons-responsiveness; however, it requires a more stable pattern of reasons-responsiveness than weak reasons-responsiveness. To qualify as moderately reasons-responsive, two conditions must obtain regarding the action-producing mechanism. First, the mechanism must be properly “receptive to reasons,” meaning the mechanism must allow the agent to “evaluate the spectrum of reasons for action.”194 To be receptive to reasons means that a mechanism stably and reliably “recognizes how reasons fit together, sees why one reason is stronger than another, and understands how the acceptance of one reason as sufficient implies that a stronger reason must also be sufficient.”195 This kind of regular pattern of reasons-recognition is what is needed for a mechanism to be properly receptive to reasons.

In addition to receptivity, moderate reasons-responsiveness requires that the mechanism must be minimally “reactive,” meaning it must be the kind of mechanism that can actually result in the agent recognizing reasons for acting differently and doing so. So, just because a mechanism can recognize reasons as sufficient for acting otherwise, the mechanism cannot be moderately responsive to reasons unless it is the kind of mechanism that could, indeed, respond to those reasons. To answer whether premise three of MRR is true, we must examine whether or not one needs to feel like either of these conditions obtains in order for them to indeed obtain.

Fischer and Ravizza’s account places no stipulations on the phenomenological state of the agent when it comes to establishing either reactivity or receptivity and thus moderate reasons-responsiveness. For example, I might deliberate (this would be my mechanism) about how to get out of an awkward social event. Ultimately, the upshot of my deliberation (my action) might be that I decide to tell a lie in order to avoid attending—“Sorry, I need to take Snowball to the vet!” Here, we can imagine that the deliberative mechanism that resulted in this action recognizes reasons in an orderly and intelligible pattern without my necessarily having any phenomenological experience of this fact. Put differently, it might be the case that, were I presented with a different set of reasons, I would recognize them as reasons against lying, and, furthermore, that my pattern of recognition of these reasons would make sense to a third-party observer; however, it need not feel as though I would be receptive to reasons at the time of my deliberation in order for the mechanism to be properly receptive.

Similarly, one’s deliberative mechanism might exhibit the right amount of reactivity necessary for guidance control regardless of whether one experiences this reactivity or is aware of this fact. For example, it might very well be the case that, were my deliberative mechanism to recognize sufficient reasons against lying, the mechanism would, in at least in some cases,
translate into action. Yet, the presence of this reactivity regarding my deliberative mechanism might not be something I am consciously aware of or something that I can feel or experience at the time of my deliberation.

More generally, the idea is that one does not need to have the feeling that one’s mechanism is moderately reasons-responsive in order for it to in fact be responsive in the way necessary for guidance control and thus moral responsibility. With this, I have shown that Fischer and Ravizza’s first requirement regarding guidance control (moderate reasons-responsiveness) does not necessitate any sort of phenomenological experience of reasons-responsiveness on behalf of the responsible agent. Therefore, MRR fails. At this point, in order for BPCA to succeed, OO must succeed.

As with MRR, I will establish the falsity of premise three in OO. To do this, more needs to be said about what it means for a mechanism to be one’s own in Fischer and Ravizza’s account. According to Fischer and Ravizza, whether or not a mechanism is one’s own is a historical question. This means that one cannot determine whether a mechanism is one’s own by analyzing it at the time slice in which the action took place. Instead, one must examine a person’s past relationship to the mechanism that produced the action. In cases where a mechanism is “one’s own,” the agent in question must have “taken responsibility” for it at some point in his or her life (this can include on the spot). This is what Fischer and Ravizza refer to as a “standing policy” with respect to reasons-responsive mechanisms:

So, for example, if one has in the past taken responsibility for the mechanism of ordinary practical reasoning (and in the absence of reconsideration of this mechanism), it follows that one takes responsibility for the currently operating mechanism of ordinary practical reasoning: taking responsibility is, as it were, transferred, via the medium of “sameness of kind of mechanism.”

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196 Ibid., 242.
But what does “taking responsibility for a mechanism” look like? And what sort of first personal, phenomenological experiences does it require, if any?

In some cases, this process of taking responsibility can be reflective, and a person can have the phenomenological experience of engaging in this process. For example, a person might consciously ask herself whether she is the fair target of reactive attitudes for actions that issue from a particular mechanism. I might wonder to myself whether it is fair of my coworkers to blame me for my inappropriate habit of nail biting when bored during a meeting with the boss. “Are actions that are the result of habituation something I can be justly held responsible for?” I might wonder. However, this sort of explicit reflection about my mechanism is not required in order for me to “take responsibility” for it, Fischer and Ravizza claim.

More typical cases in which an agent takes responsibility for a mechanism do not involve any kind of explicit “deep philosophical reflection” about whether one is the fair target of reactive attitudes for actions that spring from that particular mechanism. They explain this more common, nonreflective route to “taking responsibility for a mechanism” in the following way:

As a child grows up, he is subject to moral education (imperfect as it may be). The child’s parents—and others—react to the child in ways designed (in part) to get the child to take certain attitudes towards himself: to view himself in certain ways. Partly as a result of this education, the child typically acquires the view of himself as an agent, in at least a minimal sense. That is, he sees that upshots in the world depend on his choices and bodily movements. Further, the child comes to believe that he is a fair target of certain responses—the ‘reactive attitudes’ and certain practices, such as punishment—as a result of the way in which he exercises his agency. We claim that it is in virtue of acquiring these views of himself (as a result of his moral education) that the child takes responsibility. More specifically, it is in virtue of acquiring these views that the child takes responsibility for certain kinds of mechanisms: practical reasoning, nonreflective habits, and so forth.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 241-42.
A mechanism can be one’s own, then, with or without reflection. However, it must be the case that, at some point in the past, the agent has taken responsibility for that mechanism if one is to claim it as one’s own and thus have control over the actions that issue from it.

The fact that their account is historically oriented and involves a “standing policy” with regard to determining whether a mechanism is “one’s own” leads me to conclude that they do not require that an agent needs to feel like her action flows from a mechanism that is “her own” at the time at which she performs the action. This feeling is distinct from the broader, more historically oriented question about whether at some point in her life she has taken responsibility for the mechanism and come to view it as her own which can be done nonreflectively, and thus without one’s explicit or conscious experience of doing so.

All of this is to say that, in Fischer and Ravizza’s view, though they do not explicitly state it, a mechanism can be one’s own even in cases where a person might not feel this way at a particular action-issuing instance. Having taken responsibility for the mechanism in the past does not require that the person experience any sense of ownership in the present over the mechanism in question. A person therefore can possess guidance control over an action despite the fact that the action was caused by a mechanism that does not feel as though it is one’s own at the moment. What matters is that the person has taken responsibly for the mechanism at some point, and this is not contingent on any sort of current phenomenological experience at the time one executes an action issuing from that mechanism.

What exactly does this conclusion get us with regard to microaggressions? Imagine that Sharron in Eye Contact 2 were to express reactive attitudes toward Dr. Foreman for his lack of attention towards her: “Dr. Foreman, you’ve ignored me this entire conversation and I’m the patient here, not my husband!” Additionally, imagine that Dr. Foreman were to respond by
telling Sharron she should not be upset because he did not feel any sort of control over his behavior: “I couldn’t help it! It just happened! I couldn’t control it.” We can now see that this objection does not hold up philosophically even if reconstructed in such a way that seeks to preserve many of the philosophical assumptions driving the objection in the first place. Our feelings of control, or lack there of, are not tied to whether or not we actually possess control, and thus this kind of objection should not represent an endpoint to reactive exchange between microaggressor and microaggressee.

To recap, in this section I have argued the following: while it might be the case that feeling like you lack control over a certain behavior corresponds with whether or not you can do otherwise, the exercise of guidance control as outline by Fischer and Ravizza’s influential account does not necessitate any feelings of control (as they define control) over one’s actions. If one takes guidance control as necessary for moral responsibility (a claim I have argued the objector in BPCA would likely find attractive), then feelings of control are not necessary for moral responsibility and thus BPCA fails. This conclusion helps show that the Denial of Control excuse is not as effective as microaggressors might take it to be and lacks the philosophical backing it would need to be compelling. Thus, microaggresses should not take this sort of response to indicate that their expressed reactive attitudes are inappropriate or misguided. Next I will show that the same is true for the Denial of Action excuses.

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198 The question of whether or not Dr. Foreman actually possesses guidance control in this case is a complicated one that depends on what mechanisms resulted in his behaviors. I will discuss this in the next section. The general point in this section is that individuals are not reliable when it comes to self-reporting about their ability to control their behaviors and therefore this objection is not as strong as microaggressors might hope.
4.3. “I Did What?”: The Argument from Awareness

In some cases, one can commit a microaggression without any conscious awareness of acting.

Dr. Foreman in *Eye Contact 2* does not have any conscious awareness of his microaggressive, non-verbal body language. In cases like this, the *Denial of Action* excuse (“You’re making that up!—I did no such thing!”) represent an objection microaggressors might employ when met with expressed reactive attitudes and voiced moral concern from microaggressees. To see whether or not this objection holds water, I will first formalize it:

Argument for Awareness and Microaggressions (AA)

1. One cannot be legitimately held morally responsible for an act that one has no conscious awareness of committing.
2. Some microaggressions are acts of which perpetrators lack conscious awareness.
3. Therefore, individuals cannot be held morally responsible for these microaggressions.

The term “conscious awareness” could refer to a wide array of phenomenological experiences. Here, I will not pinpoint exactly what conscious awareness means. I will, however, clarify what I do *not* mean by the use of this term. Conscious awareness of action does not require the experience of any sort of intention or any sense of purposiveness, although often conscious awareness of action does involve these sorts of feelings: I intend to scratch my cheek and then I find myself scratching it; and, as I scratch, I am consciously aware that my fingers are moving and of the sensations in both my cheek and my fingers. Other times, however, we just find ourselves acting accordingly: all of a sudden I am scratching my cheek; it happened automatically without any feelings of purposiveness. A lack of conscious awareness is not the same as a lack of the intention to act. You can be consciously aware of the fact that you are scratching your face despite the fact that it happened automatically and you did not ever experience intending to scratch it. Loosely, I take a “lack of conscious awareness” to signify an
in-the-moment lack of sensing, perceiving, or feeling what one’s body is doing from either a first person or third person perspective.

It is possible to become consciously aware of actions for which we start out consciously unaware. For example, a nearby stranger in the library might tell you to stop humming. His request might make you suddenly aware of the fact that you are humming—and rather loudly to boot! However, had you not been chastised, you would have gone on humming without taking yourself to be doing so or without feeling like you were humming. Furthermore, later on, had your humming not been pointed out to you, you would have no memory of having hummed at all in the library. To you, it is like it never happened. Premise one of AA contends that, when you lack conscious awareness of an act in this way, you cannot legitimately be held morally responsible for the act. In other words, according to AA it would be inappropriate for your fellow library patron to express indignation at you or to request an apology for your disruptive behavior, if you had no idea you were humming.

Whether or not the Denial of Action objection is successful depends on whether premise one of AA is defensible. Why might someone think premise one is true? What is it about awareness that links it to moral responsibility? One route someone might take to defend this position would be to argue that a lack of awareness leads to a lack of the kind of control that one thinks is necessary for moral responsibility. As I discussed earlier in the chapter, prominent accounts of moral responsibility argue that control over one’s action is necessary for responsibility. The reason that many people find the Denial of Action objection plausible, I suggest, is that lacking this kind of phenomenological experience is taken to be a symptom of the fact that a person lacks control. With this in mind, we can now see that the larger philosophical argument behind AA could be something like the following:
Argument for Awareness and Control (AAC)

1. One must be in control of one’s behavior in order to be held morally responsible for the behavior.
2. One must have conscious awareness of one’s behavior to be in control of it.
3. By contraposition, if one is not consciously aware of one’s behavior, one is not in control of it.
4. Therefore, if one is not consciously aware of one’s behavior, one cannot be held responsible for it.

This prompts the question of whether premise two is correct: must a person have conscious awareness of her action in order to possess control over it (and thus be morally responsible for her behavior)? Put differently: must a person sense or perceive that she is behaving in order to be held morally responsible for that action? To answer this question I will again adopt Fischer and Ravizza’s version of control (guidance control). As with the argument in the last section, I have chosen to work with Fischer and Ravizza’s account here because their account is a prominent account in the moral responsibility literature. A person forwarding an argument like AAC would likely hold similar commitments about moral responsibility as Fischer and Ravizza’s account does, viz. that moral responsibility is merit-based and dependent on a compatibilist notion of control. Given that I want to provide a counter argument to AAC that objectors will find attractive, I will therefore see if premise two of AAC holds up according to Fischer and Ravizza’s account of control and moral responsibility.

Fischer and Ravizza do not directly answer this question, although what they say about nonreflective behavior can help us work out what their response might be. They define “nonreflective behavior” as behavior that does not involve explicit, practical reflection or conscious deliberation.199 Certain mechanisms lend themselves well to producing nonreflective behavior. For example, habit can cause someone to do something without conscious awareness

of the mechanism that leads one to behave accordingly. I bite my nails out of habit without explicitly asking myself whether or not I ought to. Or, you might drop to the ground at the sound of gunshots without consciously being aware of doing so; you simply find yourself on the ground and lack awareness regarding your behavior of dropping.

For behaviors like this, Fischer and Ravizza maintain that, just so long as the action-issuing mechanism is properly receptive and reactive to reasons, the individual is exercising guidance control. To illustrate this point, they ask us to imagine a scenario involving a university professor who drives to work and is habituated to exit the highway at the University Avenue exit and often does so unreflectively. They explain that this habitual mechanism could be moderately reasons-responsive if it were properly receptive and reactive to reasons:

…the University Avenue exit is blocked off because of road construction…presumably, there are scenarios in which [the professor] simply automatically (and without explicitly asking himself what to do and consciously deliberating) responds by taking the next exit from the freeway. This fact helps to show that the agent’s actual-sequence action (from nonreflective mechanisms) is moderately reasons-responsive. 200

Because the professor recognized reasons in favor of not taking the exit (albeit without explicit or conscious deliberation) and because he reacted in response to that reason, we can see that his action issuing mechanism is reasons-responsive despite the fact that his habitual behaviors are unreflective. This example helps show that conscious awareness of an action is not necessary for moderate reasons-responsiveness (and thus guidance control) in Fischer and Ravizza’s account. This is significant, since it implies that microaggressors who claim that conscious awareness of their microaggression is necessary for moral responsibility are wrong.

Many instances of microaggressive conduct are the result of mechanisms that lie outside of our conscious awareness or explicit, deliberate practical reasoning. The question now is

200 Ibid., 86.
whether microaggressors can be said to possess guidance control over these unreflective behaviors. The answer to this question depends on what kinds of mechanisms actually yield the microaggressive behaviors in question. In all cases (microaggressive or otherwise), to determine whether an action is reasons-responsive, one must assess whether the relevant action issuing mechanism is moderately reasons-responsive and the agent’s “own” in the historical sense needed for guidance control. Recall that to be reasons-responsive, a mechanism need not recognize every single reason to act differently (strong receptivity); instead, it must simply recognize a minimally consistent pattern of reasons to act otherwise (moderate receptivity). Additionally, to be properly reactive, the mechanism needs to be the kind of mechanism that would, at least in some cases, translate these reasons into actions.

What do these requirements mean with regard to unreflective microaggressions? If we consider Eye Contact 2, the requirement simply holds that the mechanism that resulted in Dr. Foreman’s actions be able to recognize reasons sufficient for actions in an intelligible pattern of recognition. Furthermore, the mechanism needs to be the kind of mechanism that could actually translate reasons into action. It would be an impossible task to discuss all of the possible mechanisms that could lead to Dr. Foreman’s unreflective behaviors. My discussion here is therefore not meant to be comprehensive. However, I will give reason to believe that there are some versions of Eye Contact 2 in which Dr. Foreman exercises guidance control over his microaggressive behaviors despite lacking awareness.

Picking up where the discussion on habit left off, we can imagine cases where microaggressive behaviors are the result of habituation. These kinds of mechanisms can be reasons-responsive and one’s own, and thus under the agent’s control in the sense needed for moral responsibility according to Fischer and Ravizza. If Dr. Foreman’s habit is to make eye
contact with the person sitting to his right (Rick in this case), we could imagine a scenario in which this unreflective, habitual behavior was indeed reasons-responsive. Were Sharron to indicate that she would like Dr. Foreman to direct his comments towards her (perhaps a subtle clearing of her throat or catching of Dr. Foreman’s eye), he might recognize this as a reason to redirect his attention (even if all this takes place below the surface of his awareness). So some habits that result in microaggressive behaviors can be reasons-responsive and thus under one’s control in the sense needed for responsibility, despite lacking awareness of one’s behaviors.\textsuperscript{201}

Some unreflective microaggressions are the result of something beyond mere, idiosyncratic habit. For instance, microaggressions are often the result of social contexts in which stereotypes and biases are prevalent. This pervasiveness is often the result of structural forces that reproduce, enact, and maintain oppression. For example, imagine that Dr. Foreman lives in a context in which he receives repeated exposure to the idea that black women are less competent than white men. This idea can be conveyed in myriad ways—images, words, implications, etc. Repeated exposure might cause Dr. Foreman to form a bias in favor of white men and against black women that results in his unreflective, microaggressive behaviors in \textit{Eye Contact 2}. Are the cognitive mechanisms that lead to these behaviors reasons-responsive?

If it turns out that Dr. Foreman’s action issuing mechanism in this case is purely associative and will automatically result in biased behaviors regardless of whatever reasons against such behavior he is presented with, then we ought to describe Dr. Foreman’s action  

\textsuperscript{201} Recall that, even though this behavior was not the result of malicious intent or rooted in a pernicious bias, the behavior still qualifies as a microaggression in my view due to the social context, which imbues the behavior with a particular meaning—namely, it signals that Dr. Foreman has a bias against Sharron.
issuing mechanism as lacking the appropriate degree of reasons-responsiveness. In this case, Dr. Foreman’s behavior would be the result of an irresistible association and nothing more. On this view, Dr. Foreman’s unreflective microaggressions would not be controllable, and thus he would not be responsible for them.

However, perhaps the mechanisms that lead to unreflective, biased behaviors are more complicated than pure associations. This opens up the possibility that biases like Dr. Foreman’s might be the result of psychological mechanisms that are, in fact, reasons-responsive to the degree necessary for guidance control. For this argument to work, we must think of the action issuing mechanism as comprised of multiple parts. Some of these parts are less responsive to reasons (i.e., associative mechanisms) while others are more reasons-responsive. The result is an overall mechanism that achieves a moderate level of reasons-responsiveness, enough to qualify the behavior as falling under the purview of guidance control.

For instance Jules Holroyd discusses findings that suggest our explicitly held beliefs and commitments can regulate the expression of our biases. In other words, part of the mechanism that leads to a biased behavior can involve other mental processes in addition to purely associative structures. Importantly, in some cases these additional mechanisms are reasons-responsive and under our control in the sense needed for guidance control. For instance, Moskowitz and Li found evidence to suggest that explicitly forming and having an egalitarian goal (e.g., to treat African American men fairly) can inhibit biased behaviors despite one holding

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202 For a more in-depth discussion on this point, see Michael Ledger, “What Makes Us Responsible: Fischer and Ravizza on Implicit Attitudes” (Macquarie University, 2015).
203 Ibid.
204 Holroyd, “Responsibility for Implicit Bias.”
biased associations. Importantly, participants who exhibited this pattern of decreased stereotype activation lacked awareness over this inhibition and did not consciously try to inhibit stereotypes from being activated. This kind of data suggests that the mechanisms that lead to unreflective microaggressions might be more complicated than simply associative mechanisms and, furthermore, can be reasons-responsive to some degree even in cases where the mechanisms are unreflective. Thus, unreflective microaggressive conduct can be caused by a wide array of psychological mechanisms and there is reason to believe that sometimes these mechanisms are moderately reasons-responsive in the sense needed for guidance control. This argument further undercuts the claim that lacking awareness over one’s behaviors necessarily means one lacks control and thus cannot be held morally responsible.

4.4. Conclusion

My arguments in the last chapter have suggested that Sharron would be presumptively justified in expressing her moral concern to Dr. Foreman about his microaggressive behaviors. This chapter has considered what to make of Dr. Foreman’s potential claim that Sharron’s reactive attitudes do not deserve uptake, due to Dr. Foreman’s lack of sensation of control or awareness surrounding the microaggressive conduct. I have argued that microaggressees like Sharron should not be convinced by claims like this meant to dismiss microaggressees’ reactive attitudes. Of course, my argument is catered to those who find a guidance control version of moral responsibility plausible, which I argue many forwarding this objection would endorse due to the kinds of commitments one needs to have in order to find this objection compelling. However this approach leaves open much room for considering how other accounts of control and moral

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206 Ibid.
responsibility could accommodate and respond to this objection. In the next chapter I will consider another common response microaggressee encounter: namely, that microaggressors who do not know the moral significance of their behaviors cannot be held morally responsible. I will argue that these objections do not always succeed even if one continues to adopt a merit-based understanding of moral responsibility.
Chapter 5: Epistemic Negligence and Microaggressions

Not all microaggressors understand that their behaviors are morally significant. This can lead microaggressors to dismiss microaggresses’ concerns about microaggressions: “It’s not a big deal, get over it!”; “You’re being overly sensitive”; “You’re blowing things way out of proportion!” These dismissals aim to halt the patterns of exchange I endorse in chapter three between microaggressor and microaggressee. The idea is that, by showing that microaggresses’ reactive attitudes are inappropriate, the microaggressor can evade responsibility-holding practices by avoiding truly engaging with microaggresses in a co-reactive exchange. Of course, nothing about the account of responsibility I endorse in chapter three makes it such that these kinds of objections can really succeed. In short, responsibility-taking and responsibility-holding for morally significant behaviors can legitimately proceed regardless of whether the microaggressor knows about the salience of their behavior, since my account of responsibility simply necessitates that the microaggressor is able to competently engage in a back-and-forth exchange of reactive attitudes in order to be properly held morally responsible. However, these dismissals nonetheless represent a key challenge to microaggresses who face these objections from microaggressors who might not endorse the same framework of responsibility I do in part one of the dissertation. Instead, this type of objection gains currency within a merit-based account of moral responsibility.

In this chapter, I respond to dismissals of this sort in such a way that shows that, even if we work within the alternative framework of responsibility presupposed by the objector, these objections are less powerful than often assumed. To do this, I work within the merit-based framework of moral responsibility and forward an account of epistemic negligence that I find most defensible. I show that on this approach, in some cases, one can be held morally
responsible for one’s behavior despite lacking awareness about its moral harmfulness. I apply this account of epistemic negligence to microaggressive behavior and argue that we can often hold microaggressors who lack knowledge about the moral significance of their behaviors morally responsible according to this view. This conclusion helps defend the idea that reactive exchange between microaggressors and microaggressees should not necessarily falter in cases where microaggressors do not fully grasp the moral significance of their conduct.

Put formally, the basic argument that motivates dismissals of the type I am interested in here is the following:

**Ignorance Argument**
1. One cannot be legitimately held morally responsible by way of reactive exchange for behaviors if one does not know the moral significance of one’s behaviors.
2. Perpetrators of microaggressions often do not know the moral significance of their behaviors.
3. Therefore, these perpetrators of microaggressions cannot be held morally responsible by way of reactive exchange.

The Ignorance Argument turns on the idea that there are certain epistemic conditions that must be met in order to legitimately engage in responsibility-holding practices.

To help motivate the Ignorance Argument, here is an example an objector might forward in order to elicit the intuition that certain epistemic conditions must be met if we are to rightfully engage in responsibility-holding practices: imagine that Erick is throwing a tea party. Unbeknownst to Eric, someone has sneakily added lethal levels of arsenic into the sugar jar.

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207 I should note that there are two major ways that a person might come to lack knowledge about the moral significance of her behaviors. First, she might not know that her conduct is morally problematic because she does not know that she is behaving in the first place. This sort of experiential failure was the focus of the last chapter. In a different sense, a person could fail to see her behaviors as negatively morally significant due to the fact that she fails to understand the moral importance associated with her actions, despite the fact that she might be aware of acting. These two reasons for lacking knowledge about the moral salience of one’s acts can factor independently of each other. In this chapter I focus on this second epistemic phenomenon.
Erick offers one of his guests “sugar” with her coffee, and she accepts. Tragically, the guest dies due to arsenic poisoning. In this case, many philosophers agree that Erick is not the appropriate object of responsibility-holding practices, despite the fact that he served his guest a lethal dose of arsenic. This intuition supports the conclusion that Erick’s lack of knowledge somehow “let him off the hook.” People’s intuitions might change if it turns out that Erick knew he was serving poison to his guests. In this altered case, it seems uncontroversial that he can legitimately be held morally responsible for his behavior by way of reactive exchange and other responsibility-holding practices.

We can imagine a different version of the case in which Erick knows that the sugar has arsenic in it, but does not know that arsenic is poisonous. While the package that the arsenic came in featured extensive warnings about the dangers of arsenic ingestion, Erick did not bother to read the package before adding it to the sugar jar, and he thus did not learn about the chemical’s toxic nature. Here, Erick seems morally responsible, despite his lack of knowledge, because it seems like he should have known about arsenic’s toxicity—he should have taken the time to read the package before he added the arsenic into the sugar jar and thus he should have known about its lethal qualities. Cases like this prompt the broader question: Under what circumstances can agents be held morally responsible—according to merit-based approaches of moral responsibility—for behaviors of which they do not know the moral significance? With this question in mind, I next work within the merit-based approach of moral responsibility to answer

this question. I propose and defend a novel account of epistemic negligence, which I later go on to discuss in relation to microaggressions.

5.1. Epistemic Negligence Condition

I propose the following epistemic negligence condition (ENC):

Agent X can be held morally responsible for a negatively morally significant action Y despite not knowing that Y has negative moral significance just so long as:

1. X has reasonable access to evidence that could support a belief that Y is negatively morally salient given the specific stakes associated with believing Y is morally troubling for X
2. X possesses the interpretive tools necessary to make sense of the evidence,
3. and, X’s failure to believe that the act has negative moral significance falls below standards determined by X’s contextually contingent obligations (including epistemic obligations).

For example, consider the following case of someone who would be epistemically negligent according to ENC:

Injury: After graduating from college, Kareem opens a construction equipment rental business. Beth comes to his shop and asks to rent some machinery. Kareem notices there is a red light on the machine Beth wants to rent. The red light signals that the machine needs repair before it is safe to operate. However, though Kareem notices the light, he doesn’t know what it means. Kareem owns the machine’s user manual; however, he does not bother to check it before he

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210 For an account that has a similar condition, see Nicholas Rescher, *Ignorance: (On the Wider Implications of Deficient Knowledge)* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009). ENC’s first condition is related to discussions in the “pragmatic encroachment” literature in epistemology and conversations about “inductive risk” in the philosophy of science. Both literatures focus on the idea that differences in pragmatic circumstances can constitute a difference in knowledge. In a nutshell, the idea is that it can be more or less reasonable to accept a claim depending on what is at stake with regard to potential epistemic errors regarding that claim. For more on pragmatic encroachment, see Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath, “On Pragmatic Encroachment in Epistemology,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 75, no. 3 (2007): 558–89. For more on inductive risk, see Heather Douglas, “Inductive Risk and Values in Science,” *Philosophy of Science* 67, no. 4 (2000): 559–79. Keith DeRose also supports the idea that the standards for knowledge vary depending on context. In particular, see Keith DeRose, “Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52, no. 4 (1992): 913–29.
rents the equipment to Beth. While in use, the machine malfunctions and injures Beth. Beth comes back and expresses anger towards Kareem. Kareem claims that, since he did not know what the light meant, he is not responsible and does not have to engage with Beth about the incident.

ENC would find Kareem epistemically negligent. First off, looking at the last condition of ENC, Kareem’s position as the store owner gives him a special obligation not to endanger customers when avoidable, and thus to know about the meaning of safety lights on the equipment he rents out. Part of this obligation entails the epistemic obligation to seek out knowledge regarding safety lights when they come on. In other words, when one is a storeowner like Kareem, one has an obligation to be epistemically curious about repair lights on the machines one rents out.

Furthermore, given that Kareem owns the user manual, he has reasonable access to evidence that would support a belief that renting out the equipment would be morally wrong. So, not only should Kareem have known that renting out the equipment was wrong, he also could have known this given his access to the user manual and his ability to interpret what the user manual said given his educational background. Finally, regarding the stakes of the situation, Beth’s safety, and the strength of the evidence Kareem could reasonably access, Kareem was epistemically negligent in his failure to know that renting out the equipment was wrong. This example is meant to be generally illustrative of ENC, although is not focused on microaggressions in particular.

Sociologist Jennifer Mueller’s research on white ignorance illuminates real life examples of ignorance that are more relevant to the topic of microaggressions. Her research focuses on ignorance regarding large-scale patterns of racial oppression and injustice. In one study, Mueller used her students as her research subjects. Between 2008 and 2011, Mueller taught a

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number of college courses that focused on exploring the “social reproduction of racial inequality and the racial wealth gap.”

Students engaged in weeks of lectures, readings, and discussions about social structures, institutions, and policies that have unjustly favored and supported white people’s acquisition of wealth and capital in the United States. Students were then instructed to:

- Explore [their own family] connections to slavery; property, money, or business inheritances; home down payment or college assistance; utilization of state or other asset based programs (e.g., Homestead Act, GI Bill); social network assistance (e.g., for jobs, loans, starting businesses); and relatives’ beliefs about whether race figured into these matters. Students were directed to use course material to analyze racial dynamics that may have shaped family wealth/capital acquisition and transfer.

Mueller analyzed 105 of these assignments written by white students. Her investigation revealed a series of epistemic maneuvers students used to obfuscate and ultimately remain ignorant about the moral effects of their participation in unjust, white supremacist social and economic practices. In one striking example, a student acknowledged that her family owned slaves; however, she provided reasoning meant to explain why this fact did not represent a significant impact on her family’s acquisition and retention of wealth:

[One of my ancestors] carried his slave with him to the Civil War to cook… and tend to the horses. After the war, his slave stayed with him because he had nowhere else to go. This proves that in the later days of slavery, my family’s slaves were allowed to leave, but chose not to. Since the slave man was given the opportunity to leave, it is shown that slavery was an expendable part of my family’s wealth.

This example and Mueller’s work more generally highlights the widespread phenomena in which white people willfully perpetuate ignorance about the moral impact of their behaviors. Even in cases where students were provided with extensive, reliable, and authoritative evidence about the

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212 Ibid., 223.
213 Ibid., 223–24.
unjust nature of their (and their family’s) actions, they remained unwilling to accept the negative moral significance of these actions.

Should we hold these students morally responsible for their actions that perpetuate the unjust acquisition and retention of white wealth and capital even when students remain unable to fully appreciate the moral salience of these actions? Are these students epistemically negligent? To answer this question we will have to unpack each condition of ENC a bit more. The first condition of ENC prompts the question: what constitutes reasonable access to evidence? The question of what constitutes reasonable access to evidence turns first on what counts as access to evidence.

Access, in my view, can be either internal or external to the subject in question. The subject has access to evidence that lies internally, within the subject’s set of rational beliefs, experiences, memories, and embodied understandings of the world. In addition, one has access to external evidence that can take the form of testimony from others, information in books, sense data, and many other sources that exist external to the subject. For example, I might not hold the belief that the largest living cat is a Liger (a lion and tigress hybrid) named Hercules that lives at the Myrtle Beach Safari.\footnote{“Largest Living Cat,” Guinness World Records, accessed January 11, 2016, \url{http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/largest-living-cat}.} However, given that I have regular access to a laptop with an internet connection, I have access to sources with this information. Similarly, I sometimes have access to many (albeit not all) of my own memories, beliefs, and emotional experiences. Thus, access is broadly defined and encompasses both internal and external sources.

Of course, there are many cases where I technically have access to information, yet it would be very difficult for me to obtain it. For example, imagine I did not have a reliable internet connection and the only copy of the Guinness Book of World Records within 1,000 miles of my
location lies within a private book collection that costs hundreds of dollars to view. Certainly under these conditions it would be much more difficult for me to obtain the information in question, although, assuming I could pay the money and get to the collection, it would not be totally impossible to access this information. Thus in many cases, people’s access to evidence, while technically possible, is restricted or reduced.

To take a more realistic and sobering example, many women have restricted access to information about their sexual health. In some places, information can be obtained through clinics. However, the clinics are only open for limited hours that coincide with when many have to work. Clinics might also be located in areas that are difficult to access. In some cases, social pressures, stigmas, or cultural norms make it dangerous for women to go to clinics to obtain the information they might need.

The idea that access comes in degrees helps to explain the notion of “reasonable access.” What, then, counts as a reasonable degree of access? Since the answer to this question will vary given the contingent, context-specific nature of each circumstance, I will not give a precise answer to this question. Generally speaking, though, a reasonable degree of access will be one in which a subject can access the information without having to expend many resources (material, or otherwise) or be exposed to more than minimal harm (physical or psychological) or disadvantage (socially, materially, physically, or psychologically). It would be unreasonable to expect that, in the example sketched above, women with limited access to information about their health would be able obtain this information. Women in certain contexts therefore do not have reasonable access to information about their reproductive health.

Of course, given that I have not offered a precise defense of what constitutes reasonable access, there will be borderline cases that are difficult to classify as either reasonable or
unreasonable when it comes to the degree of access. As access varies, degrees of moral responsibility might vary as well. While ENC allows for this sort of mitigated responsibility, the view ultimately holds that, in cases where access is deemed *unreasonable*—when the stakes are too high one way or another—the subject cannot be legitimately held morally responsible. Thus, when it comes to determining whether a subject who does not know the negative moral impact of one’s action can be held morally responsible, it is necessary to determine what sort of access one had to evidence in support of the act’s moral harmfulness. If the stakes associated are high enough to constitute unreasonable access, then one cannot be held negligent.

In the case of Mueller’s students, it is clear that they received reasonable access to evidence that showed that their (and their family’s) actions were morally troubling. Mueller curated and presented compelling evidence to them throughout the semester in multiple formats (lectures, readings, discussions). However, this reasonable access to evidence alone does not establish that Mueller’s students can be held morally responsible for their actions. The first condition of ENC also demands that the evidence supports a belief in the negative moral significance of Y given the *specific stakes* associated with believing this. Does the evidence in the case of Mueller’s students support a belief in the negative moral significance of their behaviors given the stakes at hand?

In general, the particulars of a specific scenario have an effect on what sort of evidence would support a belief in some proposition.\(^{216}\) For example, if a person thought that taking a certain drug would endanger her child’s life, the sort of evidence she would need to support a belief that the drug is safe for her child to take would likely be held to a higher standard than that needed to convince the parent that, of two pizza restaurants she has yet to try, one is better than

the other. ENC’s first condition therefore states that a person needs to have reasonable access to the sort of evidence needed to support a belief that Y is negatively morally significant given the specific context at hand and what is at stake when it comes to supporting a belief that Y is negatively morally significant. If the costs of accepting this belief are high for an individual, they will likely need reasonable access to strong evidence that Y is morally troublesome.

In contrast, if the stakes are low for X, and failing to believe that Y is negatively morally significant could cause harm to others, then the sort of evidence needed to support a belief that X ought not Y will be less demanding. For example, imagine that a friend tells Tom the word “abracadabra” is highly offensive to people from a specific religion. Here, given how easy it is to refrain from saying “abracadabra,” Tom might come to believe that he ought not say the word around people of the religion in question despite the fact that Tom’s evidence for this claim is not terribly reliable—let us assume his friend is not a part of the religion. Here, the stakes are just so low for Tom that he does not need further evidence to adopt the belief that he ought to refrain from saying “abracadabra” around certain people.

Returning to Mueller’s research, what is at stake with regard to believing that one’s actions perpetuate and maintain racial injustice? This is a complicated question that I will return to in more depth later when I place attention more fully on microaggressions and ENC. However, with regard to Mueller’s students, their perception of themselves as morally pure is at stake. The notion of white, moral innocence is crucial when it comes to perpetuating white supremacy, since it allows white subjects to continue engaging in oppressive practices which benefit them without having to critically examine their own behaviors.217 If Muller’s students

come to believe in the moral wrongness of their actions, this might precipitate a reimagining of themselves and their families as less morally pure than previously thought. This reimagining can compel students to distance themselves from privilege conferring practices. Thus, not only is a view of the self as morally pure on the line here, but also a set of material, social, moral, and epistemic practices that result in benefits and privileges.

At the same time, failure to believe in the moral significance of one’s actions in this case further entrenches and perpetuates unequal and unjust wealth distribution, thus harming others and people of color in particular. On the one hand, a set of privileges and a view of the self as morally pure is on the line for the individual epistemic agent. On the other hand, failure to believe in the moral significance of one’s actions in these cases perpetuates an inaccurate view of the self as morally pure and contributes to vast and pernicious systems of injustice and oppression.

Recall that ENC will demand that students have reasonable access to evidence that could support a belief that their action is negatively morally significant given the specific stakes associated with believing this. My brief discussion of this case has highlighted that, in fact, a lot is at stake for students in these cases as well as for others. With this in mind, I argue that the kind of evidence needed to support a belief that their (and their family’s) actions are negatively morally significant is fairly demanding and must be of a high caliber in order to fulfill that first condition of ENC.

In the case of Mueller’s research, this threshold was met. Students learned from experts and were given access to myriad evidence from diverse peer-reviewed sources in varying formats in support of the notion that their actions were negatively morally salient. They were given the opportunity to probe deeply into the facts supporting these claims and were given the
tools necessary to research these subjects further. Because of the stakes at hand and the high
caliber and large quantity of evidence that students had access to, I argue that Mueller’s students
fulfill the first condition of ENC. However, this alone is not enough to find them epistemically
negligent and thus morally responsible for their behaviors despite their lack of knowledge
according to ENC.

ENC’s second condition stipulates that an agent must possess the interpretive tools
needed to make sense of one’s evidence in support of the claim that one’s behaviors have
negative moral significance. To see this, consider the fact that reasonable access to evidence is
only significant insofar as a person has the tools necessary to interpret the available evidence.
For example, if Kareem had access to an instruction manual that was in a language he did not
understand, he could not have known what the light meant on the equipment. Here, he lacks the
ability to make sense of (interpret) the evidence that he has available to him. Thus, one must also
possess the interpretive skills necessary to make sense of the evidence, since, without this, a
person cannot use the evidence to support a belief in the negative moral significance of Y.

Note that, just because one possesses the interpretive tools necessary to make sense of the
evidence, one might still fail to do so, and thus, according to ENC, be held morally responsible
for their lack of knowledge. To help see this, consider the case of a police detective who has a
piece of evidence that can lead her to the offender: a telephone number scrawled by hand on a
crumpled up, old napkin. At first glance, the detective reads the telephone number as containing
a four, when it fact it contains a nine. On any other day, the detective might have read the
number as a nine, but today she interprets it as a four. This interpretation leads her to have
“false” evidence in support of arresting suspect Y as opposed to the true culprit suspect X.
According to ENC, the detective in this case can be held epistemically negligent for her failure to
know that suspect X is the culprit and that she really ought not arrest suspect Y. In this way, just
because someone has the interpretive tools necessary to make sense of the data (the detective had
the visual and reasoning skills necessary to interpret the first digit as a nine and should have
entertained this interpretation of the number given the stakes involved and her obligations as a
detective) does not mean that one will interpret it correctly or form the belief that the action in
question is morally problematic (in this case, arresting Y). Because of this, ENC holds those
morally responsible by way of epistemic negligence even in cases like this where the individual
makes an inaccurate interpretation but nonetheless has the interpretive tools to make the correct
one.

Do Mueller’s students possess the necessary interpretive tools? While perhaps students
lacked these tools at the start of the semester, it seems reasonable to suppose that they would
have obtained these tools by the end. Given that the course explicitly taught students to analyze
and make connections between their own family’s actions and oppressive policies and structures,
they practiced and honed the skills necessary to interpret and make sense of the evidence
regarding the moral significance of their actions. They were explicitly taught how to perform
analyses that would reveal behaviors with negative moral significance. Indeed, a large part of the
class was aimed at providing students with the necessary interpretive tools to critically examine
their actions with regard to wealth acquisition, accumulation, retention, and oppression. With this
in mind, I argue that Mueller’s students fulfill the second condition of ENC. This conclusion
leads us to the last condition of ENC.

There are cases where a person fulfills ENC conditions one and two, yet they cannot be
held negligent due to the obligations or roles they may or may not have in the specific situation
at hand. For example:
*Pills:* Mike is in the emergency room waiting to get stitches on his finger. While he waits, the man next to him slumps over and passes out, falling to the ground. Mike looks around and cannot find anyone to help, so he wakes the man up and gets him back up into his seat. Once seated, the stranger asks Mike to help him open some pills to take, saying they are in his pocket. Mike reads the name of the medication, doesn’t recognize it, and helps the man open the container. The man takes the pills and, a few minutes later, dies. The pills were the wrong pills and caused a heart attack.

In this case, Mike had reasonable access to information that, when added to his evidence, could have supported a belief that it was wrong to help the stranger with the pills. Specifically, the name of the medication that was printed on the container.

Mike could have easily used his smart phone to look up the medication and read any warnings. Mike is literate and able to read and understand websites that discuss the use of different medications. However, most would agree that, in this case, we ought not blame Mike for helping open the pills—he cannot be rightfully held responsible for his failure to know that giving the man these pills was wrong. The reason for this is that Mike did not violate any of his contextually contingent obligations or standards. First off, given that they were strangers, Mike could not be expected to know the man had other medications in his pockets or that the man might get mixed up about which pills to take. In addition, Mike is not a trained medical professional. He had no obligation to know about the varying side effects of the stranger’s medications. His failure to recognize the pill’s danger therefore did not fall below the standards determined by his obligations in the situation.

It is with cases like *Pills* in mind that the necessity for the third condition of ENC becomes clear. Sometimes we have reasonable access to evidence that could support a belief in the negative moral significance of some action and can interpret that evidence; however, it is not our responsibility to know that the action is morally troublesome and therefore we cannot be held responsible for not knowing this.
Had Mike been a nurse, standards would have been different. Mike would have been obligated, due to his role as a healthcare professional, to know that the medication was not safe, or at least to know that he ought to check to make sure it was safe before administering the pills. That is to say, the standards about what one is expected to know change depending on the context, roles, relationships, and other factors that vary across situations. For this reason, the second condition of ENC is necessary. Taken together, I argue that fulfilling these three conditions establishes moral negligence.

Do Mueller’s students have an obligation to believe that their actions are morally problematic? I argue that they do. This is because there is a morally relevant connection between those who cause injustice and those who suffer injustice. This connection supplies purveyors of injustice with epistemic obligations to know about the impact of their actions. The actions in question with regard to Mueller’s students support and lead to racial injustice and oppression. More generally, in cases where one party harms another there is often a special moral connection created between the two parties—the beneficiary of injustice owes something to the recipient(s) of injustice. Even if the beneficiary does not have a duty of compensation, he or she should, at the very least be presumptively expected to understand the moral significance of his or her behavior in cases where both parties are moral subjects, deserving of equal moral consideration.

To see why this seems plausible, consider a world where this standard does not exist—where there is no obligation to know about the impact of your unjust actions. Here, we would describe a burglar who did not know the wrongness of his actions as failing solely in terms of his theft. But this seems misguided; surely part of what makes a person like this blameworthy is his failure to know that stealing is wrong.

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The same principle holds with regard to Mueller’s students. In cases where one’s actions perpetuate injustice from which he or she benefits, one ought to know about the moral valence of his or her actions. Some might argue that this standard holds even when agents do not benefit from the injustice in question, but all my argument needs to succeed is the idea that benefiting from this injustice produces the relevant epistemic standard. Since Mueller’s students benefited from the unjust actions in question, they have an obligation to know about the moral salience of these actions.

While Mueller’s example is related to microaggressions in so far as it pertains to the maintenance and perpetuation of large-scale patterns of oppression, I have yet to apply ENC to microaggressions in particular. This will be the focus of the last section of the chapter. But, before that, I will respond to an objection to ENC. In particular, I will turn to a discussion of George Sher’s epistemic negligence condition, which represents a challenge to my own. Specifically, Sher argues for a more stringent set of requirements necessary to establish moral responsibility. In the next section I respond to this objection, thus defending my more minimal set of requirements for epistemic negligence.

5.2. An Objection: Sher’s Partial Epistemic Condition

The epistemic negligence condition that I outline in the section above is similar in many ways to George Sher’s “partial epistemic condition” (PEC):

(PEC): When someone performs a wrong or foolish act in a way that satisfies the voluntariness condition, and when he also satisfies any other conditions for responsibility that are independent of the epistemic condition, he is responsible for his act’s wrongness or foolishness if, but only if, he either:

1. is aware that the act is wrong or foolish when he performs it, or else
2. is unaware that the act is wrong or foolish despite having evidence for its wrongness or foolishness his failure to recognize which
   a. falls below some applicable standard, and
   b. is caused by the interaction of some combination of his
constitutive attitudes, dispositions, and traits.\textsuperscript{219}

Put less formally, in Sher’s account, three things matter when it comes to establishing responsibility for ignorance. First, one must have access to evidence for the wrongness or foolishness of one’s act. Second, one’s knowledge must fall below an applicable standard. And, third, the reason(s) for one’s ignorance must be connected or linked to the agent in the right way—caused by the agent’s constitutive attitudes, dispositions, and traits.

While my account also includes a requirement about access to evidence and about ignorance falling below standards, it does not require as robust a connection between the agent and his or her ignorance as is required in PEC 2b. Sher’s account therefore represents an objection to ENC, namely, that ENC ought to include a condition like PEC 2b. I will argue against this extra condition.

Sher’s third requirement for blameworthy ignorance states that our lack of knowledge must be “caused by the interactions of some combination of our constitutive attitudes, dispositions, and traits” that “make us the person we are.”\textsuperscript{220} While Sher does not offer a rigorous explanation of what exact features qualify as “constitutive,” he lists some examples:

It is common place that each person’s theoretical and practical decisions are influenced by factors such as his background beliefs, his moral commitments, his views about what is good and valuable, and what he notices and finds salient. His decisions are influenced, as well, by his degree of optimism or pessimism, his attitude toward risk, and many other facets of his emotional makeup.\textsuperscript{221}

Sher includes this requirement because he believes that, without it, there would be no way to link the “nonevent” of possessing ignorance to the agent in question.

\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., 88 & 117.
\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., 122.
But what is the distinction between “constitutive” attitudes, traits, and dispositions and those that are not constitutive? To help illustrate what he means, Sher offers an example of a woman, Alessandra, who, on a hot day, forgets about her dog, Sheba, in her car while going to pick her children up from school. Alessandra forgets her dog because when she arrives at the school “she is greeted by a tangle of misbehavior, ill-considered punishment, and administrative bungling which requires several hours of indignant sorting out.” When Alessandra returns to the car, Sheba is unconscious from heat prostration. In this case, since Alessandra was not aware of the ill effects of her decision to stay in the building her actions resulted in unwitting pet abuse. As Sher explains, her failure to remember her dog can be attributed to her “concern for her children, and her tendency to focus intensely on whatever issue is at hand” since these are “consistent contributors to the way she characteristically approaches practical and theoretical problems.” The physical and mental features that undergird Alessandra’s “normal patterns of intellectual functioning,” her “rationally related consciousness and reason responsiveness,” and her “subjectivity” are the causal sources of Alessandra’s failure to know that her action was wrong. Thus, according to Sher, Alessandra is responsible for her lack of knowledge and therefore epistemically negligent because her lack of knowledge is caused by mechanisms that lead to her normal patterns of intellectual functioning, rationally related activities, consciousness, and subjectivity. To help state his position, Sher asks rhetorically:

Why, when Alessandra forgets about Sheba because she is distracted by the dispute at the school, should we suppose that the aspects of her psychology that account for her distraction—her concern for her children, for example, or her tendency to focus intensely on whatever issue is at hand—are anything but

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222 Ibid., 24.
223 Ibid., 112.
224 Ibid., 122, 125.
consistent contributors to the way she characteristically approaches practical and theoretical problems? Sher states that it is the “the collection of physical and psychological states whose elements interact to sustain…characteristic patterns of conscious and rational activity” that create the responsible self and are thus constitutive. Because Alessandra’s ignorance is caused by underlying psychological mechanisms that lead to her rational, conscious, and subjective self she is morally responsible for her action in Sher’s view, despite not knowing it was wrong at the time. It is this link between our lapses of knowledge and the mental structures that allows for these lapses that make us responsible for our ignorance. For these mechanisms to be connected to responsibility in the right way, they must be “constitutive” of us as agents, meaning they must sustain characteristic patterns of rational and conscious activity. This “constitutive feature” requirement of PEC is part of what sets Sher’s account apart from mine. I next show why I reject this sort of condition, which seeks to tether specific instances of ignorance to constitutive features in order to ground responsibility, as overly restrictive.

Sher’s view focuses exclusively on mechanisms that shape our rational, conscious mind. It is only when mechanisms of this sort cause one’s ignorance that agents can be held responsible for their lack of awareness. However, other psychological mechanisms that do not shape our rational, conscious minds can lead to ignorance. I will outline a case where the links between underlying mechanisms; rational, conscious minds; and ignorance are missing:

Flash Flood: Owen is leading a group of first graders on a hiking trip in the desert. It is an overnight trip, and the group will camp outdoors. While preparing for the trip, Owen visits a ranger station that has pamphlets about outdoor safety. He begins grabbing the pamphlets and suddenly is startled by a large, hairy insect that is sitting by one of the pamphlets he grabs on campsite safety. Owen has never been afraid or disgusted by insects before, and in fact has never been

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225 Ibid., 123.
226 Ibid., 124.
repulsed in this way by anything he’s ever seen. Because he implicitly associates the campsite safety pamphlet with the insect and thus is motivated by his disgust, he never reads the pamphlet. This leads him to pick a campsite in a flash flood area, since he does not know this is dangerous. One of the first graders drowns during a flashflood in the night.

In this case, Owen’s ignorance leads to a child’s death. Owen has access to the pamphlet on campsite safety that warns against picking campsites in flash-flood prone areas, and he possesses the interpretive tools necessary to make sense of the pamphlet (he can read and has strong reading comprehension). The pamphlet is written by experts and, given the potential stakes associated with flash flooding and small children, it represents sufficient evidence for believing Owen’s chosen campsite was risky. Furthermore, as trip leader and the adult in the group, Owen has a responsibility to know about the hazards of the desert, especially ones as common as this. Intuitively, I find that Owen can be held morally responsible for his ignorance—he really ought to have known that his campsite choice was dangerous.

Sher, however, would disagree. In this case, Owen’s ignorance is not caused by a “collection of physical and psychological states whose elements interact to sustain” his “patterns of conscious and rational activity.” Instead, the psychological, emotional mechanisms that lead to his ignorance—mechanisms of disgust and repulsion—exist separately from his judgments, rationality, subjectivity, or conscious self. In this way, Owen’s ignorance is not something he could be held morally responsible for according to Sher. However, I hope that intuitively this seems wrong. Just because he failed to read the pamphlet due to a feeling of revulsion not linked up to his conscious, rational self should not mean that he is off the hook for having skipped reading the pamphlet and thus having camped in a dangerous place. Since our unconscious, implicit selves and the mechanisms that fuel this part of the self can play a significant in role

227 Ibid., 224.
how we treat others, it seems arbitrary to claim responsibility only for mechanisms that lead to the conscious, rational, or intellectual self.

The larger implication of my argument is that the responsible self can extend beyond our rational, subjective self and the mechanisms that lead to it. When we fail to know about the negative moral significance of certain actions, we can still be held responsible for those actions even if the reason for our ignorance is not tethered to our intellectual selves. In my view, you can be held responsible for this ignorance just so long as you have reasonable access to evidence that could support a belief that the act is negatively morally significant given the specific stakes associated with believing this; you possess the interpretive tools necessary to make sense of the evidence; and, your failure to believe that the act is morally troubling falls below standards determined by your contextually contingent obligations (including epistemic obligations). Rejecting PEC 2b is significant in the context of microaggressions, since ignorance about the moral impact of microaggressive behavior might not always be caused by mechanisms that sustain patterns of conscious or rational activity.

5.3. Microaggressions and Epistemic Negligence

Having laid out and defended ENC, I can now turn fully to the question which motivates this chapter: can microaggressors be held morally responsible (according to a merit-based view of moral responsibility) for their microaggressive behavior even when microaggressors do not know the negative moral significance of their acts? In this section I will argue that indeed, in some cases, perpetrators of microaggressions can fulfill all the conditions in ENC and so can be held morally responsible for their microaggressions despite not knowing that these behaviors are morally salient. The kinds of responsibility-holding practices I have in mind are the ones laid out in chapter three, which involve dialogical, co-reactive exchange. Starting with ENC’s third
condition, I next discuss each criterion of ENC as it pertains to microaggressive behavior and show that there are cases in which microaggressors can meet each one and thus can be held morally responsible for their microaggressive behavior despite not knowing the moral salience of their actions (even if one adopts the merit-based framework of moral responsibility I am working within for this chapter). The conclusion will therefore be that this objection is less successful at undercutting responsibility-holding practices than objectors might like to think, even to those who adopt a similar, merit-based view of moral responsibility.

How, an opponent might wonder, can microaggressors fulfill the last criterion of ENC which states that “X’s failure to believe that the act is negatively morally significant falls below standards determined by X’s contextually contingent obligations (including epistemic obligations)”? What standards make it the case that one has a responsibility to know that microaggressions are morally troubling? Whether a person ought to know about the moral import of his or her actions is determined largely by the person’s role(s), relationship(s), and the specifics of the situation. Here I will argue that, in many cases, microaggressors should know about the moral significance of their actions, given the contextual standards that apply to them.

That microaggressors have an obligation to know that their actions are morally problematic is especially true in cases where microaggressors and microaggressees have close relationships (relationships between spouses, friends, and co-workers), and relationships that entail a power differential (between professors and students, doctors and patients, or bosses and employees). In these cases, at the very least, both parties have a responsibility to do what is in their power to avoid harm to the other party, especially if doing so causes no or minimal harm to oneself.
For example, say that I can avoid harming my spouse by waiting for her to get completely out of the car before shutting the car door. It seems reasonable that I have an obligation to refrain from prematurely shutting the car door and hitting her, since the cost of this for me is minimal and doing so would harm her. Pragmatically, this obligation to avoid unnecessary harm is closely related to the epistemic obligation to know what actions are potentially harmful to those you are in relationships with. If one is presumptively obligated to avoid harming others, one must also, in most cases, know when one’s actions will harm another. I might, by fluke, decide not to shut the car door as my spouse is in the midst of getting out of the car; however, I have failed in my duties as a responsible partner if I do not also know that it would be wrong to slam the door into her half emerged body. An obligation to avoid unnecessarily harming others you are in relationships with seems strange if you are also not required to know or believe that your actions are morally problematic.

As such, part of fulfilling one’s duties to others is not only refraining from doing things to harm them, but also knowing what sorts of things might harm them. The trust that we place in others when we are in relationships with them is trust that they will know how to keep us safe. Failure to know this therefore represents a failure to fulfill moral standards laid out in the context of most relationships, and especially in ones that require trust to function reasonably.

For those that do not think such an epistemic obligation automatically obtains in the context of relationships, there is still reason to believe that, in many cases, microaggressors fulfill the third criterion of ENC—in particular, when microaggressees provide first personal testimony about their phenomenal states: “your comment hurt me” or “that made me feel disrespected” or “I feel offended.” But why think that microaggressors should privilege this kind of testimony? Talia Mae Bettcher explains that claims about one’s phenomenal state can be made
without external evidence and incorrigibly.\footnote{228}{Talia Mae Bettcher, “Trans Identities and First-Person Authority,” in You’ve Changed: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity: Sex Reassignment and Personal Identity, ed. Laurie Shrage (Oxford University Press, USA, 2009), 99.} The presumption in these cases is that one has epistemic authority over these claims and, as such, others ought to accept them without requesting additional evidence. From an outside perspective, there is no better evidence to support a claim like this than testimony from the speaker. In some cases it is appropriate to defy this presumption, (e.g., you suspect the speaker is joking or lacking in sincerity); however, by and large, speakers ought to be granted with epistemic authority with regard to phenomenal avowals. Defying this presumption without a good reason to do so therefore represents a failure to treat microaggressees with the kind of respect they are owed as agents and thus would represent a failure of one’s obligations to others.

In some cases, microaggressees make claims about the wrongness of microaggressive behaviors that are not linked to their phenomenal state. For example, a person could claim that microaggressive behaviors “reinforce sexist ideas about women” or “justify racism.” These kinds of statements rest on evidence that lies outside of the speaker’s phenomenology and, as such, a speaker does not automatically have the kind of authority they do when they make phenomenal claims. So, in these cases, why think that this kind of testimony supplies microaggressors with a responsibility to know or believe that their behaviors are morally troublesome? In many cases microaggressees’ life experience, identity, and other areas of expertise make it so we ought to regard their testimony as credible, at least initially. Thus, absent good reason to doubt the speaker’s credibility, microaggressors in relationships with microaggressees have a presumptive epistemic obligation to treat testimony from microaggressees about the negative moral
significance of microaggressions with openness, curiosity, and humility and, in turn, believe testimony about the moral status of microaggressions.\(^{229}\)

In some cases microaggressors fail to view microaggresses as credible due to a prejudice in the microaggressor. These cases represent a breach in obligation owed to microaggresses. Gaile Pohlhaus’s work on Miranda Fricker’s notion of testimonial injustice can help us to see what is morally troubling about these kinds of cases.\(^{230}\) In a very basic sense, communities rely on the sharing and pooling of information to facilitate survival and success. This involves coordinating with others who have differing loci of experience. To build healthy epistemic communities, one must therefore treat others as epistemic subjects. This entails recognizing that others provide unique contributions to epistemic practices. To do this, one must recognize others as possessing the epistemic credibility that they deserve. A failure to treat others as epistemically credible for arbitrary reasons such as an unjust prejudice is therefore harmful on the community level as well as to the individual. First, “it forestalls conditions that are maximally truth conducive for the epistemic community” by preventing the transfer of beliefs which could impact the community.\(^{231}\) Second, Pohlhaus argues that the failure to view agents as credible due to a prejudice treats them as “somewhere between an epistemic subject and object.”\(^{232}\) As a subject, the agent

\[\text{is able to engage in epistemic practices that support the epistemic community; consequently individual members of that community benefit epistemically (at}\]


\(^{231}\) Pohlhaus, “Discerning the Primary Epistemic Harm in Cases of Testimonial Injustice,” 101.

\(^{232}\) Pohlhaus, “Discerning the Primary Epistemic Harm in Cases of Testimonial Injustice.”
least in part) from her role as an epistemic subject. Moreover, she is subject to the rules of epistemic practices and faces sanction for their violation.²³³

Yet, when microaggressors fail to recognize the authority of microaggressees’ testimony because they are prejudiced, they fail to treat microaggressees as full epistemic subjects. In cases where microaggressees voice perspectives that contradict or challenge dominant understandings of the world and are denied the credibility they deserve, microaggressees are unjustly excluded from epistemic practices:

However, unlike a subject (and more like an object), she is not seen as capable of contributing to epistemic practices uniquely, that is, from her own distinct lived experience in the world. Consequently, her epistemic labor contributes to the community via which epistemic interests are pursued, but she is not permitted to contribute in ways that would redirect epistemic practices toward those parts of her experienced world that extend beyond or trouble the veracity of the dominantly experienced world. Any contribution that might do so is summarily denied epistemic support and uptake by dominant members of the community (and perhaps even other marginalized members).²³⁴

Pohlhaus’s discussion thus helps to show why microaggressors who fail to treat microaggressees’ testimony as credible because of a prejudice are failing at their obligations to treat others with the respect they are owed as epistemic subjects.

In Interruption, if Sarah were to explain to her male colleagues that their behaviors were disrespectful or sexist, her coworkers have a presumptive epistemic obligation to treat her as credible. To fail to do so for arbitrary reasons such as a bias against women would result in a failure to fully recognize Sarah’s epistemic subjectivity. This would not only harm Sarah in her capacity as an epistemic agent, but would also deprive the larger epistemic community of knowledge that could challenge dominant perspectives.

²³³ Ibid., 107.
²³⁴ Ibid.
To make the case that many microaggressors have a moral responsibility to know about the negative moral significance of their microaggressive behaviors, I do not need to defend any claims about whose perspective is “objectively” closer to reality. All I need is the idea that those from oppressed groups should be presumptively treated as credible epistemic authorities when it comes to claims that certain kinds of behaviors contribute to one’s oppression or the oppression of one’s group. This presumed authority stems from one’s experiences as a part of their identity group. This obligation can be easily defeated when good reason exists to do so; however, prejudice in the hearer does not represent a good reason. While it might be the case that some members of oppressed groups are not able to recognize certain microaggressive behaviors as morally significant due to internalized oppression or other instances of accepting hegemonic ideology, this should not stop us from taking seriously those from oppressed groups who make claims about the negative moral significance of certain behaviors. Here, the presumption of credibility ought to stand, at least initially and absent countervailing reasons, to avoid harming both epistemic communities and epistemic agents.

So far, I have argued that the presumptive obligation to know that microaggressions are negatively morally significant springs from relationships between microaggressors and microagressees as well as situations in which microagressees supply microaggressors with testimony about the import of microaggressions. However, this argument does not apply to all perpetrators of microaggressions. For example, in Sidewalk, Jennifer is a stranger to the gay couple she passes. Her interactions with them are not dictated by any role she has and they do not supply her with testimony that her actions are morally problematic (and we can imagine she has not received testimony of this sort before from any other sources). If Jennifer does not realize the moral import of her actions in this case, is she epistemically negligent? To answer this
question affirmatively, there must be some other mechanism to ground an obligation to know that one’s microaggressive behavior is morally significant.

As I discussed earlier, there are some cases in which one’s *unintentionally occupied* or *unchosen* social position can supply standards about what one ought to know. The kind of social position that grounds this obligation is one of social privilege. The basic principle at the heart of this argument is that benefiting from injustices, even if unintentionally, creates obligations in the beneficiaries. This principle can apply in cases involving microaggressive behaviors. As a straight person, Jennifer benefits from behaviors that reinforce heteronormativity. A morally relevant connection between Jennifer and the gay couple emerges when Jennifer engages in behaviors that benefit her yet cause others to suffer injustice. Furthermore, these standards apply regardless of whether microaggressors provide testimony about the moral significance of microaggressions or whether microaggressor and microaggrsee have a relationship with one another. Perpetrating injustice that one benefits from, even if done unintentionally, can therefore supply microaggressors with the responsibility to know about the moral impact of their behaviors.

To see why this seems plausible, consider a world where this standard did not exist. Here, we would explain a woman who randomly poisons other people, does not know the wrongness of these actions, and who unintentionally ends up benefiting from the fact that she poisoned others as failing solely in terms of her actions. But this seems misguided; surely part of what makes a woman like this responsible is her failure to know that poisoning people is wrong.

Acting microaggressively is a less extreme example than the one mentioned here (that results in death), but the same principle holds. In cases where a person’s actions perpetuate injustice from which one benefits, one ought to know about the moral valence of one’s actions,
even in cases where one does not intend to occupy this place of privilege. Some might argue that this standard holds even when those do not benefit from the injustice in question, but all my argument needs to succeed is the idea that benefiting from this injustice produces the relevant epistemic standard.

Some might object by noting that this is a fairly sweeping principle that, if true, likely applies to much of what Americans eat and wear. I am inclined to think this larger implication is right. If we buy clothes made in sweatshops at low prices and thus benefit from unjust working conditions, we are complicit in the suffering of others and we really ought to know that this is the case. With regard to microaggressions, we should know when our behaviors—even if unintentional or unchosen—benefit us at the expense of others’ unjust suffering.

So far, I have given reason to think that many microaggressors should know about the moral import of their behaviors. But this argument cannot get us very far if it turns out microaggressors cannot know that their actions are morally problematic given the kind of access to evidence and interpretive tools they have available. Put differently, we are left to wonder whether there are cases in which microaggressors can fulfill ENC’s first and second conditions. Just because they are expected to know about the negative moral significance of their actions in many cases does not mean that they always can, and thus that they can be held responsible for their ignorance.

Consider ENC’s first requirement: that agents must have reasonable access to evidence that could support a belief that their microaggressive behavior is negatively morally significant given the stakes associated with believing that the behavior is morally troubling. Here, I will focus on evidence that suggests that microaggressions help sustain, reproduce, solidify, and manifest unjust systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. Are there cases
in which microaggressors have reasonable access to evidence of this sort? If so, does the evidence support the fact that one ought to believe that microaggressive behaviors are morally significant given the specific stakes associated with adopting this belief?

The answer, I will argue, is that cases like this do exist. And therefore there are cases in which microaggressors can be found epistemically negligent according to ENC. However, as my discussion will show, while there are cases where this kind of evidence exists in such a way that fulfills ENC, there are also situations where it does not. In these cases microaggressors cannot be found epistemically negligent for their lack of understanding about the moral import of microaggressive behavior.

On one side of the spectrum, there will be clear-cut instances where microaggressors have reasonable access to evidence that tells in favor of believing that the microaggression is morally significant given the stakes of the particular situation, yet the microaggressor fails to form the necessary belief that the behavior is worrisome. According to ENC, these people can be held responsible for their negligence (if all the other conditions are met). People in this category are the ones who are educated in matters of oppression and have access to materials (e.g., books, videos, academic studies) and testimonies (e.g., in person, on the internet, in writing) about the ethical implications of microaggressive behavior. Their background knowledge in matters of oppression can help them to interpret the evidence at hand, and any failure to know that their actions are negatively morally significant can be seen as morally negligent.

To illustrate these kinds of cases, imagine that Rasheed works at an NGO that focuses on promoting women’s rights. He is told by a co-worker that his use of the term “girls” to refer to his female colleagues is harmful, since it implies that Rasheed does not view female colleagues as full moral subjects but instead as children. Here, Rasheed has reasonable access to information
that supports a belief that his behaviors are wrong. Furthermore, the stakes involved with forming the belief that he should not refer to his female colleagues in this way are low for Rasheed; by refraining from using the term “girls” to refer to his coworkers, he is not put in any danger or exposed to any sort of detraction from his well-being. On the flip side, by realizing that this sort of language can undermine his coworker’s autonomy and subsequently not using it, he avoids potentially harming or disadvantaging other moral agents. Rasheed thereby fulfills the first condition of ENC, since he has access to evidence that supports the belief that the behavior is wrong given the specific stakes associated with believing the behavior is wrong for Rasheed. By analogy, if a friend of yours told you that he had a rare ear condition that made whistling excruciating to listen to, you really ought to believe him, form the belief that whistling around him is disrespectful, and thus refrain from whistling. Believing him poses no harm to you but could potentially benefit him. If you fail to form this belief despite having access to this type of evidence, and continue to whistle, you could be found negligent according to ENC.

On the other end of the spectrum, we can imagine cases where individuals lack reasonable access to evidence that would support a belief in the negative moral significance of their microaggression, given the stakes associated with believing that the behavior is ethically problematic. For example, imagine a white person, Tim, who grows up in an all white community and who never interacts with Asian Americans. Tim works a full-time job at a factory and has a high school level education. In such a segregated environment, Tim has never had the opportunity to interact with people who are not white. He also works so many hours and has limited resources such that getting to the library to read about race relations or topics that might provide him with evidence about the negative moral significance of racially
microaggressive behavior is extremely difficult. Furthermore, were he to do this, the people in his community might socially ostracize him.

In cases like this, Tim just does not have reasonable access to evidence that would support the judgment that asking an Asian American person where they are really from is morally problematic. Tim, therefore, cannot be found epistemically negligent according to ENC and thus could not be reasonably held morally responsible for his actions, absent testimony from microaggressees. However, once this testimony is supplied, Tim might gain access to the evidence that would ground responsibility-holding practices thereafter.

In the middle lie cases murkier than Rasheed’s and Tim’s. In many instances, microaggressors encounter evidence that suggests that microaggressions are morally neutral (e.g., varying forms of discourse that normalize racism, sexism, or homophobia). In these cases, it might take stronger or more counter-evidence that microaggressions are morally worrisome to cause someone to believe that microaggressions are in fact problematic. If twenty coworkers tell you the boss is making tomorrow a holiday and only one coworker tells you otherwise, then, while you might have access to evidence that tomorrow is not a holiday, it would not be strong enough to support a belief that you should go to work tomorrow. Thus, in contexts where microaggressive behaviors are widely condoned and normalized, it will be more difficult to provide someone with adequate evidence needed to support the idea that one ought not act microaggressively.

I agree that this much is true. However, in cases where the bulk of your evidence comes from those who lack proper epistemic authority, you really ought to privilege testimony from the “experts.” By analogy, if twenty coworkers tell you that the boss is making tomorrow a holiday and then your boss tells you that you have to work tomorrow, you have enough evidence needed
to support the belief that tomorrow is not a holiday. This is because the boss is an epistemic authority in this case. As discussed earlier, in cases of microaggressive behavior, microaggresseses should be presumptively regarded as epistemic authorities when it comes to claims about their phenomenological experiences, identity groups, or experience of moral harms. In this way, the evidence one needs to support a belief that microaggressions are morally troubling should still outweigh counter evidence suggesting otherwise that might be more prevalent yet less reliable. Thus, in many cases, microaggressors do have reasonable access to evidence that could support a belief that microaggressive behavior is morally problematic given the specific stakes associated with believing this for the microagggressor.

As the second condition of ENC states, though, access to evidence is only relevant in so far as one can interpret that evidence. Are there cases where microaggressors have the interpretive tools needed to make sense of evidence that supports a belief that their behavior is morally significant? What interpretive challenges arise for microaggressors in this regard? Thinking back to Mueller’s research, students with access to evidence supporting the moral significance of their families’ actions still managed to misinterpret and ignore this evidence.235 Regarding white ignorance, Charles Mills states:

…in effect, on matters related to race, the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.236

While it is true that some white people do not understand “the world they themselves have made” a lot hangs on the question of whether they are unable to understand this world as Mills suggests. If this were the case, then it would seem that these subjects cannot be held

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235 Mueller, “Producing Colorblindness.”
epistemically negligent after all according to ENC due to a failure to meet its second condition—they simply do not have the tools necessary to interpret the evidence about the moral salience of their behaviors, even if they have access to it.

To respond to this argument, I will make a distinction between being unable to interpret evidence (i.e., totally lacking the interpretive capacity to do so) and having difficulty doing so while possessing the necessary interpretive tools. In the case of evidence supporting the negative moral significance of microaggressions, most adults have the necessary tools needed to interpret this evidence: the basic ability to understand others’ spoken testimony, written testimony, and the ability to make basic inferences. In most cases, these basic interpretive skills are all that are necessary to interpret evidence that supports the idea that microaggressive behavior is morally problematic. However, perpetrators of microaggressions can fail to interpret this evidence accurately. Often when this happens, I argue, the issue is not that microaggressors lack the skills necessary to interpret evidence, but instead that they fail to do so because it is difficult.

For instance, in Mueller’s research mentioned above, all subjects had the necessary interpretive tools to analyze the evidence before them, yet many failed to form beliefs about the moral import of their family’s behaviors. The distorting forces that allowed students in Mueller’s research to systematically misinterpret evidence are mainly psychological and emotional barriers that function to “protect” and “insulate” white subjects from having to face the realities of white supremacy and racial privilege. By continually failing to interpret the evidence before them, her students were able to maintain ignorance about the moral significance of their behaviors and avoid painful or difficult feelings of stress, guilt, shame, or humility. Crucially, in these instances, students’ interpretive failures are not the result of an inability or a

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237 Mueller, “Producing Colorblindness.”
lack of interpretive tools but instead the result of deeply held desires to maintain a sense of (white) moral purity. 238 Psychological and emotional phenomenon work to prevent white subjects from problematizing their own behavior, even in cases where the subject is perfectly able to do so. Robin DiAngelo’s concept of “White Fragility” helps capture this phenomenon well. She argues that White Fragility is the state in which even a minimal amount of racial stress feels intolerable. 239 Here, racial stress can be understood simply as stress that results from talking about race, white supremacy, or racial divides. White Fragility manifests in many ways—from anger to simply walking away from conversations. In most instances, the phenomenon allows white people to avoid interpreting evidence presented to them that might disrupt their views about race, racism, and white innocence. This, in turn, perpetuates ignorance that helps sustain white supremacy. The question is whether psychological phenomenon such as White Fragility that obfuscates evidence ought to mitigate moral responsibility for ignorance, since these psychological, distorting forces make it difficult for individuals to interpret evidence about oppression properly.

To respond, I will first note there is a sense in which these psychological forces are actively maintained and, as such, willfully exercised. Mueller’s student quoted above who discusses her family’s slave owning past very purposefully and actively worked to construct an essay that avoided the implication that she or her family is morally at fault. Her reluctance to properly interpret this family history speaks more to her deep seated desire to maintain a façade of moral purity and avoid conflict than to her inability to interpret this evidence. I do not doubt

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239 DiAngelo, “White Fragility.”
that this desire for a sense of moral purity and her reluctance to experience the negative emotions were quite powerful and strongly felt; however, I do not think these desires constitute a mitigating force when it comes to moral responsibility.

An analogous case can help us see that mitigation of responsibility in these instances is unwarranted. Kareem is at the construction equipment rental shop and deciding whether to rent Beth machinery with the service light on. He is not exactly sure what the light means, and he knows that in order to figure it out he would need to walk out outside to his van to get the instruction manual. It is a stormy night and Kareem really does not feel like experiencing the negative sensations of the frigid wind and rain. Plus, Kareem realizes, if the light means something is wrong, he will not be able to rent the machinery to Beth and thus will lose out on some money he would like to have. Kareem opts to stay inside where it is warm and rents out the equipment without knowing what the light really means.

Kareem has reasonable access to the evidence he needs (instruction manual) and the interpretive tools necessary make sense of this evidence (he can read and reason well). However, due to a desire to avoid discomfort and maintain some benefits, Kareem opts to stay inside. He decides that ignorance about the light is better than knowing he has done something wrong, and so he actively and willfully decides to ignore evidence to which he has access. With regard to this scenario, I think most would agree that neither Kareem’s desire to avoid feeling chilly, damp, or uncomfortable (no matter how strongly felt) nor his desire to make some money are enough to let him off the hook morally speaking. Similarly, the desire or fear of suffering discomfort in cases of white ignorance ought not let Mueller’s students off the hook. Extending the argument further, these kinds of psychologically distorting forces are not enough to eliminate responsibility for ignorance in cases where agents have reasonable access to evidence they have
the tools to interpret. While they might make it feel uncomfortable to interpret evidence, they do not make it impossible, and so condition two of ENC is still met in cases like this.

But there are other ways in which our capacities for interpretation are systematically distorted, and these represent a key challenge to the idea that microaggressors can be found epistemically negligent. As I discuss above, there are cases where microaggressors do no treat microagressees’ testimony as authoritative due to a prejudice in the microaggressor. In cases like this, bias and other distorting, oppressive forces cause agents to disvalue evidence that, given the stakes involved, ought to support a belief that microaggressions are morally significant. The question is, can people subject to these sorts of distorting biases be let off the hook for their failure to know? Can they be said to possess the interpretive tools necessary to make sense of the evidence to which they have reasonable access (ENC’s second condition)?

Imagine a person, Sofia, who has a bias against women that has been systematically ingrained in her since she was a child. This bias is largely the result of structural and systemic forces. Because of these biases, Sofia often interprets women to be overly emotional and untrustworthy when this is not actually the case. Thus, when Sofia is told by another woman that some of Sofia’s behaviors are sexist, Sofia fails to interpret this evidence properly. Instead of taking the other woman’s concerns to represent an important and legitimate moral concern, Sofia interprets the woman as being overly emotional and “making a mountain out of a molehill.” Sofia fails to properly interpret the testimony and evidence presented to her due to biases that distort her interpretive capacities. Can Sofia be held responsible for her ignorance in this case? Does she fulfill ENC’s second condition?

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Answering this question depends on the nature of the distorting biases that affect microaggressors. In cases like Sofia’s, these biases make her interpretive tools less effective. The degree that biases can affect one’s interpretive skills will vary on a case-by-case basis. We can imagine some situations where bias completely overtakes a person’s capacity to interpret evidence accurately and distorts it to such an extreme extent that a person simply does not stand a chance at interpreting evidence accurately. In these instances, microaggressions would not fulfill ENC’s second condition, since their interpretive skills are completely compromised in such a way that makes them unable to interpret evidence in support of the belief that their behaviors are negatively morally significant.

But I hypothesize that these extreme cases are less common than cases where interpretive skills are distorted but not all together comprised. Say Sofia goes to a lecture on stem cell research presented by a female professor. While Sofia might interpret the professor’s evidence as less credible than a male professor’s, her bias does not lead her to all together dismiss the findings in the lecture due to her bias. Instead of being totally defunct, her interpretive tools are simply miscalibrated. This miscalibration results in Sofia frequently underestimating lecturer’s credibility, although does not cause her to totally discount the speaker’s testimony.

Cases where biases cause people’s interpretations to be “off” in this sense do not cause agents to completely lack the interpretive tools necessary for making sense of evidence they have reasonable access too. And, as I argued before, just because it is difficult to interpret data well does not mean that we should let people off the hook altogether, morally speaking. However, depending of the severity of the distorting bias, it might be appropriate to relax the degree to which we hold a person responsible according to ENC—to say that they are responsible but to a lesser extent than if they did not have the bias. Thus, responsibility can be mitigated in some
cases where perpetrators’ interpretive tools are severely compromised due to systemically ingrained biases.

I have argued that in some cases microaggressors can be found epistemically negligent when they fail to realize that their microaggressive behavior is negatively morally significant. I have also suggested that, despite the fact that hegemonic ideology leads to biases that can distort our ability to interpret evidence about the moral significance of microaggressive behavior, in some cases microaggressors still possess the interpretive tools necessary to make sense of the evidence to which they have access. And so, while interpreting this evidence might be tricky or challenging, we can still hold these microaggressors morally responsible for their lack of knowledge.

This discussion has taken up a merit-based approach to moral responsibility in order to convince objectors (who are likely to hold this conception of moral responsibility) that the objection is not always as compelling as it may seem. In addition, this chapter has helped us to gain a fuller understanding of how the ignorance objection functions in terms of the responsibility-holding practices I forward in chapter three. By forwarding this type of objection, objectors often refuse to take part in co-reactive responsibility-holding practices. This, successively, protects them from having to engage at any meaningful level with their ignorance. In other words, they are not forced to confront their ignorance via a trajectory of reactive attitudes. Avoiding this process allows microaggressors to perpetuate ignorance, because it allows them to sidestep exchanges that might supply them with testimony needed to overcome their ignorance or that might encourage introspective and growth. Thus, these objections help foster ignorance in addition to halting moral repair between microaggressor and microaggressee. The chapter has therefore given reason for thinking that these objections do not always succeed,
even within the framework of responsibility these objections presuppose. Thus, I have provided two separate responses, one in part one and one in part two, to the objections featured in this chapter and the last. The hope is that doing so will help open up doors for moral repair between microaggressor and microaggressee.
Conclusion

In this brief, concluding section, I will review what the dissertation has accomplished and trace future directions for research. The three motivating questions behind the project were: What are microaggressions? In what ways are they morally significant? What should our responsibility-holding and responsibility-taking practices be regarding microaggressive conduct? Politically and morally, these questions gain their importance from the role that microaggressions play in sustaining unjust, oppressive social conditions and the impact they can have on individual microaggressees. More generally, these questions gain their philosophical importance from the light they can shed on the relationship between intent, responsibility, and ignorance.

The dissertation has left us with a novel understanding of what microaggressions are and a robust understanding of the moral impact that these behaviors can have. As a whole, the project has been designed to support and empower microaggressees. The dissertation realizes part of this commitment by responding to common objections raised by microaggressors. These objections often crop up when microaggressees voice concerns about microaggressive conduct. I provided arguments meant to undercut the force of these objections in such a way I hope objectors will find compelling. In terms of my positive project, I have argued that these objections are significant because of the role they can play in halting a dialogical back and forth between microaggressor and microaggressee. I defend an understanding of moral responsibility in which co-reactive, communicative exchange constitutes both holding responsible and taking responsibility. In doing so, I hope to have produced a narrative about microaggressions and moral responsibility that avoids ignoring the interests and impact of microaggressees. This approach to moral responsibility allows responsibility-holding practices to ensue regardless of whether disputing parties have special insight or access into the psychology of the perpetrator.
This approach also situates relationships and interpersonal interactions as an integral part of moral responsibility in a way that merit-based views of moral responsibility do not. This helps give voice to the fact that moral responsibility concepts are significant largely due to their implications for how we navigate the social world.

While this dissertation has made several concrete contributions, the chapters here also represent a set of blueprints for future research. For one, the conceptual arguments I make regarding the moral psychological harms of microaggressions\textsuperscript{241} deserve empirical investigation and support. In addition, there is further philosophical work needed to develop, refine, and specify the communicative norms I propose with regard to microaggressive conduct. Because my definition of microaggression is “depyschologized,”\textsuperscript{242} there exist a wide array of psychological states under which microaggressors can commit microaggressive conduct. For instance, a microaggressor might fully intend to signal a racial bias, or they might have no conception of the negative moral significance of their behaviors. Further conceptual work to taxonimize different kinds of microaggressions is needed to more fully map the terrain of microaggressive conduct. While the work I have done here makes a case that we can hold microaggressors responsible for all of these kinds of microaggressions, this task of further classifying microaggressions paves the way for future investigation into the specific responsibility-related norms associated with each. For example, what does it look like to take responsibility via a co-reactive exchange for a microaggression one did not intend to commit? And how should this differ from the communicative norms regarding intended microaggressions? Work that seeks to answer questions like these will continue to prove useful not only philosophically but also for microaggressees, microaggressors, and efforts to promote social justice.

\textsuperscript{241}See chapter two.
\textsuperscript{242}See chapter one for a discussion on this point.
References


Szymanski, Dawn M., and Arpana Gupta. “Examining the Relationship Between Multiple Internalized Oppressions and African American Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Questioning


