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How to Take Offense: Responding to Microaggression

ABSTRACT: *A microaggression is a small insulting act made disproportionately harmful by its part in an oppressive pattern of similar insults. How should you respond when made the victim of a microaggression? In this paper I survey several morally salient factors, including effects upon victims, perpetrators, and third parties. I argue, contrary to popular views, that 'growing a thicker skin' is not good advice nor is expressing reasonable anger always the best way to contribute to confronting oppression. Instead, appropriately responding to microaggression involves difficult application of practical wisdom that does not easily fall under a simple prescription.*

KEYWORDS: microaggression, oppression, anger

A microaggression is a relatively minor insulting event made disproportionately harmful by taking part in an oppressive pattern of similar insults. Novelist Paul Beatty provides several examples while describing the 'mask' victims often don in response:

> We recognized the face he was wearing as a mask from our own collections. . . . That autonomic eager-to-please response that's triggered anytime you're approached in a store and asked, "Do you work here?" The face worn every moment you're on the job and not in the bathroom stall, the face flashed to the white person who saunters by and patronizingly pats you on the shoulder and says, "You're doing a fine job. Keep up the good work'.' The face that feigns acknowledgment that the better man got the promotion, even though deep down you and they both know that you really are the better man and that the best man is the woman on the second floor. So when Hominy . . . stood up and made that face, everyone on board felt like they, too, had a white person next to them baring their forearms and wanting to compare tans after they've returned from a Caribbean vacation. Felt like Asians being asked, 'No, where are you

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> from originally?' Like Latinos being asked for proof of residency and big-chested women being asked, 'So are those real?' (Beatty 2015: 131–33)

Microaggression is a relatively new concept in public discourse. Most discussions tend to focus on whether perpetrators of microaggression are morally responsible for the harm they cause.[1] But there is very little discussion of the other side of microaggressive transactions: how should *victims* react to microaggression? How should you respond when you are subject to an insulting action or comment related to your ethnicity or gender or religion? Should you get angry? Call the microaggressor out? Or should you swallow your offense, let it slide, even grow a thicker skin? Wear a mask of nonchalance, as Beatty's characters do?

This paper offers answers to these questions. Answers, plural, because I will argue that there is no one answer. Several distinct moral factors are at work in any particular case of microaggression, making the appropriate response complex and situation-dependent. To demonstrate this, I will first examine two popular monolithic views, each of which suggests a single, simple answer. The first, popular with cultural conservatives, is the 'thicker skin' response, demanding that microaggression victims simply ignore the offense and move on. I will show that this response misconstrues the nature of microaggression as mere insult rather than constituent of oppression. The second monolithic view, at the opposite pole, prescribes *anger* as an always appropriate, even obligatory, response to microaggression. I will show that this view is too simple for nonideal social contexts; sometimes expressing anger diminishes the effectiveness of anti-oppression efforts.

Finding the gaps in these monolithic views will leave the topic unsettled. I will use the rest of the paper to map a range of factors important to any response decision: we will need to separate out effects on microaggression perpetrators, microaggression victims, and everyone else. We will then be able to conclude that there cannot be one single best response to all microaggressions, but we will also able to see which situational factors can make one sort of response better than another.[2]

Conceptual Preliminaries

First we need to clarify some features of the microaggression concept itself. The term originated in the work of Harvard psychiatrist Chester Pierce (1970), who focused on cases of racial microaggression against African Americans by whites. Pierce theorized that American whites are socialized to expect deference from African

[1] To my knowledge, the first philosophy paper to discuss microaggression, albeit tangentially, is Dotson's (2011). The most sustained philosophical treatment so far is Friedlaender's (2018), which focuses on moral responsibility for microaggression. Other works by philosophers on microaggression and related concepts include Rini (2015), Brennan (2016), Tschaepe (2016), Fatima (2017), and McTernan (2017).

[2] This paper only considers how microaggression victims *themselves* should respond, not how *bystanders* should respond. I leave discussion of bystander intervention for another time, because that sort of act introduces additional moral complications, such as the 'problem of speaking for others' (Alcoff 1996), and 'white-knighting' (taking on another person's anti-oppression fight simply as a means of signaling your own upstanding character). For a related discussion of 'moral grandstanding', see Tosi and Warmke (2016).

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Americans and to react with hostility when it is not forthcoming. Many whites do not display this hostility openly, and may not even be consciously aware of it, but it is unconsciously expressed in minor acts of presumption or insult.

Pierce offered the following example: he, a Harvard professor, frequently found presumptuous white undergraduates telling him how he ought to arrange his lectures or his classroom. As Pierce saw it, 'The student is on the initiative and sees as his usual prerogative with a black that he must instruct me and order me about and curb my own inclinations and independence.' (Pierce 1970: 277)

Though a student ordering his teacher around is insulting and obnoxious, as an isolated act it is yet not a case of injustice. Pierce's point is that, for African Americans, insulting acts are often *not* isolated. Pierce reports that he received this treatment from more than one white student. Each case was part of a pattern, a predictable regularity of reminders that he was viewed by many white students as less worthy of respect than his white colleagues.

It is this pattern that changes an isolated insult into a harmful oppressive act, following Marilyn Frye's influential conception of life under oppression: 'the living of one's life is confined and shaped by forces and barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systemically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them and restrict or penalize motion in any direction' (Frye 1983: 4). Pierce wrote as a clinical psychiatrist, not a social justice theorist, but the idea is clear when he says:

> Even though any single negotiation of offense can in justice be considered of itself to be relatively innocuous, the cumulative effect to the victim and to the victimizer is of an unimaginable magnitude. Hence, the therapist is obliged to pose the idea that offensive mechanisms are usually a *micro-aggression,* as opposed to a gross, dramatic, obvious *macro-aggression* such as lynching. (Pierce 1970: 266)[3]

So an individual microaggression is not *simply* an insult. It is one constituent of a pattern of similar insults, linked together by derogation of the victim's race, gender, and so on. This pattern is distributed across both time and social context. It would be one thing to have an enemy, some one person who dislikes you and insults you whenever you meet. It is something different to be routinely insulted by many different people: acquaintances, strangers, even family or friends—especially when those insults are linked to stable traits such as gender, ethnicity, or disability status. What makes microaggression distinctively harmful is victims' awareness that each instance is *not* an isolated accident. It will happen again and again and

[3] To my knowledge, this excerpt is the very first appearance of the term 'microaggression'. Pierce himself used the term in a few other publications in the 1970s, and it later received some attention in critical race studies and legal theory (e.g., Davis 1989). But the term did not reach colloquial discourse until around 2010, after appearing in a well-publicized paper by psychologist Derald Wing Sue and colleagues (Sue et al. 2007). The most influential contemporary definition is: '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' (Sue 2010: 5).

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again. Further, these minor insults are linked to vast social harms through their participation in systemic oppression and structural injustice (Young 2013). Derald Wing Sue, a psychologist who has done more than anyone to bring public attention to microaggression, puts it like this:

> People of color do not just occasionally experience racial microaggressions. Rather it is a constant, continuing, and cumulative experience. Thus, racial microaggressions remind them that they live in a country where persons of color are not frequently represented in Fortune 500 companies, that they continue to occupy the lower rungs of employment, that segregation continues in many facets of their lives, that they continue to receive inferior education and health care, and that they continue to fill the ranks of the unemployed. They may be reminded that history books never taught them about the contributions of their groups and when they are presented, it is often a dysfunctional or pathological portrayal. (Sue 2010: 52–53)

An example may help to distinguish microaggression from mere insult. When I was a prospective graduate student, visiting departments to decide where to go for my PhD, I was introduced to a certain very famous philosopher. This philosopher knew I had done my undergraduate degree at Georgetown. Standing amid a circle of prospective students, he offhandedly said, 'The interesting thing about Washington, DC, is that, unlike the other world capitals, it doesn't have any very good universities.' He then looked straight at me, evidently curious how I would react. The other prospective students turned nervously to stare.

The famous philosopher insulted me, apparently deliberately. This was obnoxious and strange behavior and perhaps mildly harmful to me at the time. But it was not a microaggression, because it was not part of a pattern of systemic oppression. I have had few other experiences of being insulted on account of my status as a Georgetown graduate. It is not something I expect to happen routinely. There is no history of widespread social derogation directed at Hoyas.

The situation would be different if this famous philosopher had chosen to insult, off-handedly, my gender or ethnic heritage. When an insult is related to a category of social oppression, the target reasonably connects it to a pattern of similar insults, and the effects are typically much stronger than a mere isolated insult. The concentrated harm of microaggression arises from the existence of this background pattern, not from intrinsic features of any one microaggressive act. Sue (2010: chapter 5) sorts these harms into biological stressors (bodily exhaustion) and psychological stressors (aversion to microaggressive situations). He cites evidence suggesting that long-term exposure to these stressors has a measurable negative impact on physical and mental well-being.

I am belaboring this point because it will be crucial to everything else I say in this paper. We need to keep in mind that when we ask how a victim ought to respond to a microaggression, we are *not* asking how they ought to respond simply to a single isolated incident. We are asking how they ought to respond to an incident which they know to be just one piece in a much larger pattern. We are now in a position

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to see what is wrong with the first popular view on how to respond to microaggression.

The 'Thicker Skin' Prescription

Recently, many writers have claimed that the appropriate response to microaggression is, in effect, to *grow a thicker skin*. In a September 2015 cover story in *The Atlantic*, campus speech activist Greg Lukianoff and psychologist Jonathan Haidt wrote the following:

> The recent collegiate trend of uncovering allegedly racist, sexist, classist, or otherwise discriminatory microaggressions doesn't *incidentally* teach students to focus on small or accidental slights. Its *purpose* is to get students to focus on them and then relabel the people who have made such remarks as aggressors. . . . What are we doing to our students if we encourage them to develop extra-thin skin in the years just before they leave the cocoon of adult protection and enter the workforce? Would they not be better prepared to flourish if we taught them to question their own emotional reactions, and to give people the benefit of the doubt? (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015)

The thicker skin prescription gets microaggression wrong in at least two ways. First, it ignores the systematicity of microaggression. Lukianoff and Haidt make the tritely correct point that students should learn to shrug off isolated insults. But that is not what microaggressions are. Lukianoff and Haidt focus on the 'small or accidental' aspects of particular microaggressive acts, omitting the role that any particular microaggression plays in a larger pattern. It is a well-established point from the literature on oppression that a consistent pattern of small, accidental insults adds up to much more than the sum of its parts and that we miss the point when we try to see any one manifestation in isolation.

A second problem with the thicker skin prescription is its overemphasis on the motives of microaggression perpetrators. Lukianoff and Haidt stress this when they insist that victims should 'give people the benefit of the doubt'. The thought is that most microaggression perpetrators do not *intend* to cause harm, and therefore it is inappropriate to react with anger or moral censure. I will say much more about this thought later, but for now I want only to stress the misleading oversimplicity of this account of microaggressors' motives.

When Pierce first coined the term, reflecting concerns of psychiatric theory of the late 1960s, it was essential to the definition of microaggression that perpetrators were enacting *unconscious aggression*.[4] But contemporary usage of the term does

[4] Psychologist Scott Lilienfeld objects to 'microaggression' because, in his view, there is insufficient empirical evidence to demonstrate that people who commit such acts have harmful motives (Lilienfeld 2017). He prefers the term 'inadvertent racial slights'. I think Lilienfeld's position is too simple for the phenomenon. It is possible to be aggressive without aiming at harm. For example, as Nic Bommarito points out, you might aggressively shout at a family member to attend to road conditions while driving, meaning to protect rather than harm them (Bommarito 2017: 6).

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not insist upon this psychiatric claim; for social justice theorists and activists, the key focus is on how victims of microaggression are affected, regardless of the motives of perpetrators. This is consistent with a recent trend in social philosophy away from attention on individual motives and responsibility and toward attention to systemic harms and systemic solutions (see, for instance, Saul [2013] on implicit bias or Zheng [2016a]) on racial fetishization).

For example, a publication on microaggression by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign said that 'students of color reported feeling uncomfortable just walking into or sitting in the classroom, especially if they were the only person of color, or one of a few' (Harwood et al. 2015: 7). This is an example of what Sue calls 'environmental' microaggressions: 'demeaning and threatening social, educational, political, or economic cues that are communicated individually, institutionally, or socially to marginalized groups' (Sue 2010: 25). In cases like these, the microaggression does not appear to be caused by *any* determinate individual, so it is implausible to make claims about motives. (Of course, the absence of people of color from university classrooms does have nonrandom systemic causes, ultimately rooted in individual choices that may be motivated by unconscious racial aggression. The point is only that in this case, unlike in the cases of microaggression Pierce discussed, there is no particular microaggressor proximate to the situation.)

All of this shows how Lukianoff and Haidt are confused about the importance of motives. They appear to think that microaggression victims *falsely* believe that perpetrators act from hostile motives. Since there (often) are no such motives, a negative emotional response is inappropriate. But contemporary accounts of microaggression do not assume any such motives. Though microaggressions *can* arise through intentional hostility, they can also happen through the accumulation of unwitting individual contributions to social oppression.

We can now put these two points together to see why the thicker skin prescription is misguided. It claims that victims should treat microaggressions as accidental insults, toughen up, and move on. The implicit argument is something like this:

1. Microaggressions are mere accidental insults.
2. It is not appropriate to react with anger or censure to mere accidental insults.

Therefore, it is not appropriate to react with anger or censure to microaggressions.

The problem with this argument is the first premise. As we have seen, microaggressions are not mere accidental insults; they are situated within systemic oppression in a way that makes them unlike mere accidents. This means that we can *agree* that premise 2 is correct—Lukianoff and Haidt erroneously think we have simply failed to understand it—but set it aside as irrelevant. The question now is whether it is *ever* appropriate to react with anger or moral censure to patterned actions that contribute to systemic oppression. If so, then the thicker skin prescription is wrong.

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Anger and Tactical Quiescence

There is a strong argument to be made that anger is not only an appropriate response to microaggression but is perhaps *the* appropriate response. If microaggression involves a type of disrespectful harm via oppression, then why should victims not respond just as they do to other forms of disrespect? Many philosophers, influenced by Strawson (1962), see angry evaluative reactions to mistreatment as a way of *upholding* moral respect for both the perpetrator (as a responsible agent) and the victim (as deserving of respect.) Jeffrie Murphy, for examples, writes: 'the primary value defended by the passion of resentment is *self-respect* . . . a person who does not resent moral injuries done to him . . . is almost necessarily a person lacking in self-respect' (Murphy and Hampton 1990: 16).[5]

Following this line of thinking, we can frame a second common view about responses to microaggression, which I will call the *righteous anger prescription*. On this view, anger is always an appropriate response to microaggression, perhaps even a positively recommended response. The righteous anger prescription appears less frequently in print than does the thicker skin prescription, but it has many proponents among activist communities. (One nearby scholarly example is Tschaepe [2016], who builds on the work of Audre Lorde to argue for a positive role for anger in response to microaggression.)

Unlike the thicker skin prescription, the righteous anger prescription is not confused about what microaggressions are. However, I think that it moves too quickly from the correct observation that microaggressions involve disrespectful harm to the conclusion that anger is the right response. In some cases, anger may not serve the interests of microaggression victims, even if it is otherwise justified.

To see the point, it will help to distinguish two types of reasons we might give for responding with anger to microaggression (or any act of social oppression). These are *reasons of desert* and *tactical reasons*. As the name suggests, reasons of desert concern whether a perpetrator deserves to be treated angrily. Tactical reasons concern the effects of anger: will anger accomplish something valuable? In the rest of this section I will argue that there *are* compelling reasons against anger as a response to microaggression but these are tactical reasons, rather than reasons of desert.

This may be surprising, since the most commonly expressed objections to anger are reasons of desert. Recall Lukianoff and Haidt's claim that microaggression allegations fail to 'give the benefit of the doubt'. The thought here is that anger is an appropriate response to only *agential* or *blameworthy* wrongdoing, and microaggression might (sometimes) not be either of these. Sometimes microaggression happens through ignorance or through 'slips' of agency (Amaya 2013); it may not be what a person meant to do. In those cases, anger is normatively inappropriate. There is a reason of desert to hold back from anger at being targeted by a microaggression.

[5] But see Nussbaum (2016) and Flanagan (2016) for recent critiques of moral anger. See Bommarito (2017) for a defense of anger as virtuously manifesting concern for moral goods. See also Tessman (2005), Leboeuf (2017), Silvermint (2017), and Srinivasan (2017) for discussion of the role of anger in confronting social injustice.

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There is some plausibility to this point, but I think it oversimplifies. We *do* sometimes react angrily to unintentional mistakes. For example, I might be angry if a very close friend completely forgets my birthday, and I might persist in holding her responsible via this anger *even if* I know she did not intend to forget (Smith 2005: 236). Our practices of holding people responsible are not strictly tied to intention, and therefore the ambiguity of intention in microaggression does not automatically make it an inappropriate target of anger.

Further, even if microaggression perpetrators sometimes do not *deserve* anger, this does not settle the matter of whether anger is morally *justified*. Sometimes anger may be justified for tactical reasons. Cheshire Calhoun has influentially argued that in 'abnormal moral contexts', such as when the harmfulness of a common practice is not widely appreciated, 'it may be reasonable to reproach moral failings even when individuals are not blameworthy' (1989: 405). She points out that when harmful acts are widely practiced, failing to condemn them risks simply allowing them to continue because silence is easily interpreted as acceptance. So, even if people do not quite realize what they are doing when they microaggress and even if this makes them not blameworthy, this lack of awareness may actually be a *positive* reason to express angry reproach in order to draw attention to otherwise unacknowledged harm.[6]

So there may be tactical reasons to express anger even when it is otherwise undeserved. But there are also tactical reasons *against* expressing anger toward microaggression perpetrators. These have to do with the social uptake of anger.

In popular critiques, people who challenge microaggression are often portrayed as 'shrill', or 'bitter', or even 'hysterical'. As Sue Campbell has argued, terms like these are often employed in socially constructing oppressed people as suffering from 'diseases of the affections' (Campbell 1994: 47). Campbell draws a useful distinction between 'anger' and thicker evaluative terms like 'bitter'. Though anger is sometimes a reasonable response to being mistreated, bitterness and similar affective 'diseases' are not reasonable.

Campbell claims that 'the individuation of feeling is collaborative' (55)— whether a person counts as angry or bitter depends not upon intrinsic features of her emotional state, but instead upon how her emotions are construed by her audience. Whether a person ends up 'angry' rather than 'bitter' (or 'shrill' or 'hysterical', I would add) depends on whether her audience extends interpretive uptake to her. Campbell says, 'We may try to be angry through our actions and simply not succeed. The very same actions may succeed as angry actions in a different interpretive context' (54).

[6] Recently Robin Zheng has argued that Calhoun's claim should be reinterpreted by distinguishing between holding people accountable for harm and *attributing* moral wrongdoing to them. Zheng claims that in abnormal moral contexts, 'We can still engage in non-appraising responses that educate and exhort people to behave in ways that would combat structural injustice and implicit bias' (2016b: 76–77). This might be right, though I am unsure. As Calhoun (1989) points out, adults may not be receptive to this sort of patient instruction, hearing it as how one speaks to children. Ordinary angry reproach—the full weight of moral censure among equals—may be more effective. See Holroyd (2012) for similar thoughts. I regard these tactical questions as unresolved and thus as another reason to doubt that there is any one best cover-all response to microaggression.

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Campbell points out that there are often (implicit) political motives behind audience ascriptions of bitterness rather than anger. When a woman or person of color tries to express anger at social oppression, people who benefit from privilege have an (possibly unconscious) incentive to interpret the expression as irrational bitterness rather than as reasonable anger because attributing reasonableness would mean acknowledging the existence of pervasive oppression. If a person attempts anger but is constructed as bitter instead, her complaint can be ignored, and everyone else can go on without the trouble of confronting injustice.

These points are very important for a tactical response to microaggression. Of course, it is terrible that people trying to register oppressive harm end up construed in dismissive ways; as Sylvia Burrow writes, 'oppressed persons should not have to defend their emotions if they fail to express them as a result of another's oppressive political agenda' (Burrow 2005: 30). But to the extent that we are concerned to make response to microaggression socially efficacious, expressing anger may not always be the best practice. If it is a predictable fact that victims of microaggression will often be unfairly construed as bitter, then attempting anger may be a tactical error. It may be best to make an emotionless, patient declaration—or, in some cases, simply to let the offense pass. Sometimes—such as when insulted by a gangster or neglected by a well-lawyered landlord—silence is the only tactically feasible response to mistreatment.

To pull this all together: though sometimes reasons of desert count against directing anger at microaggression perpetrators, in abnormal moral contexts angry reproach may nevertheless be the most effective response to systemic injustice. Hence, the thicker skin prescription cannot be right. Yet, tactical reasons do not univocally pull in favor of anger. This suggests that the righteous anger prescription is misguided, at least if construed as *always* recommending anger. Instead, anger is one possible tactic, but it must be adaptable to particular circumstances.

To be clear: I am not assuming that we always have control over our anger. Nor do I think that it makes sense to fault a microaggression victim who becomes angry when quiescence would be more efficacious tactically. I am only trying to sketch a type of regulative ideal: how should victims react if they *could* calibrate their spontaneous responses to ensure maximal efficacy? Real world practice, of course, cannot reasonably be expected to mirror regulative ideals, but they at least offer us a guide.

What have we accomplished so far? We have examined the thicker skin prescription and the righteous anger prescription. I have argued that neither is a convincing cover-all recommendation for responding to microaggression. What can we say instead? It is tempting to try to construct some third cover-all prescription that gets everything right. But I think we should resist this impulse. Microaggression is such a complex phenomenon that I doubt that *any* generalized prescription is adequate. Appropriate responses will be highly adaptive and situation-specific, more a matter of practical wisdom than of formal imperative.

What I will do instead, in the remainder of this paper, is catalog the factors that go into determining the best response to a particular microaggression. What are the *effects* of responding in such-and-such a way? We can sort these into three types:

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effects on the microaggression victim, effects on the microaggression perpetrator, and effects on third parties.

Effects on the Victim

Some criticism of microaggression discourse assumes that victims gain *benefits* from challenging microaggression; sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning claim that: 'victimhood is a kind of moral status based on suffering and neediness, something that makes one sympathetic and deserving of help and concern' (Campbell and Manning 2016: 155). But this is a facile thought. In fact, some of the strongest reasons *against* challenging microaggression are prudential. The victim takes personal risk in speaking up: risk of not being believed (and so judged thin-skinned or foolish), risk of economic or even physical retaliation. Sue and colleagues detail some of these risks:

> Responding with anger and striking back (perhaps a normal and healthy reaction) is likely to engender negative consequences for persons of color. . . . They are likely to be accused of being racially oversensitive or paranoid or told that their emotional outbursts confirm stereotypes about minorities. . . . In this case, the person of color might feel better after venting, but the outcome results in greater hostility by Whites toward minorities. (Sue et al. 2007: 279)

But there are also risks in *not* challenging microaggression. Sue and colleagues call this the 'Catch-22 of microaggression':

> Deciding to do nothing by sitting on one's anger is one response that occurs frequently in people of color. This response occurs because persons of color may be (a) unable to determine whether a microaggression has occurred, (b) at a loss for how to respond, (c) fearful of the consequences, (d) rationalizing that 'it won't do any good anyway,' or (e) engaging in self-deception through denial ('It didn't happen.'). Although these explanations for nonresponse may hold some validity for the person of color, we submit that not doing anything has the potential to result in psychological harm. It may mean a denial of one's experiential reality, dealing with a loss of integrity, or experiencing pent-up anger and frustration likely to take psychological and physical tolls. (Sue et al. 2007: 279)

I think we should start by accepting this catch-22 as a moral *excusing condition* for victims of microaggression. Even when there are moral reasons to speak up (such as educating the perpetrator, see below), a victim's ambiguous prudential situation is a legitimate excuse for remaining silent.

Importantly, different people will face different risks if they choose to challenge a perpetrator. Some victims occupy a social position that is relatively economically advantaged or powerful. For example, US Senator Tammy Duckworth was the

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target of a racial microaggression during her 2016 electoral campaign. Her opponent, Mark Kirk, made a mocking comment about her East Asian heritage. Duckworth had enough social capital to openly challenge Kirk without serious personal costs—she won the election—and it is good that she did this.

By contrast, a young African American man who is microaggressed by a white police officer has overwhelming prudential reason to allow the harm to go unchallenged, at least in the moment (though, of course, we should not *blame* him if he does react with anger).

This point shows the misguidedness of a certain popular critique of microaggression theory. It is sometimes claimed that the people most likely to employ the language of microaggression are economically privileged college students, rather than the most vulnerable members of marginalized communities (Campbell and Manning 2016: 160). Critics seem to think this is a sign that talk about microaggression is an affectation of the well-to-do. But if I am right, then it is no surprise that open discussion of microaggression is most common in privileged academic environments; it is privileged people who have the safety to draw attention to microaggression, and they do so in solidarity with those who lack that safety.

But there is another reason why even the most privileged victim may choose to stay silent. This is the risk of not being believed. As Sue and colleagues note, victims who report microaggression are frequently told that they have misperceived their situation. In that article Sue himself recounts a personal experience of being subject to a racial microaggression aboard an airplane. But in a professionally published response, another psychologist suggests that Sue's description of the case 'may speak more about Sue's personal need to feel special or privileged than about any prejudice on the part of the flight attendant' (Thomas 2008: 274).

If Sue, a senior faculty member at Columbia University, cannot dispassionately report microaggression without facing colleagues' doubts about his judgment, what hope do less well-positioned victims have of being believed? Victims of microaggression are intimately aware of this risk. Recall the example from Chester Pierce, the originator of the microaggression concept, with which we began. Pierce reported being bossed around by his white undergraduate students. In recounting the example, he wrote:

> One could argue that I am hypersensitive, if not paranoid, about what must not be an unusual kind of student-faculty dialogue. This I concede. What I cannot explain, but what I know every black will understand, is that it is not what the student says in this dialogue, it is how he approaches me, how he talks to me, how he seems to regard me. (Pierce 1970: 277)

Notice two things about what Pierce says: he 'concedes' that he can be seen as paranoid. But also he 'knows' that 'every black' person will recognize what he has seen. There is a revealing tension in these two points; Pierce allows that even he, a Harvard psychiatrist, will not be trusted to perceive correctly a social

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situation; yet, there is an entire community that knows he is right. The message, of course, is that it is white people who will think him paranoid and people of color, those who have greater access to the reality of oppression, who will not. But it is the white people who are mostly in power. (For closely related points, see Miranda Fricker's [2007] concept of 'hermeneutic injustice' and Kristie Dotson's [2011] concept of 'testimonial smothering'. For discussion of the continuing threat racial microaggression poses to self-conception, see Fatima [2017].)

Many microaggression victims have far fewer professional and analytic resources than Pierce or Sue and will understandably avoid putting themselves forward to be regarded as paranoid. What they reasonably fear is that they will be targeted for oppressive *gaslighting*. Gaslighting is 'a form of emotional manipulation in which the gaslighter tries (consciously or not) to induce in someone the sense that her reactions, perceptions, memories and/or beliefs are not just mistaken, but utterly without grounds—paradigmatically, so unfounded as to qualify as crazy' (Abramson 2014: 2). That is what Pierce means when he concedes he will be seen as paranoid. It is also what Kenneth Thomas *does* when he suggests that Sue has confabulated microaggression aboard the airplane.

Gaslighting is bad not only because it leads to others not listening. It can also sap one's own self-trust, leading gradually to a diminished ability to make agential choices and to be treated as doing so by others (Govier 1993; Benson 2000). Ordinary victims of microaggression anticipate this effect and are understandably deterred from challenging or reporting microaggression. (Jordan Peale's recent film *Get Out* is, in part, an examination of the pressure that people of color feel to excuse or explain away microaggression in order to avoid being thought paranoid.)

Again, the risk of gaslighting shows that victims of microaggression have prudential reason to avoid challenging perpetrators, but also that those in the most secure positions ought to do so as an act of solidarity with the most vulnerable. Learning that other people have been through the same experience is one of the strongest defenses against doubting your own perception.

To summarize: there are important prudential reasons to stay quiet in the face of microaggression, especially for the least socially empowered victims. Not surprisingly, since we are talking about systemic oppression, it turns out to be quite difficult to say much about the interests of individual victims of microaggression without also discussing the need for solidarity among members of marginalized groups.

Effects on Third Parties: Educative and Aversive Correction

I turn now to the effects of responding to microaggression on third parties: anyone other than the microaggression perpetrator or victim. Third parties are, among others, witnesses to the particular act of microaggression and other members of oppressed groups who might be the victims of similar future microaggressions. All can be affected by how a victim responds to a particular microaggression, so all have a stake.

The first thing to appreciate about third-party effects is their relation to the distinction between microaggression and mere insult. In ordinary cases of insult,

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third parties do not have much at stake. When the rude professor insulted my alma mater, it did not matter very much to bystanders how I replied. They were uncomfortable, and perhaps it would have been nice of me to make a friendly quip to dispel the awkwardness. Similarly, perhaps other Georgetown alumni might have been offended if the story circulated, so perhaps they had a bit of a stake in wanting the rude professor not simply to get away with it. But these do not seem like very weighty moral interests. Everyone has to deal with a bit of awkwardness or disagreeable opinion at times.

But as I have been stressing, microaggression is not mere insult. Because each particular microaggression is part of a pattern of similar insulting actions that target an entire category of socially marginalized people, third parties have a far greater stake in the response to microaggression than do bystanders to a mere insult. How we respond to microaggression—whether we allow it to pass unchallenged or insist upon marking it as an infraction—makes a difference to whether we continue to tolerate a pattern of oppressive harm.

There are two distinct social benefits to challenging a microaggression. The first benefit is *corrective*. Challenging a microaggression can reduce the chances that it will be committed *again* by the same perpetrator or by a witness. We have already seen this idea in Calhoun's suggestion that abnormal moral contexts can make it reasonable to reproach an unwitting oppressor; the confrontation is what allows for the possibility of change.

Sometimes microaggression perpetrators are simply ignorant; they do not realize that what they have done is offensive or that it is part of a wider pattern of oppression.[7] For example, consider the question 'where are you really from?'. Asian-Americans frequently report receiving this question from non-Asians, apparently as a coded inquiry about ethnicity. Here is a representative dialogue between *A*, a New York City resident of European heritage, and *B*, a New York City resident of East Asian heritage:

A: So, where are you from?
B: Los Angeles.
A: Yeah, but where are you *from*?
B: Um, I was born in Los Angeles. So were my parents.
A: Okay, yeah, but where are you really from?
B: Do you mean where did my great-grandparents come from? Korea. But that was like 100 years ago.

This is a classic instance of microaggression. The question 'where are you from?' is not, *by itself*, harmful or insulting at all. It can be a perfectly reasonable question to ask a new acquaintance, especially if it is meant literally (as an inquiry about where the individual grew up). And sometimes it is even reasonable to ask others about their family background. The problem is that this question, asked in *this* way,

[7] That they are ignorant of their contribution to oppression does not *necessarily* mean they are excused from responsibility for it; see, among others, Mills (1997) and Medina (2012). But the topic of this paper is not whether perpetrators of microaggression are theoretically responsible, but how victims should respond practically.

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tends to attach specifically to members of certain ethnic groups and not to others. Sue and colleagues (2007) call this type of microaggression the 'alien in one's own land' type. They suggest that it sends an implicit message: people of Asian heritage are not *really* Americans in the way that people of European heritage are. If 'Los Angeles' is a sufficient answer when asking a European American about their origin, but not sufficient when asking an Asian American, the insulting implication is that Asian Americans just don't *belong*.

This is a useful example because many people who perpetrate this microaggression are simply ignorant of what they are doing. They may not even be aware that they have a disposition to accept different 'where are you from?' answers from European Americans and Asian Americans. When this is called to their attention and they are given the opportunity to see the question from the other side, they may realize that they are being unintentionally insulting—and that may be enough to keep them from doing it again. In that happy chain of events, challenging microaggression leads to fewer recurrences and diminishes (by a little) the amount of oppressive harm experienced by potential future victims.

Of course, not every microaggressor acts in pure ignorance, and not all those who do will learn from a challenge. For example, people of color who work in professional occupations find that they are sometimes mistaken for waiters or attendants at fancy events. A white person who has made this mistake and been challenged on it might respond in a variety of ways. Here is one: 'Well, look, it's just a fact that most of the people of color working around here are waiters. So my (unconscious, implicit) inference was statistically reasonable. I didn't mean anything by it.'

A microaggressor who reacts in this way probably hasn't learned much, since they seem to regard their behavior as justified or at least mitigated. But they still might become less likely to perpetrate the same microaggression in similar circumstances, simply because of social pressure. Being challenged for engaging in offensive behavior, especially behavior related to social marginalization, is usually an unpleasant experience. This can have an aversive effect on the likelihood of the behavior being repeated, whether or not the perpetrator comes to understand better why it is a bad thing to do.

Ideally, microaggression perpetrators would become educated about the harm of their actions and would voluntarily aim to stop. We can call this ideal type *educative correction*. But there is also *aversive correction*, as we have just seen, where microaggressors stop simply because being challenged is unpleasant. There are important reasons to prefer educative correction over aversive correction, but education is not always possible—and aversion is sometimes enough to secure the third-party benefit of reducing the occurrence of harmful microaggression.

Effects on the Perpetrator: Deserved and Undeserved Costs

But what about the people who commit—and get called out for—microaggressions? What about effects on the perpetrator? On a cartoon picture of microaggression, perpetrators are people who merely behave with less than perfect political correctness. It is unfair to get angry and 'jump all over' them for an innocent mistake. After all, it hurts to be accused of participating in a pattern of systemic social oppression.

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There is something right about this view, but a lot is wrong. The part that is right is this: it *is* costly to be called to account for perpetrating a microaggression. There is psychological pain, in some cases damage to reputation. We should not simply ignore these costs—and they should have a moderating effect on appropriate responses to microaggression. We should not impose exorbitant personal costs on individual microaggression perpetrators. We should not 'make an example' of a microaggression perpetrator through public humiliation.

We can find examples of this in journalist Jon Ronson's recent book *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* (2015). A woman named Justine Sacco was briefly infamous in 2013 after posting an ill-advised joke to Twitter. Moments before boarding an overnight flight, Sacco wrote: 'Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just Kidding. I'm white!' She later claimed that the tweet was meant to be an ironic parody of white ignorance. Whatever her intent, the alleged joke was not well-executed and certainly in poor taste. But the Internet reaction was out of proportion. Thousands of people around the world began tweeting abuse at her. Internet denizens delighted at the thought of Sacco, incommunicado on a long flight with no idea of the retribution that faced her; the hashtag #hasjustinelandedyet exploded (and is used to this day as a marker of virally ill-advised social media humor). Sacco was soon fired from her job and found her professional and personal reputation ruined. Any Internet search on her name returned thousands of results about her villainy.

I hope we can all agree that Sacco did not deserve *this* response to her poorly considered tweet. Perhaps she did deserve to be called out for it—for someone to explain to her, perhaps even angrily, the harm of making light of racial disparities in health. But she did not deserve to have her life ruined.

Yet, it would be a mistake to generalize far from cases like this one. It is very rare that challenging a microaggressor will have effects anything like what happened to Sacco. Typically, the costs are short-lived and no worse than a heated misunderstanding with a stranger. These *are* costs, but we need to be realistic about their extent.

Some theorists will insist that many microaggression perpetrators do not deserve to pay *any* costs because (sometimes) microaggressions are committed unintentionally. The thought is that we can only deserve to pay costs for harms that we have inflicted knowingly and voluntarily. I take this to be a big part of the motive for urging a quiescent response to microaggression. Recall Lukianoff and Haidt's question about student microaggression victims: 'Would they not be better prepared to flourish if we taught them to question their own emotional reactions, and to give people the benefit of the doubt?' (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015).

But this is a mistake. We *do* sometimes think people deserve to pay costs for harms they inflict unintentionally (for discussion, see Scanlon 1998, Young 2013, and Zheng 2016b). For example, I once parked at a highway rest area in the mountains. When I opened the car door, a strong wind ripped it from my hand and slammed it into the mirror of the car next to me. The mirror shattered. I left a note and eventually paid to have the mirror replaced. I deserved to pay this cost even though I did not intentionally break the mirror. That is simply a feature of social life; we can reasonably be expected to bear costs our accidents inflict upon others.

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The same is true, I think, about social oppression. Even if some microaggression perpetrators do not act intentionally, they can still be reasonably expected to bear some costs for the harms they impose. It is important to realize that *someone* will have to bear the costs of microaggression. If we insist that victims must always be quiescent so as to spare the feelings of perpetrators, then we pool *all* of the costs onto victims. Microaggressions remain unaddressed, and harmful patterns continue. That this is the status quo does not mean it is the right answer; if we claim that quiescence is the correct response to microaggression, we must provide a justification for assigning all the costs to victims and none to perpetrators.

Pierce referred to racism as a 'lethal disease', a kind of epidemic mental illness whose primary victims are not the carriers themselves (1970: 266–67). Through microaggression, those infected with the disease of racism do not usually mean to harm others, but their illness nevertheless does. The cure is slow and costly. In microaggression, perhaps no one *deserves* to pay costs—neither the carriers nor those harmed by their illness. But someone must pay them. When the disease is social oppression, it seems reasonable to try to distribute costs away from those already disadvantaged.

Benefits to the Perpetrator

Perhaps surprisingly, challenging microaggression also provides *benefits* to perpetrators, not only costs.

One of these benefits is epistemic. As I noted earlier, regarding educative correction, sometimes microaggression perpetrators simply do not *know* that what they have done is part of a pattern of oppression. Being challenged on a particular microaggression provides them with an opportunity to learn about social reality, especially about their own role in its perpetuation.

Laurence Thomas (1998) has written about the phenomenon of 'moral deference', which occurs when a person accepts the testimony of a member of a marginalized group regarding the moral significance of their oppression. Thomas says, 'Moral deference is owed to persons of good will when they speak in an informed way regarding experiences specific to their diminished social category' (373). He argues that some forms of oppression lead to experiences that are simply *inaccessible* to people who are not oppressed. Following Nagel's (1974) famous point about the ineffability of unfamiliar sensory forms, Thomas claims that some effects of oppression simply cannot be fully explained in public language. Those who are not targets of oppression simply need to take victims' word for it.

If Thomas is right, then challenges to microaggression can be opportunities for epistemic growth. We do not always have the chance to receive testimony from victims of specific oppressions. If a moment of offense can be turned into an occasion for testimony, deference, and reflection, then perpetrators achieve an epistemic gain.[8]

[8] This is not to say that victims of oppression should be *expected* to constantly educate perpetrators. As Nora Berenstain (2016) has recently argued, such an expectation would risk 'epistemic exploitation'. Notice, though, that there is some tension between Berenstain's point and Thomas's. If Thomas (1998) is right that some effects

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Relatedly, microaggression perpetrators might achieve a *moral* gain after being challenged. If they learn to avoid causing certain forms of oppressive harm, then they improve the quality of their own moral behavior. There is some dispute over whether being morally good is a part of an individual's own well-being (see Bloomfield 2014 for an argument that it is). At minimum, we can say this: many of us do not *want* to contribute to oppression, but we unwittingly do so anyway. Being forced to confront this lack of unity between our intentions and our behavior is troubling (Rini 2017)—but becoming aware of it is the first step toward moral self-improvement.

Finally, challenging microaggression provides an opportunity for *interpersonal* gain between perpetrator and victim. Calling a person out for causing harm, perhaps angrily, draws attention to the rupture in social relations caused by the harm itself. But so long as the victim keeps open the possibility of forgiveness, there can be a process of 'moral repair' leaving the relationship stronger than it was before (Walker 2006).

Social justice activism has begun to focus on reactions to microaggression that avoid unnecessary antagonism and seek to restore relationships of equality and trust. In an influential essay, Asam Ahmad (2015) builds on a distinction between 'call out' culture and 'call in' culture (see also Trân 2013). Calling out involves the righteous denunciation of a microaggressor. Though this can sometimes have its uses, Ahmad points out that it often devolves into the destructive spectacle of 'a public performance where people can demonstrate their wit or how pure their politics are' (Ahmad 2015). This has the harmful effect of severing relationships that might have recovered from microaggressive breach; Ahmad says 'most call-outs I have witnessed immediately render anyone who has committed a perceived wrong as an outsider to the community'. Instead, Ahmad argues, activists should learn to 'call in' offenders by taking them aside privately and explaining the harm without performative condemnation. The goal is effective anti-oppression education that allows the person who caused harm to restore relations with other people of good will.

In summary: we should not ignore the fact that challenging microaggression imposes costs on perpetrators, and sometimes these costs are undeserved. But assigning undeserved costs is an inevitable part of nonideal theory, and it is better to relocate these costs away from victims of ongoing oppression. Further, challenging microaggression can provide perpetrators with epistemic and moral benefits, and it can be done in ways that aim to preserve community and mutual respect. The effects of a challenge upon the perpetrator give us reason to be careful in *how* we challenge microaggression, but they do not overwhelmingly count against doing so.

Conclusions

I have looked at the effects of responses to microaggression on victims, perpetrators, and third parties. I have argued that there is no one answer to all cases. The thicker

of oppression are transmissible *only* through deference to testimony, then we cannot say that the burden is entirely on perpetrators to educate themselves; some lessons are simply not of the teach-yourself variety.

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skin prescription is confused about the nature of microaggression. The righteous anger prescription risks making tactical errors.

Instead of offering another monolithic prescription, this paper has mapped the effects of confronting microaggression. There are many morally relevant factors, which sometimes pull in opposing directions and which cannot be easily weighed against one another. Responding to any particular case is more a matter of practical wisdom than of general principle.

I conclude with remarks about our *response to the response* to microaggression. How should the rest of us react when victims respond to microaggression? Is there anything we can reasonably expect or even demand from microaggression victims? Can we demand that (when able) victims challenge their perpetrators in order to secure the benefits discussed above?

It might seem perverse to make demands of victims of systemic oppression. But we cannot treat victims of oppression as *mere* victims; they remain full moral agents with responsibilities to themselves and others (see Tessman 2005; Hay 2011; Silvermint 2013). So we should not dismiss the possibility of moral demands on microaggression victims.

That said, we have now seen how incredibly complex any response decision must be. Victims need to weigh effects on themselves, on perpetrators, and on third parties. Further, many microaggression victims are forced to respond quickly, in emotionally demanding interpersonal circumstances. There simply is not time to parse and weigh all morally relevant factors when someone has just insulted you and will turn away in a few seconds. The difficulty of this choice suggests that we should apply a heavy dose of deference, or the benefit of the doubt, to anyone confronting it.

This point shows that the outline I have given here can at most be a framework for normative ideals. It cannot always serve as a practical decision procedure. Above all, it should not be used to hold responsible microaggression victims who act differently than we would.

Microaggression is a harmful, complex social phenomenon, and there are better and worse ways to respond to particular instances, but getting it right is extremely demanding. Keep this in mind the next time you think someone has 'overreacted' to a microaggressive slight—or, for that matter, the next time you think someone has 'underreacted'. If we are going to eliminate the underlying oppression reflected in microaggression, we have to work together. That means patience and leeway for everyone—most of all for victims.

REGINA RINI
YORK UNIVERSITY (TORONTO)
rarini@yorku.ca

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