

Microaggressions and the Problem of Invisible Wrongdoers

Minji Jang

A thesis submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Philosophy.

Chapel Hill  
2018

Approved by:

Susan Wolf

Luc Bovens

Thomas E. Hill, Jr.

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## ABSTRACT

Minji Jang: Microaggressions and the Problem of Invisible Wrongdoers  
(Under the direction of Susan Wolf)

I argue that victims of microaggressions suffer from *the problem of invisible wrongdoers*, where they cannot properly respond to everyday injustice of which they become the targets, because they cannot identify these events as wrongdoings and perpetrators as culpable wrongdoers. I identify the causes of this problem as: (1) the recent transformation of explicit, ‘old-fashioned’ discriminations into implicit, ‘modern’ forms, and (2) our focus on the macroscopic perspective to examine the moral significance of oppressive practices. I propose that we tackle this problem by extending our discussion to the microscopic level. In this paper, I offer a positive account of why microaggressions are moral offenses that merit *blaming and critical responses* from victims, and respond to three excuses given by perpetrators of microaggressions, namely, (1) that the act itself was trivial, (2) that the agents were well-intentioned, and (3) that they were non-culpably ignorant at the time of offense.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my wonderful advisor Susan Wolf for her valuable guidance and inspiration throughout the year, and my readers Luc Bovens and Thomas E. Hill, Jr. for their insightful comments and helpful discussions. I also thank my friends and family for their love and support.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. The Problem of Invisible Wrongdoers .....	1
II. The Limits of Macroscopic Analysis .....	5
III. Microaggressions as Moral Offenses .....	10
IV. Three Excusing Conditions .....	20
i. Wrong but trivial .....	20
ii. Wrong but well-intentioned .....	24
iii. Wrong but done from non-culpable ignorance .....	29
V. Objections and Replies .....	41
i. The coddling objection .....	41
ii. The silencing objection .....	44
VI. Conclusion .....	48
REFERENCES .....	49

## I. The Problem of Invisible Wrongdoers

Despite the progress in the rights of marginalized groups since the civil rights movement, discrimination against the members of these groups is still persistent in society. A difference is that there are now legal sanctions, and widely accepted social norms against more explicit forms of discrimination, such as committing hate crimes, refusing service at stores, or paying lower wages for equal work to people based on their gender, race, ethnicity, and cultural backgrounds, which were both acceptable and commonplace in the past. At least in most regions of North America, our community has now entered a phase where being labeled as a ‘racist’ or ‘sexist’ has certain costs.<sup>1</sup> Such a label carries the implication that one is still living in the past, and against the democratic ideals valued in the community, and these costs range from judging glares to condemnation and ostracization from other ‘fair-minded’ citizens.

These sanctions in social life, as well as the raised awareness about ‘political correctness’ in society at large, have not eradicated injustice faced by oppressed groups in their everyday lives, based on the deeply rooted stereotypes against and inferiorization of the groups. Recent studies observed that many explicit, now-called ‘old-fashioned’ or overt forms of sexism and racism have been replaced by, or transformed into<sup>2</sup> more “disguised, subtle, and less conscious forms,” now-called

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<sup>1</sup> This is not the case with *all* marginalized groups. For instance, there are still fewer legal and social sanctions against overt discriminations based on someone’s sexual orientation than the ones based on their gender and race. In this paper, I will often use “sexism” and “racism” to stand for the oppression faced by these groups in general, but I acknowledge that different groups have different experiences of oppression, and are in different stages of progress in the recognition and protection of their rights.

<sup>2</sup> This does not mean that these explicit forms of discrimination have disappeared. Explicit assaults against oppressed groups still *coexist* with subtler offenses, as indicated by the series of testimonies from the current “me too” movement of female victims.

‘modern’ or ‘aversive’ discrimination.<sup>3</sup> They also find that many of the perpetrators of ‘modern’ discrimination consciously endorse egalitarian values, publicly condemn overtly expressed sexism and racism, and strongly identify themselves as non-prejudiced.<sup>4</sup> Unlike perpetrators of ‘old-fashioned’ racism and sexism, who consciously, and often proudly, admit their discriminatory beliefs and behaviors, perpetrators of ‘modern’ discrimination tend to actively deny that they are engaging in discrimination, even to themselves, partly due to the now apparent costs of being labeled as sexists or racists, and partly due to the subtlety and ambiguity of their acts.<sup>5</sup>

These modern discriminations are typically represented by practices commonly referred to as *microaggressions*, defined as follows:<sup>6</sup>

Microaggressions are<sub>df</sub> *subtle* forms of verbal, nonverbal and environmental behaviors and remarks that, whether intentional or not, *communicate* denigrating messages to persons *based on* their marginalized social group membership.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sue 2010, p.26. Also see McConahay et al. 1987: “These [overtly discriminatory] beliefs were called ‘old-fashioned’ because they are no longer fashionable in the elite, trendsetting circles of our society” (p.564).

<sup>4</sup> Cortina et al. 2013, p.1582. The same study also reveals that ‘modern’ sexists or racists have a shared set of beliefs, namely, that “sexism (or racism) is no longer a problem in this country, women or minorities are making unfair demands and using unfair strategies to advance their privilege and power, and ‘preferential treatment’ or ‘special favors’ granted to these groups are undeserved” (*Ibid.*, p.1581-82).

<sup>5</sup> What seems to add strength to their denial, and unwillingness to accept their acts being labeled as discriminatory, is that the rather explicit forms of discriminations still coexist in society with these subtler acts, and perpetrators of these subtler acts refuse to identify themselves as belonging to the *same* perpetrator group as blatantly racist and sexist individuals.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Modern’ discriminations and microaggressions are not always considered as the same category. This is because some scholars view ‘modern’ discriminations as acts done by ‘modern’ racists or sexists, who have private or subconscious beliefs that are deeply discriminatory, despite their public or conscious endorsement of non-discriminatory beliefs (See McConahay et al. 1987). However, microaggressions defined in this paper need not be rooted in beliefs against egalitarian values, private or otherwise, for they can be cases of genuine mistakes. In other words, that it was a mistake does not make it *not* a case of microaggression, for your *act* can be covertly sexist or racist without *you* being a covert sexist or racist. We will return to this thought later.

<sup>7</sup> This is based on the definition of microaggression given by Sue et al. 2007. To give quick examples, *verbal* aggression would be calling a female customer “honey” and a male customer “sir,” a *non-verbal* one would be giving disproportionately low attention to a student of color in class, and an *environmental* one would be hanging a showgirl poster that sexually objectifies women in an office shared with female employees.

These behaviors communicate denigrating messages to victims about their identity, whether or not these messages are consciously intended by the perpetrators. The contents of these messages are based on the marginalized group identity of a person, not individual qualities.<sup>8</sup> Since these behaviors are subtle, unlike overt forms of discrimination, it is often unclear whether they *are* conveying these messages, or whether it is fair to conceive of these acts as communicating these messages.

I begin with an observation that there is a problem uniquely yet commonly faced by victims of microaggression. As part of ‘modern’ discriminations, these microaggressions are *subtler*, so they are harder to identify as discriminatory, and *newer*, so there aren’t legal sanctions or widely acknowledged social norms against these particular kinds of practice. In today’s society, we all seem to know what the right response to a blatantly racist or sexist act is – there are publicly accepted norms that indicate that it is a serious moral offense, and that whoever becomes the victim of such an offense is entitled to react with a certain kind of response, whether it be an uproar of anger, or public condemnation of the offender. Not only is such a response acknowledged as justified, it is often praised as being courageous and virtuous, for it fights against the injustice that plagues our community.<sup>9</sup>

The situation is different with these newer, subtler forms of discriminations. Not only is it harder to identify them as wrongdoings (harder to the perpetrators than to the victims), but with the absence of such action-guiding norms, it is not clear (this time, both to the victims and the perpetrators), what the right way of responding to these types of aggression would be. Unlike the individuals who fight against blatantly racist and sexist acts, those who respond to microaggressions

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<sup>8</sup> See Young 1990 for the definition of a social group, especially: “Though sometimes objective attributes are a necessary condition for classifying oneself or others as belonging to a certain social group, it is identification with a certain social status, the common history that social status produces, and self-identification that define the group as a group” (p.8), and “[These] groups ... exist only in relation to other groups” (p.11).

<sup>9</sup> I thank Samantha Wakil for making this point clearer.



with a protest frequently face confusion, distrust, defensiveness, and an accusation of being hypersensitive and paranoid.<sup>10</sup> Victims face the situation where they have been wronged, but cannot properly respond to what has been done to them, because they cannot identify the event as a wrongdoing, and the perpetrator as a culpable wrongdoer. As a society, we face the situation of there being sexism without identifiable sexists, racism without identifiable racists.

I wish to name this *the problem of invisible wrongdoers*. As Kimberlé Crenshaw says, “where there's no name for a problem you can't see a problem, and when you can't see a problem you pretty much can't solve it.”<sup>11</sup> I want to call attention to the problem routinely and persistently faced by victims of microaggressions, where they could not properly respond to the wrongdoings of which they become the targets, where they had to suppress their pain and silence their voice. The goal of this paper, therefore, is to identify and name this problem, and to discuss the ways in which we can alleviate it. It would be to make the wrongdoers behind microaggressions *visible* again, and the voice of the victims heard.

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<sup>10</sup> I share another study, which observed that while the students of color could easily identify and define the racial microaggressions in classroom, white students in the same classroom had difficulties understanding and accepting that their language and behavior were racially offensive; instead, they often became defensive and labeled students of color as ‘oversensitive’ and ‘paranoid’ (Sue 2010, p.32). Because of these reactions frequently exhibited by perpetrators and unsympathetic third-party listeners (who are, unsurprisingly, often members of the dominant social groups), victims of microaggressions report that they render *reacting* to these incidents as ineffective or stressful (*Ibid.*, p.81).

<sup>11</sup> Crenshaw 2016, *Ted talk*.

## II. The Limits of Macroscopic Analysis

In the previous section, I identified one main cause of *the problem of invisible wrongdoers* as the transformation of ‘old-fashioned’ discriminations to newer, subtler forms of discriminatory practices. Now I invite you to consider another factor that has been contributing to our failure to see, and solve this problem: our focus on the *macroscopic* perspective, and neglect of the *microscopic* one, to analyze the moral significance of oppression.

Microaggressions are not random misdemeanors or mistaken beliefs of some individuals. They are part of structural and systematic oppression faced by marginalized groups, which is, as Marilyn Frye puts it, “an enclosing structure of forces and barriers which tends to the immobilization and reduction of a group or category of people.”<sup>12</sup> Victims of oppression are treated not as individuals, but as members of groups that are marginalized in multiple dimensions – social, political, legal and cultural, and it is in virtue of being members of those groups that they are oppressed.<sup>13</sup> Oppression is structural. As Iris Young emphasizes, the causes of oppression are so deeply embedded in social, political and cultural norms, customs and the rules of our institutions, that it immobilizes and causes harm to the victims in the normal processes of their lives; now with the emergence of ‘modern’ discrimination, oppression faced by the victims is carried out through “the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Frye 1983, p.11.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

<sup>14</sup> Young 1990, p.41.

Because of this structural nature of oppression, we have been advised *against* taking the microscopic view in analyzing the significance of oppressive practices. Instead of looking at individual acts, events, or even practices in isolation, we are told to look at the whole system, in order to understand and analyze the collective wrongness involved in the overall pattern. For instance, Frye famously describes the oppressed victims as being trapped in a birdcage with numerous wires systematically related to each other and blocking every movement of a bird inside. She says:

There is no physical property of any *one* wire, nothing that the closest scrutiny could discover, that will reveal how a bird could be inhibited or harmed by it ... It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, *microscopically*, and take a *macroscopic* view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere.<sup>15</sup>

I cannot agree more with the claim that we cannot fully understand the significance of each practice outside the context of structural oppression, or that taking a macroscopic perspective is essential to seeing how the wires function together to oppress the victims in their everyday lives. Recognizing and keeping the whole structure in mind is crucial to fighting oppression, for, as Frye emphasizes, this bigger picture is what makes individual practices *visible* as contributors to oppression.<sup>16</sup> For instance, without understanding the overall pattern, we cannot be brought to see why the practice of the male door opening ritual is oppressive to women. It is only when we “see the various elements of the situation as systematically related in larger schemes” that we get to see this practice as part of the system that reduces and molds women into their marginalized status.<sup>17</sup> Again, without seeing the problem, we cannot fight against the injustice behind it.

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<sup>15</sup> Frye 1983, p.4-5, *my italics*.

<sup>16</sup> I thank Philip Bold for helping me clarify this point.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7.

While the macroscopic picture is crucial to making individual practices visible as part of oppression, it *alone* cannot provide the story of why *each* instance of someone's participating in such practices is wrong, and what the proper responses are for those who are harmed by such incidents. In other words, while it has been acknowledged that the overall pattern of microaggressions collectively contributes to the suffering of oppressed groups, far less attention has been paid to individual incidents of these aggressions as moral offenses that have *direct* victims. I argue that the first step of tackling *the problem of invisible wrongdoers* is to extend our discussion to what is going on at the microscopic level, namely, in interpersonal interactions between individual victims and perpetrators. In order to make individual wrongdoers and their wrongdoings *visible* for victims, it is not enough to acknowledge that the pattern of microaggressions as a whole is collectively harmful; we need to pay attention to the wrongness involved in *each* incident of aggression, which victims have to face and deal with in their everyday lives.

There are three reasons that identifying individual microaggressions as moral wrongdoings would help us solve *the problem of invisible wrongdoers*. First, limiting our discussion to a macroscopic analysis of oppression, and to the collective harms produced by the overall pattern may encourage the thought that *each* incident in the pattern is itself only trivially wrong, if wrong at all. When victims of oppression vocally respond to these incidents of aggression, they are often told that they should be fighting a 'real' enemy, i.e. the society or the whole structure of oppression, instead of unfairly or unreasonably channeling their frustration and anger toward individuals. Secondly, these 'invisible' wrongdoers wish to deny that they belong to the same group as those who engage in overt discrimination. This denial then adds strength to the claim that *they* have done nothing wrong, compared to these openly or blatantly racist and sexist individuals. In order to make their behaviors visible as wrongdoings, and themselves visible as wrongdoers, we should identify what is wrong with this *particular* set of acts that we call microaggressions.

Lastly, I believe that knowing that some piece of behavior is wrong, yet not knowing why it is wrong, and therefore, not knowing how and whether to respond to this wrongdoing, exacerbates the *double-bind* faced by the victims. Double-binds are not situations uniquely faced by victims of microaggressions. Members of oppressed groups frequently face such situations, where they cannot win whichever option they take. If they vocally respond to an offense, then they seem to confirm and foster the stereotypes against their groups (e.g. women are emotional, Blacks are aggressive, gays are sensitive). If they remain silent, then they seem to validate the act, as well as the offensive claim implied by the act, and contribute to the persistence of the aggressions toward them. This particular situation of a double-bind in the face of an offense is made *worse* for victims of microaggressions, where due to the subtlety and ambiguous motives behind the acts, they either don't know, or don't know how to explain why the acts being done to them are offensive. Without knowing why these acts are wrong, responding to these events with apparently fitting and justified responses to wrongdoings, would again seem to ensure the stereotypes that oppressed people are hypersensitive and paranoid, and that they are making up the problems to complain about their situation.

This claim is supported by the research reporting that members of the marginalized groups “find it easier to deal with old-fashioned forms of bigotry, because no guesswork is involved in discerning the motives of the perpetrator,” whereas these subtle practices are less obviously wrong, and therefore, “create psychological dilemmas” for them.<sup>18</sup> Consider the testimony of a black undergraduate, after seeing a fellow student wearing a Ku Klux Klan costume at a Halloween social:

“I felt very unprepared . . . to explain my emotions; like, all I knew was, it's wrong. Like, that's just wrong, and I don't understand why it's wrong, but that's upsetting me. And I remember I just started crying, and I was so embarrassed because I . . . just didn't know how to react.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Sue 2010, p.26.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.65.

A woman philosopher of color Saba Fatima shares a similar experience. When she was a graduate teaching assistant, she was having a conversation with her student about the upcoming exam. When the student's friend saw them talking, her eyes lit up, and she instantly called over her friend, "Hey! ...Come here." Fatima recalls that she felt humiliated by the incident, but she could not explain why.

"... I am reminded of the sense of inarticulation I felt then, of being unable to explain to others (again, mostly Whites) why I felt insulted – all the while, thinking that perhaps I had no reason to feel that way, that perhaps I was being paranoid."<sup>20</sup>

These testimonies tell us that one of the reasons that the victims find it challenging to properly respond to these subtle incidents of wrongdoings is that they themselves cannot easily identify and articulate why these acts are wrong, why they feel insulted and offended, and whether their feeling this way is justified. As Fatima says, they end up doubting their own sanity, and smothering their own concerns about being mistreated. Understanding the wrongness involved in individual incidents of microaggression, in the context of structural oppression, therefore, will help victims deal with these newer, subtler forms of wrongdoings.

The rest of this paper will lay out my attempt to tackle *the problem of invisible wrongdoers*. I wish to do this by first, establishing that each microaggression is a moral offense taking place in an interpersonal interaction between a victim and a perpetrator, and claiming that the victims can have appropriate responses of blame or criticism to moral offenses done to them. Then, I will consider three *excusing conditions* that might be thought to excuse the wrongdoers and render these blaming and critical responses from victims inappropriate. I will close by considering two objections to my account, concerning the repercussions of treating individual incidents of microaggression as moral offenses.

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<sup>20</sup> Fatima 2017, p.147.

### III. Microaggressions as Moral Offenses

I hope to address two distinct yet related questions in this section and throughout this paper. First, what is wrong about individual incidents of microaggression? Second, what are the appropriate responses to these incidents, and how are those responses justified? Let's start with the first. The answers might vary, depending on the particular moral view one takes. Instead of committing to a specific moral theory, let me first start with a common-sense claim.

*Claim 1.* As members of the moral community, I can legitimately expect and demand that in my interactions with you, you act in a way that *expresses* respect toward me. Your failure to meet such a demand is an offense deserving moral attention, and it is reasonable for me to respond to such an offense with *blaming and critical responses*.<sup>21</sup>

In his influential piece "Freedom and Resentment," Strawson distinguishes two kinds of attitudes we might have toward other human beings. I would have *objective attitudes* toward someone whom I regard as "excluded from ordinary adult human relationships" due to psychological abnormality or to being a child.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, I would have *reactive attitudes* toward someone whom I regard as a responsible moral agent, and capable of standing in an interpersonal relationship to me. This involves an expectation of, and demand for the expression of goodwill or regard, or of an absence of ill will, disregard or lack of concern toward me, which are manifested by one's behaviors.

Strawson notes that these expectations of, and demands for goodwill and regard would *vary* depending on the context and content of particular interpersonal relationships, and the kinds and intensity of my reactive attitudes would vary accordingly. Yet, there are also generalized forms of

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<sup>21</sup> I thank Susan Wolf for suggesting this term.

<sup>22</sup> Strawson 1962, p.345.

demands toward *all* men who can be considered as responsible moral peers, and are capable of participating in ordinary interpersonal relationships. I believe that the demands entailed by one's membership in the moral community includes expressing respect toward another member through one's behaviors.

By respect, I have in mind what Stephen Darwall calls *recognition respect*, which is to give appropriate consideration or recognition to each person in one's deliberation about what to do, by virtue of them being a person.<sup>23</sup> Instead of getting into a debate about whether all persons *qua* person deserves respect, I will claim here that all responsible members of the moral community, who are subject to a moral demand for respect, are simultaneously entitled to be objects of respect from other members. By virtue of recognizing me as a legitimate member of the moral community, or your moral peer, who has equal worth and status, you are demanded to express respect toward me in your behavior. Your failing to express respect, or expressing disrespect toward me, then, would count as a violation of this demand, and I can reasonably have responses that are appropriate for moral offenses done to me.

The next question is, what are the appropriate responses to moral offenses done to us? A popular view in the literature on forgiveness is that the most, if not the only, appropriate response is *resentment*. Jeffrie Murphy claims that not having the attitude of resentment to moral injuries done to us reveals a lack of respect for ourselves, for those who wronged us, and for the rules of morality.<sup>24</sup> If we fail to have resentment, because we care less about our worth and rights, we would have displayed our lack of self-respect. If we refuse to feel resentment, because we find that other people simply don't matter enough to us, then we would have shown lack of respect for others, who are

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<sup>23</sup> Darwall 1977.

<sup>24</sup> Murphy 1982, p.505.



entitled objects of our respect, by virtue of being our moral peers.<sup>25</sup> It would simultaneously show that we do not take the violation of moral demands resting on the rules and norms in our moral community seriously. Similarly, Pamela Hieronymi argues that a moral offense done by a legitimate member of the moral community subject to demands and expectations entailed by one's membership *ought* to be met with resentment from the one who is wronged.<sup>26</sup>

How is resentment as a response to moral injuries justified? On Hieronymi's view, the victim's resentment, as a response to a moral offense, should be understood as a *protest*, "affirming both [the event's] wrongfulness and the moral significance of both herself and the offender."<sup>27</sup> Like Murphy, Hieronymi also points out that not having resentment or easily abandoning it would reflect one's *ceasing to care* about oneself, about the wrongdoer, and about what is right and wrong. It is by virtue of rightfully resisting this claim that the victim's resentment is justified.

I agree with the following claims. First, there are the kinds of responses that are appropriate or fitting to moral injuries done to us. Second, these responses should be understood as a *protest* to injuries done to us, affirming both their wrongness, and the moral significance of both ourselves and the wrongdoers as responsible members of the moral community. I depart from the view, however, that resentment is the *only* fitting response, and propose a range of blaming and critical responses as appropriate responses to moral injuries. By *blaming and critical responses*, I mean a range of emotional and non-emotional responses, which includes both blaming responses toward the wrongdoers, and

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<sup>25</sup> This is unless the content or context of their offense, perhaps its repetitiveness or outlandish gravity, gives me good reason to believe that they are not my moral peers. For instance, if I were to find that there is no way I can bring someone to see the world as it is, perhaps due to his obsessive prejudices that plague his world view, then I might consider him as lacking a *Sanity* condition (See Wolf 1987), and not capable of standing in a relationship of shared respect. In that case, following Strawson, I would not regard him as a proper object of responses such as blame.

<sup>26</sup> Hieronymi 2001.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.530.

critical responses toward their failure to meet the moral demand entailed by their moral agency, which may or may not be accompanied by blaming responses. For instance, blaming responses might include having resentment toward the wrongdoer, or revising my judgment of their character and values with a potential impact on my future relationship with them, whereas critical responses might include pointing to the wrongness in the other's behavior and demanding that they do not repeat it, or demanding a sincere apology from them. I argue that depending on the context and content of a relationship between the victim and the wrongdoer, and that of an offense taking place, these responses can be reasonably construed as *protesting* responses to moral offenses, and thus, as appropriate reactions to such events.<sup>28</sup> For the rest of my paper, I will refer to this range of responses as blaming and critical responses.

I acknowledge that one might reject a particular response listed above as a fitting response to a moral offense. For instance, one might find that depending on the context, demanding the correction of a wrongdoer's behavior is too weak, or that demanding a sincere apology is too strong. Or one might think that there should be a detailed and careful defense of each kind of response that might be considered as a blaming and critical response, which on my view would be appropriate as a response to moral offenses. For the present purpose of this paper, I believe that this is not a problem. All I wish to establish here is that moral offenses call for appropriate responses from the victims that should be fighting the claim that they can be wronged in such a way, that these responses are justified as ways of resisting this claim, and that these fighting responses are not limited to the attitude of resentment.

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<sup>28</sup> The fittingness of these responses will depend not only on the *types* of responses, but also how these responses are *expressed*. For instance, critical responses demanding a change in one's behaviors might carry different normative judgments based on how they are verbally expressed (e.g. "your act is reprehensible" and "your act needs be revised" will carry different judgments), and will be fitting in different contexts of offenses. I thank Thomas E. Hill, Jr. for bringing up this point.

There are two reasons that I find it important to allow for a range of protesting responses as fitting responses for moral offenses, instead of confining them to the attitude of resentment. First, as Strawson claims, different human relationships entail different expectations and demands, and call for different reactions, depending on the context and content of relationships, and the gravity of offenses. Given this, not having resentment toward the wrongdoer should not indicate my tolerance of an offense, or acceptance of my diminished moral status, so long as my reactions to the event, by blaming the wrongdoer or responding critically to their wrongful behavior, are still actively protesting the claim that I can be treated with disrespect.

Secondly, and more importantly, I believe that conceiving resentment as the only fitting response to moral injuries may lead to a narrower conception of what would *count* as moral injuries, for it might imply that only acts or events that call for resentment are properly understood as moral offenses. For instance, one might be hesitant to respond to what could have been a genuine mistake on the perpetrator's behalf with the attitude of resentment, yet this should not mean that such a mistake cannot be a serious moral offense, the wrongness of which should be recognized and protested against. By allowing a range of responses as fitting responses to moral offenses, victims can perceive microaggressions as wrongdoings and as injuries done to them. Victims can fight the implicit claim that they are not worthy of respect, even in a situation where they find the attitude of resentment uncalled for.<sup>29</sup>

Again, the goal of this paper is to identify appropriate responses to a particular kind of moral offenses, to which it is not clear what the right way of responding might be, and to discuss the ground of justification for these responses. It will not address the important question of whether these responses are not merely justified, but *required*. Whether victims are obligated to respond to

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<sup>29</sup> One might plausibly think that resentment is *always* called for, when one is wronged, even when it is a genuine mistake. Instead of disputing it, I only claim that a broader range of *protesting* responses would help us see a broader range of acts and events as violating moral duties.

moral offenses done to them, or whether it is morally objectionable for them to remain silent and tolerate abuses of which they become the targets, in the absence of legitimate overriding considerations, as well as what those considerations might be, is a topic for a separate essay. I will note, however, that there are circumstances in which the victims' not responding to moral offenses does reveal the absence of respect that they owe to themselves, namely, when their willingness to stay silent is *due to* their disregard for their own moral rights and status as persons deserving equal respect.<sup>30</sup> We will come back to this thought in the following section.

Here is the second claim:

*Claim 2.* Acts and remarks that communicate denigrating messages about my identity, based on my perceived marginalized social group membership, count as a failure to express respect toward me, and therefore, are offenses deserving moral attention.

The second claim will be quite obvious to many of us.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless, let me offer a brief defense for *Claim 2*. Why is a behavior communicating denigrating messages about my identity based on my social identity considered as a failure to express adequate respect toward me? Again, victims of oppressions are oppressed not as individuals or for their individual qualities, but *as* members belonging to a certain group or a category of people. Instead of being recognized and given adequate considerations as persons, they are reduced and molded into their groups, with attributed

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<sup>30</sup> See Hill 1973 for the claim that tolerating violations of one's moral rights can indicate the absence of a certain kind of *self-respect*, namely, respect for one's own rights, when it is *due to* either failing to understand one's moral rights and status as a person, or showing little concern for them. Also see: "a person who fully respected a system of moral rights would be disposed to learn his proper place in it, to affirm it proudly, and not to tolerate abuses of it lightly" (*Ibid.*, p.99).

<sup>31</sup> It would be safe to assume that this claim will make sense to my target audience: individual perpetrators of microaggressions and non-sympathetic third party listeners, most of whom are consciously well-intentioned and morally responsible agents. The reason that they would disagree with my claim that their behaviors merit blaming and critical responses from victims is not because they do not understand that one should treat others with respect, or that sending denigrating messages about someone's identity is disrespectful, but because they don't see their own behaviors as being disrespectful in such a way. I thank Susan Wolf for making this point clearer.

stereotypes, systemic prejudices and marginalization in society, and in the context of oppression, this reduction serves to denigrate their status as humans.<sup>32</sup>

Now recall the definition of microaggressions:

Microaggressions are<sub>df</sub> *subtle* forms of verbal, nonverbal and environmental behaviors and remarks that, whether intentional or not, *communicate* denigrating messages to persons *based on* their marginalized social group membership.

Given this, we can establish *Claim 3*:

*Claim 3.* Microaggressions are offenses deserving moral attention.

*Claim 3* simply follows from *Claim 1*, *Claim 2*, and the definition of microaggression. If *Claim 2* is not disputable, neither is *Claim 3*. Once we accept all three claims, we will reach the desired conclusion that microaggressions are moral offenses that merit blaming and critical responses from the victims.

If accepting three seemingly uncontroversial claims leads us to the desired conclusion, why are blaming and critical responses directed to individual perpetrators of microaggression so frequently met with resistance? I find that there are two ways for perpetrators to accept the three claims above, yet still resist the claim that their behaviors merit blaming and critical responses from the victims. First, while they admit that microaggressions are moral offenses calling for these responses, they do not accept that their own behaviors, which seem benign and innocent, *count* as instances of microaggression. Second, even when they are brought to see their behaviors as instances of microaggression, hence wrong, they seem to believe that there are some special conditions that exculpate them from being the targets of blaming and critical responses.

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<sup>32</sup> See Bartky 1990 for the claim that stereotyping, in the context of oppression, can be both morally reprehensible and psychologically oppressive, for, firstly, those who judge the kind of person I am based on a set of stereotypes would not understand my needs or respect my rights, and secondly, being the object of systematical stereotyping might lead me to believe in the stereotypes myself, and have difficulty determining the sort of person I am or ought to strive to become.

In response to the first strategy, I will examine why some of the apparently benign and harmless behaviors communicate denigrating messages about the victims based on their perceived group identities, hence *are* instances of microaggressions. While I cannot give a comprehensive list of microaggressions, especially given the different experiences of aggressions faced by different oppressed groups,<sup>33</sup> here are a couple examples that we can start our discussion with.

- (1) Albert notices that his female co-worker Paulina always comes to work in jeans, tied-up hair and bare face. He thinks to himself that this poor girl doesn't know how to market herself, and decides to give her some tips: "Why are you not putting on any make-up or wearing skirts like other girls do? Trust me, you'll look more attractive if you do."
- (2) Freddie is talking to his classmate, who looks Latina. He thinks that she's probably not familiar with the culture in this country. He starts explaining to her some of the basic cultural norms that would be helpful to know: "You see, *here in America*, things are different..."
- (3) Claire meets a person at a party, who looks Asian. She wants to get to know him better, so she asks him where he's from. He says Texas. She laughs, and asks him again: "No, I mean where are you *really* from?" She doesn't forget to compliment him: "Your English is good. Where did you learn it?"
- (4) Suppose Paulina from (1) tells Albert that what he just told her is a microaggression. Albert instantly dismisses her accusation. He does not think of his statement as a microaggression, for it was 'nothing but a friendly advice.' He concludes that Paulina must have misunderstood the meaning of microaggression, and corrects her: "You're *misusing* the word 'microaggression.' Don't be such a drama queen."

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<sup>33</sup> According to Sue 2010, messages communicated via microaggressions vary among different target groups. For instance, African Americans frequently become the object of aggressions that communicate the message that they are unintelligent and violent (e.g. presumed to have criminal status). Latino/Latina Americans are frequently assumed to be illegal immigrants (e.g. questioned about their US citizenship), and to work for blue-collar industries (e.g. being mistaken as servers in restaurants). Asian Americans are often treated as alien in their own lands, and, with Asians, suffer from the model minority myth. Individuals with disabilities face more patronizing forms of aggression, such as the assumption of incapacity to handle simple tasks. LGBTQ individuals become the targets of implicit endorsement of heteronormative or gender normative cultures (e.g. being gay is abnormal), or exoticization (e.g. being asked questions about private topics). A common theme in these assumptions and biases against these groups, however, that they are second-class citizens, abnormal or inferior to the dominant social groups in some dimensions.

Are these instances of microaggression? *Yes*, they are subtle behaviors that communicate denigrating messages to target persons, based on their marginalized group membership. In the first example, Albert's suggestion reinforces the stereotypes and traditional gender norms that women should care about their appearances and look feminine, which requires putting chemicals on their skin and wearing movement-inhibiting outfits.<sup>34</sup> This sends a denigrating message to Paulina, for it implies that it is acceptable for her co-workers to evaluate her based on her looks, instead of her performance, and that it is acceptable to treat her differently from male co-workers, and apply different standards of evaluation to her, *because* she is a woman.

In both the second and third examples, Freddie and Claire assume that someone who does not look 'white' must be an immigrant or a foreigner, who is not familiar with American culture and language, and does not have legal citizenship in this country. This sends a denigrating message to the groups of Latino Americans and Asian Americans, namely, that they do not belong to the country, which they identify as their homeland, and should be treated as 'aliens in their own lands.' These apparently benign, friendly questions that the members of these groups hear on a daily basis serve to threaten their formation of identity, and cause ostracization from the community.

In the fourth example, Albert's immediate denial of having committed a microaggression becomes another instance of microaggression. This communicates a denigrating message to Paulina, because Albert is discrediting her knowledge, and her testimony of being wronged by him, in the absence of reliable evidence to believe that she is wrong. In facing an epistemic disagreement (here, about the meaning and the scope of microaggression), he instantly dismisses her view, without assessing the possibility that his own view is wrong, despite the evidence that she, as a member of the oppressed group, is likely to be in a better epistemic position to discern the oppressive practices.

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<sup>34</sup> One might claim that women might genuinely care about their appearances. For problems related to this claim, see Bartky 1990, especially "2. On Psychological Oppression" and "3. Narcissism, Femininity, and Alienation."

His refusal to see his act as a moral offense further implies that the disrespect and mistreatment of which *she* became the target is not deserving moral attention, and communicates a message that she is not his epistemic and moral peer.

These examples hopefully help us see that these apparently benign and harmless behaviors are still instances of microaggressions, communicating denigrating messages about one's identity based on their marginalized social group membership. Given *Claim 3*, these acts merit blaming and critical responses from the victims. However, as I mentioned above, perpetrators of microaggressions might accept that their behaviors have expressed disrespect, and thus, ought not to be repeated, yet still claim that there are *excusing conditions* that render blaming and critical responses from the victims toward them inappropriate. In the next section, I consider three such conditions, developed from the popular excuses and alternative explanations given by perpetrators of microaggressions, namely (1) that the act itself was trivial, (2) that the agents were well-intentioned, and (3) that they were non-culpably ignorant at the time of offense.



#### IV. Three Excusing Conditions

##### (1) *Wrong but trivial*

When the victims attempt to report and respond to instances of microaggression, they frequently face the following response from both the perpetrators and unsympathetic third-party listeners: it's not a big deal, so just 'chill' and 'let it go.' There are two ways to interpret the claim that the alleged triviality of microaggression is a legitimate excusing condition, which renders blaming and critical responses from the victims inappropriate. One interpretation would be that each act of aggression, being a subtle insult or invalidation, causes at worst insignificant harm to the victim, if any harm at all. This claim is ineffective, because on my view, the act is wrong not because of its harmful consequences, but because it involves the violation of a moral demand to treat one's moral peers with respect.<sup>35</sup> An alternative interpretation would be that while this act involves the violation of a moral demand, such violation is trivial, and does not merit protesting responses from victims.

This claim that one's violation of a moral demand, and failure to treat another with respect, is only a trivial incident has several implications. First, that one sees a microaggression as a trivial incident is likely a sign that one is not understanding, or not willing to understand what is *actually*

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<sup>35</sup> One might claim that while the collective harm caused by all incidents of microaggression one faces in life, or by the entire pattern of oppression, may be severe, the *very* harm caused by a *single* incident is insignificant. While it is not the focus of our discussion, there are two plausible replies to this. First, following Parfit, one can claim that each perpetrator is blameworthy for contributing to a larger pattern of incidents that together causes greater suffering to the victims, *by virtue of being a member* of the perpetrator group. (See Parfit 1986). Second, even a single incident of microaggression can cause severe damage to victim, depending on the content and context of an offense, and the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. For instance, the male director of my graduate program telling me to "quit Ph.D. and become a housewife" might have a different gravity and merit a different fitting response, than my own mother telling me the same. What seemed to have happened on the surface is trivial, but this single event might have *non-trivial* effect on me (e.g. doubting my future prospect in academia, serious psychological damage, and decreased productivity).

happening in the event beneath the surface: the expression of disrespect toward members of marginalized groups. Consider another personal anecdote of a philosophy professor Saba Fatima. She had a student athlete in her class who was routinely displaying disrespect toward her and interrupting her lecture, and once even tried to explain the rules of basketball to her. Fatima describes the event as follows:

He did not just simply explain the rules with the “here, *in America*” clause, but he condescendingly elaborated on unnecessary details of the game. As I look back, I am convinced his disrespect toward me was fueled, in part, because he saw me as an immigrant woman slow to understand American culture and one not worthy of respect given to a professor.<sup>36</sup>

When she shared this incident with other professors, many of them replied, “we all get disgruntled students.” However, he wasn’t just a disgruntled student, for his disrespect toward her, the way Fatima perceived it, was based on *whom he saw her as*, a brown immigrant woman not worthy of respect.<sup>37</sup> Fatima reports that these unsympathetic listeners of her testimony “could not differentiate between the ‘regular’ disgruntled student, and the benignly xenophobic and sexist one,” and that these reactions from her listeners made her doubt herself in her own perception of the event, and in how she should see his behavior.<sup>38</sup> (‘What if he was just a regular disgruntled student, and I’m being paranoid?’)

That one of her students condescendingly and unnecessarily explained the rules of the sport to her might seem like a trivial event on the surface. That he felt the need to explain the rules, *because*

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<sup>36</sup> Fatima 2017, p.149.

<sup>37</sup> Due to the subtle nature of these aggressions, the motives behind these events are often ambiguous, and the victims’ perception of these events might be reasonably contested. However, more often than not, the victims are more acute in perceiving the acts and events of aggressions than the perpetrators (see footnote 8), and this time, Fatima had ample evidence to believe that her perception of the event was accurate (e.g. the student’s consistently disrespectful behavior toward her). Here, dismissing her testimony, in the absence of reliable evidence to do so, would constitute another instance of aggression and exhibit a form of *testimonial injustice* that contributes to oppression. We will discuss this more in the following section.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.149.

he saw her as an immigrant woman not familiar with American culture, and that he felt entitled to do so, *because* he saw her as not worthy of respect given to a professor, however, is not a trivial matter. It expresses disrespect toward her, and is an offense deserving moral attention. As this example indicates, the claim that microaggressions like the one described above are trivial, hence should be excused, is often rooted in failing to see the expression of disrespect exhibited by the act or event in question.<sup>39</sup>

On the other hand, one might have no problem seeing the event as manifesting disrespect toward the victim, and still claim that the victim ought to simply move past these events, or respond with nonchalant attitudes (e.g. remaining silent, and not making a big deal), instead of protesting. In claiming this, they are not taking seriously the abuses made to the victim's rights to be treated with respect, and their status as equal beings. I explained in the last section why protesting responses, which on my view, includes a range of blaming and critical responses, are justified responses to moral injuries done to us. Because, as Frye puts it, "anger implies a claim to domain" – getting angry with someone is a way of claiming that one stands in a certain relation and position to the person one is angry at, and that one is respectable in certain ways and dimensions.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, to respond with appropriate protesting responses is to claim back one's domain, and it is justified as a way of resisting the trespass made by the act of disrespect.

Again, how much a particular protesting response is called for, and is nullified in the presence of overriding considerations, given the context of a situation and the gravity of the offense, might need elaboration. However, to say that the alleged triviality of an aggression excuses the act and renders protesting responses from the victim unjustified and uncalled for, is to say that the *very*

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<sup>39</sup> As with other microaggressions in general, it would be more difficult to see these instances as part of oppression, i.e. expressing disrespect toward members of marginalized social groups, for people who are not already familiar with the overall structure of oppression.

<sup>40</sup> Frye 1983, p.90.

claim that these responses are aimed at refuting, such that one can be wronged and disrespected in such a way, need not be refuted. A perpetrator or a third-party listener saying this to a victim communicates the message that the victim is not their moral peer, who deserves equal respect and position in the moral community. A victim's telling this to oneself displays the lack of self-respect, for it shows that one takes lightly the violations made to one's own moral rights and status, and gives little concern for the trespass made to one's domain.

Claiming that protesting responses to moral injuries are unjustified, and that whoever becomes the target of such an offense ought to ignore or tolerate it, reveals lack of respect for the victim's rights and status as a person deserving respect, even when the victim is not a member of an oppressed group.<sup>41</sup> However, as Fatima quotes Reiheld, this demand for civility is frequently used "to silence those with less social power on the grounds of both how they present what they say, and the topic which they raise."<sup>42</sup> In other words, demanding that victims of microaggressions just let go of these offenses, as well as silencing their protest based on the apparent triviality of the events in question, is often used as an instrument of oppression. It is signaling either misunderstanding of the expression of disrespect manifested by the event, or neglecting of the moral significance of mistreatments of which they become the targets. Thus, to present the apparent triviality as an excusing condition for microaggressions is to place less significance on the worth and status of oppressed groups in our community by trivializing the offenses done to them and by taking away their legitimate standing as individuals who have been wronged.

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<sup>41</sup> It is not presumptuous to imagine, however, that the student in Fatima's story probably would not have felt entitled to condescendingly explain the rules of basketball with unnecessary details to a white male professor whom he sees as worthy of respect.

<sup>42</sup> Fatima 2017, p.150; originally, Reiheld 2013, p.74. For more discussion of using the demand for civility to silence the voice of the oppressed, see Dotson 2011 on *testimonial quieting* and *testimonial smothering*.

## (2) *Wrong but well-intentioned*

Another popular excuse that victims of microaggressions hear is that these acts were well-intentioned. Many unsympathetic third-party listeners attempt to give alternative explanations for the perpetrators' behaviors, such as "I'm sure he meant well," or "I'm sure she was just trying to be friendly." While these aggressions are not always deliberate attempts to harm the victims,<sup>43</sup> it is often difficult to distinguish genuinely well-meaning acts from those coming from malicious intent. Sandra Bartky describes these subtle offenses as "half-submerged weapons" of an oppressive system.<sup>44</sup> She explains that victims who became aware of their victimization suffer from a "double ontological shock," one that comes from "the realization that what is *really* happening (i.e. behaviors projecting belittling and denigrating messages) is quite different from what *appears* to be happening (i.e. benign, well-intentioned acts)," and one that comes from "the frequently inability to tell what is really happening at all."<sup>45</sup> Given the difficulty in determining the actual motives behind subtle aggressions, these alternative explanations, often rooted in the listeners' own bias or inability to discern the individual cases of discrimination reflecting the systematic patterns of oppression,<sup>46</sup> serve to validate the perpetrators' version of the story, and discredit the victims' perception of the events.

One might claim, however, that despite this difficulty, if the agents of microaggressions did not in fact intend to communicate denigrating messages through their behaviors, and were not

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<sup>43</sup> Again due to the subtle nature of and ambiguous motives behind microaggression, it is easy to come up with alternative explanations. For instance, each of the examples from the previous section *can* be construed as a perfectly benign act, such as giving a friendly advice to one's co-worker, helping a perceived stranger in the country by explaining useful norms, trying to get to know a person by asking about his origin, or explaining the meaning of the word to a person who does not seem to understand it.

<sup>44</sup> Bartky 1990, p.18.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, parentheses are mine.

<sup>46</sup> Fatima 2017, p.152. Fatima adds that the listeners' attempt to come up with these explanations might be due to the fact that they themselves are beneficiaries (i.e. members of dominant social groups), and that it is in their own interest to remain willfully ignorant of the oppressive social structure (*Ibid.*, p.153).

acting out of ill regard toward the victims, then they should not be proper targets of blame or criticisms. In order to respond to this claim, we should first understand what it really means when the perpetrators of microaggression claim that they *meant well*.

Suppose that these agents are telling the truth, and are not hiding their morally objectionable beliefs and motives behind the subtleness of their offenses. The most natural reading of the claim is that while these acts were communicating discriminatory and stigmatizing messages to the recipients, the agents were not conscious of the fact that their behaviors communicate such messages, and accordingly, were not endorsing their participation in discriminatory practices.<sup>47</sup> Take the example of Claire. If you ask Claire, she would say that she genuinely meant well by asking the person whom she met at a party where he's *really* from, despite his telling her that he's from Texas. She *falsely believed* that asking such a question would express genuine interest and curiosity in the person, hence would be a benign and friendly gesture, when it would in fact communicate denigrating messages about the person's identity (e.g. he cannot *be* from this country), and racially stigmatizing messages about the group of Asian Americans, hence would be a moral offense. What she mistakenly thought of as a well-meant act was rooted in, and was projecting problematic assumptions and subconsciously discriminatory beliefs about oppressed groups. This does not mean that Claire's behavior cannot be excused on any grounds. However, if such an act were to be excused, it would be for the ignorance from which she has acted, whether it be the ignorance about individual practices reflecting the patterns of oppression, or the very existence of larger patterns of oppression, from which she should understand the messages reasonably communicated by her act. I will return to the discussion of ignorance as an excusing condition in the following sub-section.

However, there is one important concern that needs be addressed. The main driving force behind the claim that well-intentioned microaggressions should be exculpated, I believe, is our

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<sup>47</sup> I thank Keshav Singh and Dominik Berger for helpful discussion on this point.

resistance to calling these well-meaning (albeit mistaken), ordinary people ‘sexists’ or ‘racists,’ especially given the severe costs of being labeled as such. For instance, sharing this concern, Elizabeth Anderson claims that we should withhold the label of ‘racist’ to people who merely engage in, yet are neither conscious of nor are endorsing the stigmatization of others, for the following reasons.<sup>48</sup> First, to call a person racist carries severe moral condemnation, which does not seem apt for people who merely engage in these practices. Second, to call an idea racist puts it beyond the bounds of acceptable discourse, and thus silences the idea, which should be addressed and discussed instead. Third, to use a highly charged term like ‘racist’ provokes defensive reactions and shuts down the discussion. She concludes that we should “reserve ‘racism’ for judgments of serious vice, while observing that not all injustice is caused by a vicious character.”<sup>49</sup>

Anderson insightfully observes that the terms ‘racist’ and ‘sexist’ are so highly charged that we instantly face defensive denial of the accusation, which prevents productive discussion on the topics that urgently need be addressed. The situation that we face is as follows. In many parts of our community, merely being associated with terms like sexist and racist signifies that one’s moral character is seriously flawed. Yet many instances of microaggressions are not done with consciously malicious intent to harm others, and are instead rooted in one’s false beliefs or lack of relevant knowledge. It seems inappropriate to use the terms associated with such severe costs to people for merely engaging in, yet are not consciously endorsing these practices. There are two solutions to solve this dilemma. First is, as Anderson’s suggests, to keep the use of these terms to a minimum, i.e.

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<sup>48</sup> Anderson 2011. She suggests that we instead use a concept of “racial stigmatization,” which refers “either to a condition of a racial group or to an intergroup process relating the stigmatized to other groups. ... Conduct *expresses* stigma if it insults or disadvantages the stigmatized group in ways that fit the stigmatic ideas. ... This does not require that the actor be conscious of or endorse the stigmatic representations” (*Ibid.*, p.48).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p.48.

only for the cases of serious vice. Second is to keep the scope for these terms broad, yet to qualify the sanctions and implications associated with them.

I am sympathetic to the second approach, because I am concerned about the move suggested by Anderson. To withhold terms like ‘racist’ and ‘sexist’ because these are too highly charged for the incidents of microaggressions seems to bolster the triviality consideration, according to which these incidents are too trivial to be considered serious moral offenses. This is precisely the conclusion I wish to resist. It further adds strength to the excuses routinely made by the perpetrators of microaggressions, that their acts cannot be sexist or racist, because they themselves are not sexists or racists.

Anderson does not claim that mere engagement in stigmatization of others is not unjust, or cannot give any clues about the person’s character.<sup>50</sup> Rather, a charitable interpretation of her claim would be that the moral character of someone who both engages in and consciously endorses their participation in stigmatizing practices should be judged *more severely* than the character of someone who merely engages in the same activity without conscious endorsement, and that one’s engagement in stigmatization should not itself entail a judgment of one’s seriously flawed character. Despite these concerns, I still believe that a better approach to this problem is to qualify the sanctions attached to these terms, rather than to abandon the use of these terms in a majority of cases.

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<sup>50</sup> Depending on the context, content and gravity of the act in question, mere act of stigmatization might be *enough* to give us some clue about the person’s character. For instance, someone who resists accepting the evidence that one’s behavior is stigmatizing can be seen as *not* consciously endorsing the participation in discriminatory practices, for they fail to see their own behavior as discriminatory. In this case, their voluntary resistance to consider the counterevidence, as well as the resultant engagement in discrimination, might still reflect badly on their character, for they are not doing what they ought to be doing to behave morally. We will talk more about culpability of one’s moral ignorance and its implications in the following sub-section.



A qualification that is necessary here involves the distinction between *engaging in* a racist or sexist practice (e.g. what you just did is sexist), and *being* a racist or sexist (e.g. you are a sexist.)<sup>51</sup> Being a racist or sexist would mean that you satisfy all three conditions laid out by Anderson, namely, that your acts expresses stigmatizing content, that you are conscious of participating in stigmatizing practices, and that you are endorsing your participation in the practice. Anderson seems to add another condition that the content of these acts be “extreme” in some sense, but I do not find such a condition necessary. Someone who routinely engages in microaggressions, consciously acknowledges that these acts are offensive, in the sense that they send out denigrating messages about target persons and groups and further the systematic oppression faced by victims, and still endorses their contribution to this practice, rightly deserves to be labeled sexist or racist, despite the commonly held belief that the contents expressed by microaggressions are less than extreme.

Now consider someone who engages in microaggressions, yet neither consciously acknowledges nor endorses that they are engaging in oppressive practices that contribute to the suffering of victims. It might not seem fitting to call that person a racist or sexist, unless the person has been repeatedly behaving in that way, has been corrected by others, and yet still somehow does not consciously acknowledge or endorse that one is engaging in oppressive practices. However, this should not mean that their behaviors should not be viewed as racist or sexist. In fact, these acts should be importantly *labeled* as such, especially due to the fact that it is often difficult to see the stigmatizing messages conveyed by these acts, for they look benign and harmless on the surface. By calling these acts racist or sexist, we acknowledge that they contribute to racism or sexism in our society, and emphasize that it is important to deal with them as moral offenses meriting protesting responses. However, given the aforementioned distinction, the fact that one engaged in racist or

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<sup>51</sup> See Philips 1984 for the distinction among *agent-centered*, *belief-centered* and *act-centered* ways of understanding racism.

sexist behaviors should not always entail the judgment that one has a seriously flawed character.<sup>52</sup>

Even the best of us, with the best of intentions, can act wrongly, and it should not result in our permanent ostracization from the community, or conclusive evidence for the quality of our character. That we have committed a moral offense to another should be a charge that we should humbly and heartily accept. However, how we deal with the event and its aftermath, and strive to become better members of the community, may also shed light on our character.

I admit that this distinction between an act being sexist or racist, and a person being sexist or racist is not yet clearly made in our community, and that accusing someone of having done a sexist or racist act may either impose harsh costs on the person, or instantly shut down the discussion with defensive reactions from the accused one. This is the situation that I hope to improve by having a better understanding of a broader range of events that are oppressive in nature. Sanctions currently attached to these terms are severe, precisely because they have been exclusively used to label extreme violations. Acknowledging that even acts in our everyday lives, done by ordinary people without vicious characters or motives, can be and often are sexist and racist, would both incentivize us to take *due care* in avoiding engaging in these practices, and to help us see beyond what the person has done to what the person strives to become.

(3) *Wrong but done from non-culpable ignorance*

Unlike the apparent triviality of the act, or apparently good intention behind it, non-culpable ignorance, from which the wrongdoer has acted, is considered a legitimate excusing condition in many cases. For instance, the following claim seems to hold: if an agent acted wrongly out of non-culpable ignorance about facts about the situation, then the agent is non-culpable for having acted wrongly. In other words, non-culpable ignorance about facts, or *non-moral* ignorance, from which

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<sup>52</sup> Again, depending on the context, content and gravity of such an offense, mere engagement in discriminatory behaviors might be enough to indicate a flaw in one's character. I thank Tamara Fakhoury for pointing this out.

one has acted, can exculpate, making the person no longer a proper target of blame.<sup>53</sup> Gideon Rosen proposes that the same claim should hold for *moral* or normative ignorance as well, in which one is ignorant of what one morally ought to do in a given situation, due to one's lacking relevant moral knowledge or having false moral beliefs.<sup>54</sup> Despite several qualifications suggested to Rosen's version of the argument,<sup>55</sup> the thesis that non-culpable, moral ignorance can also exculpate the wrongdoer from blame has gained many defenders.

What happens when non-culpable ignorance exculpates? An excused wrongdoing is still wrong. Yet once the act is excused, it is said to render unjustified the victim's protesting responses toward the wrongdoer for having done the offense, which in my account, include a range of blaming and critical responses. Why would excusing the act have such an effect? One answer rests on the idea that there is no longer a *need*, hence no longer a *ground* for a protest, once the wrongdoing in question is properly excused. For instance, in Hieronymi's account, an event of wrongdoing generates a presently threatening claim to the victim's worth, such that the victim can be treated in such a way, and this claim is what grounds resentment. On her view, a sincere apology from the wrongdoer, as well as an excuse given for the offense,<sup>56</sup> has the effect of retracting this claim, so that the victim's resentment in response to this claim loses its footing.

While I second the idea that blaming and critical responses should be understood as a protest against the objectionable claim issued by the event, I reject the analysis that such a claim is retracted or no longer presently threatening, once the wrongdoer apologizes for the act, or once the

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<sup>53</sup> A famous example of non-culpable, non-moral ignorance is my accidentally poisoning you with arsenic by thinking that it was sugar; my act is wrong, but I don't seem blameworthy for having acted wrongly.

<sup>54</sup> Rosen 2003.

<sup>55</sup> See Harman 2011 for the summary of qualifications and objections made to Rosen's argument by Guerrero 2007, Moody-Adams 1994, FitzPatrick 2008, and Harman 2011.

<sup>56</sup> Hieronymi 2001.

act in question is excused by other considerations. Let me focus on the case of an excused wrongdoing. Contra Hieronymi, I believe that protesting responses from the victims can remain justified, even when the wrongful act in question is properly excused. It is because the victims' protesting responses to moral offenses have two distinct aims, and the excuse given for these acts only undermines the first.

The first aim of these responses is, as Hieronymi writes, to fight the moral statement "authored by" the offenders, such that the victims can be wronged in such a way. An excused wrongdoing does not generate such a statement the way culpable wrongdoings do. For instance, when the act is caused by non-culpable ignorance, the non-culpably ignorant wrongdoer does not seem to be at fault for authoring a moral statement that threatens the victim's worth, while still being at fault for having acted wrongly. Thus, as Hieronymi observes, an excuse given for the moral offense would render this first aim of protesting responses unnecessary or uncalled for.

However, there is a second aim of these responses which remains valuable, even in the absence of a moral statement authored by a culpable wrongdoer, which is to affirm the wrongness of the act *itself* to the wrongdoers, to the community, and importantly, to the victims themselves. By responding to the event of wrongdoing with protesting responses, instead of remaining silent, the victim affirms that the act being done *is* an offense that should be resisted, and that they cannot be treated in such a way. This *self-vindicating* or *validating* function of protesting responses is especially valuable in the cases of microaggressions, where it is not readily obvious that the event in question is wrong, and in the context of oppression, where certain groups' testimonies, perspectives and perceptions of the events are systematically neglected and discredited.<sup>57</sup> By responding with protesting responses, the victims validate their judgment of the event in question as a moral offense, thereby refusing to contribute to the systematic injustice that silences their voice and distrusts their

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<sup>57</sup> See Dotson 2012 for her discussion of *hermeneutical* and *contributory injustice*.

experiences. Thus, even in the presence of a legitimate excuse, these responses to moral injuries can remain justified in light of their second, *self-validating* function.

The claim that protesting responses, which include a range of blaming and critical responses, can be justified even when the act in question is properly excused is consistent with the claim that some of these responses are *more* fitting in some situations than in others. In particular, in cases where the act is excused due to the non-culpable ignorance of the agent, it is plausible that some of the blaming responses are less fitting than blameless critical responses. This claim, however, should be qualified, for once we gain a better understanding of when a person's ignorance is genuinely non-culpable, we realize that the ignorance behind microaggressions is genuinely non-culpable only in rare cases.

Following Rosen, I find that our ignorance is culpable when it results from our failure to fulfill "procedural epistemic obligations," which is to take necessary steps to come to a view of what one morally ought to do in a given situation.<sup>58</sup> Importantly, fulfilling these obligations to come to a correct moral belief, or to come to be in an epistemic state that allows us to behave in a way we ought to behave, is part of our *moral* duties. We are subject to these duties as responsible moral agents, and can be blamed for our failure to meet them. As Rosen claims, these obligations are not obligations to know or believe something; rather, these are obligations to *take steps* to ensure that we are properly informed about the matters that bear on the permissibility of our conducts. Moreover, these are not steps that require extraordinary skills, characters or insights, but rather steps that a reasonable person would have taken to be adequately informed about relevant matters, when determining how one ought to act.

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<sup>58</sup> Rosen 2003 and 2004.

I agree with the claim that our culpability for ignorance should be grounded in what we *do* to be properly informed, and not in what we *end up* knowing or believing. As Rosen says, it is impossible to codify every step that needs be taken for one to be completely blameless for the ignorance and resultant wrongdoings. He only gives an abstract description of what he had in mind, such that these are steps that an ordinary reasonable person would have taken to be properly informed about the moral permissibility of one's conducts, and would include being adequately inquisitive, reflective, and careful in forming one's moral beliefs.<sup>59</sup> While I cannot tell where Rosen stand on this, on my view, these procedural epistemic and moral duties include taking steps both to properly manage our moral beliefs, and to critically assess potentially wrongful assumptions behind cultural and social practices.

First of all, these procedural obligations include taking presented counterevidence into consideration in forming our moral beliefs, and critically evaluating the existing ones. This would involve giving reasonably sufficient credit to the testimonies of other knowers on relevant matters.<sup>60</sup> In other words, an ordinary reasonable person, who cares about fulfilling these duties, would take steps to ensure that one does not attribute unreasonably low credibility to those whom one ought to regard as one's epistemic peers, or engage in what Miranda Fricker describes as central cases of *testimonial injustice*, whether or not these steps lead to success in avoiding it.

Fricker defines testimonial injustice as a kind of epistemic injustice, where someone is wronged specifically in one's capacity as a knower, and describes central cases of such injustice as

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<sup>59</sup> Rosen 2004. He also gives examples such as 'asking certain questions, taking careful notes, stopping and thinking, and focusing one's attention in a certain direction' (*Ibid.*, p.301), but does not explain what these questions, thoughts, or directions might be.

<sup>60</sup> I acknowledge the debate between "conciliationist" and "steadfast" views in epistemology. While I don't make a stance on whether the peer disagreement should be a decisive evidence to suspend or modify one's view, I claim that not taking the opposing view into consideration based on the *unjust* credibility deficit one gives to the speaker, i.e. the kind of deficit that is due to systematic prejudices about the speaker's identity, is both epistemically and ethically culpable. I thank Alex Campbell for helping me clarify this point.

those in which a hearer attributes a *credibility deficit* to a speaker, due to the hearer's ethically and epistemically culpable misjudgment. This misjudgment is *epistemically* culpable, for it misses a valuable piece of information contained in the speaker's testimony, and *ethically* culpable, for it undermines and wrongs the speaker in her capacity as a knower.<sup>61</sup> Fricker further explains that central cases of such injustice occur in the context of oppression, are produced specifically by the prejudices that track the subjects through different dimensions of social activity, and are systematically connected with other kinds of injustices impacting their lives.<sup>62</sup>

Not giving credibility to someone's testimony is not always wronging them; what constitutes injustice is not giving them *due* respect as a knower. Following Rosen on this, Fricker argues that we should not hold hearers to exceptionally high standards, when it comes to assigning culpability for their misjudgments.<sup>63</sup> To use her own example, if we falsely judge that the speaker's testimonies are unreliable based on the facts that she avoids looking us in the eye, when she was just a shy person telling the truth, our misjudgment is not ethically culpable, although debatably epistemically culpable, hence is not constituting injustice. However, if we discredit her testimonies, based on the socially constructed stereotypes we have against her based on her social identity, or marginalized group membership (e.g. women are whiny, so their expression of pain is unreliable), such misjudgment is both epistemically and ethically culpable, and would be an instance of systematic injustice.

Again, our procedural duties as responsible moral agents, which include taking steps to be properly informed when forming and adjusting a belief as to what we morally ought to do in a given situation, ought to include taking steps to avoid this form of systematic injustice. Recall the story of

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<sup>61</sup> Fricker 2007. She further claims that one's capacity as a knower is essential to one's value as a human, and hence that wronging one *qua* knower is thereby wronging one *qua* human (*Ibid.*, p.44).

<sup>62</sup> See also Dotson 2011 for the claim that women of color have long been the victims of *testimonial quieting*, where an audience (systematically) fails to recognize a speaker as a knower.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p.42.

Albert and Paulina. In the *first* example, Albert tells Paulina to wear some make-up, so that she can look more attractive, which is an instance of a microaggression. In the *fourth* example, when Paulina tells Albert that what he said counts as a microaggression, Albert instantly dismisses her claim, and tells her that she is misunderstanding and misusing the term “microaggression,” which constitutes another instance of aggression.<sup>64</sup> Suppose in both cases, Albert’s wrongdoing was caused by his false beliefs. In the first case, he falsely believed that it is morally permissible to tell women how they should look. In the fourth case, he falsely believed that microaggression refers only to a set of actions consciously intended by the agents to harm the victims, hence does not include what he meant as a ‘friendly advice.’ He also falsely believed that it is permissible to completely dismiss the claim made by someone whom he ought to regard as his epistemic and moral peer. Would such false beliefs behind Albert’s actions be exculpatory?

In the first example, it is unclear whether Albert’s ignorance has resulted from his failure to fulfill his duties to form correct moral beliefs. On the one hand, suppose Albert gave the same advice to another female colleague Emma a week before his interaction with Paulina, and Emma immediately told him that what he said to her was offensive, for it reflected and reinforced systematic gender-based prejudices that serve to denigrate her status both at workplace and beyond. If Albert simply ignored Emma’s claim, despite the lack of evidence to not recognize her as a credible knower, then his telling Paulina the same problematic remark a week after would be due to his *culpable* ignorance, resulting from his failing to take steps to be properly informed. On the other hand, his interaction with Paulina in the first example might have been the first time that Albert gave such an advice to his colleague, and prior to the said interaction, he somehow failed to revise his

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<sup>64</sup> What counts as a microaggression in the given example is not Albert’s *disagreement* with Paulina, but his *unjust dismissal* of her claim (and a condescending form of mansplaining), which undervalues her status as a knower and takes away her standing as a victim. He can have genuine disagreement with her regarding the definition of microaggression, but in doing so, he should give her due credibility and respect as his epistemic peer, in the absence of evidence not to treat her so. I thank Luc Bovens for helping me clarify this point.



existing false moral beliefs, *despite* having taken proper steps to be informed about morally permissible ways to interact with female colleagues. This does not mean that his ignorance is, therefore, non-culpable, for it might still have been due to his willful acceptance of problematic assumptions behind social and cultural institutions, and properly questioning such assumptions might have given him ample evidence to challenge his beliefs in the first place.

In the fourth example, when Paulina tells Albert that she is offended by his comments, he instantly dismisses her claim. He does not bother to take her testimony seriously, and fails to give her due credibility as a knower. On my view, an ordinary reasonable person would have taken steps to avoid exactly what Albert has done to Paulina; they would have considered this interaction as an opportunity to critically evaluate their current set of beliefs, and her testimony as potential counterevidence, even if they end up not revising their beliefs in light of this incident. By unjustly discrediting Paulina's claim, Albert exhibits a failure to fulfill his epistemic and moral duties. If Albert were to continue making inappropriate comments to his colleagues post his interaction with Paulina, such offenses would be the result of his culpable ignorance, and would not be excused.

Now I move on to a claim that one's procedural epistemic and moral duties include taking steps to critically assess potentially wrongful assumptions behind cultural and social practices. In other words, one's ignorance can still be culpable, when it is due to motivated or affected ignorance. In her influential piece, Michele Moody-Adams defines affected ignorance as "choosing not to know what one can and should know" – when it involves "refusing to consider whether some practice in which one participates might be wrong," it will constitute motivated normative ignorance.<sup>65</sup> Moody-Adams lists four different ways in which one can be subject to affected ignorance – by denying the

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<sup>65</sup> Moody-Adams 1994, p.296. While there might be a difference between 'affected' and 'motivated' ignorance, in the sense that one's motivated ignorance might not always be affected by one's cultural environments, I will use them interchangeably in this paper, for the kind of 'motivated' ignorance I am concerned with, that behind microaggressions, is likely to be a case of 'affected' ignorance.

presented evidence, by insisting on knowing nothing, by insisting on asking no question, and most commonly, by denying the possibility of our commonly held assumptions being wrong.

The claim is not that affected ignorance, due to one's failure to critically assess the wrongful assumptions behind cultural and social practices, especially the ones that are deeply pervasive and widely accepted in one's community, is *always* culpable. There are cases, where it does take some extraordinary insight or epistemic privilege for one to even begin to doubt the objectionable norms that are taken for granted for a long time by the majority. As we previously discussed, it is likely that one must be already familiar with the structure of oppression against women to *even see* that a particular practice, such as the male door opening ritual, is oppressive to women. Less now than before, the knowledge that this particular practice is part of the larger patterns of oppression might not be readily apparent or accessible to people.

Yet, again, the ground of culpability for one's ignorance is not what one ends up believing or knowing, but rather what one *does* to come to true moral beliefs.<sup>66</sup> The duties we are subject to as responsible moral agents are not the ability to correctly identify and challenge problematic practices, but the ability to critically review and assess the potentially objectionable assumptions behind even widely accepted social norms and cultural practices, which unfairly privilege certain social groups, and in comparison inferiorize and oppress others. While spotting a *particular* practice as objectionable on such a ground might still be challenging, evidence for the claim that *many* practices in our contemporary lives have been and still are oppressive to some marginalized groups is made

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<sup>66</sup> For a contrasting view, see Harman 2014. She rejects the view that false moral belief exculpates in cases where an agent has not violated procedural moral duties in the management of one's beliefs. Instead, she claims that one is still culpable for wrongdoing done from a false moral belief, when such belief contains 'morally objectionable attitudes' toward others. For instance, the Mafia family member who falsely believes that it is morally right to kill a shop owner for refusing to pay him money is blameworthy, *because* such belief involves a morally objectionable attitude to the shop owner, and this attitude *itself* is blameworthy (*Ibid.*, p.14). In response to the objection that one's false moral belief might be due to bad moral luck, Harman says that they are still blameworthy for their actions, and are unlucky to be blameworthy in such a way (*Ibid.*, p.17).

much more readily available now than before, and would not require more than steps that an ordinary reasonable person would have taken to be adequately informed.

This claim allows for a *degree* of culpability, depending on the accessibility of evidence presented to us, which calls for our critical reception of certain beliefs, norms and practices. This will explain our intuition behind the popularly debated example of ancient slave owners, how they seem to be at least *less* blameworthy for their false beliefs and resultant wrongdoings than, for instance, slave owners of the Civil War era, who had more evidence available to them that might defeat their false views, had they chosen to be better informed, and *significantly less* blameworthy than those who believe that one race is inferior to another in the present day, who have much more counterevidence readily and easily available to them.<sup>67</sup> Some practices will be more obviously wrong, and one's choice to remain uninformed will include rejecting more easily accessible and readily apparent counterevidence to one's view, and will entail a higher degree of culpability. There might be less evidence to challenge the assumptions behind some other practices, due to the collective lack of hermeneutical resources to identify them as problematic.<sup>68</sup> In that case, one might be less epistemically culpable for failing to critically assess and challenge these practices. Again, in the context of oppression, such *epistemic* culpability will also become *ethical* culpability, for individuals who fail to fulfill their duties to be properly informed would simultaneously contribute to the persistence of unjust practices suffered by oppressed victims.

Can our ignorance behind microaggressions be *genuinely* non-culpable? I believe that they can, especially in the following two cases. First is when despite taking proper steps to come to

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<sup>67</sup> In parallel, there seems to be a *degree* of praiseworthiness to challenging the cultural norms and practices in the absence of easily accessible counterevidence, or lack of support for one's view. For instance, those who fought for the rights of slaves in the ancient era seem to be *more* praiseworthy than those from the Civil War era, and *significantly more* praiseworthy than those who claim the same today. For discussion of partial praise and blame, see Markovits 2018.

<sup>68</sup> See Dotson 2012 for the discussion of *hermeneutical injustice*.

correct moral beliefs, and to critically assess the norms that might affect one's beliefs, one still cannot be brought to form true beliefs or revise false ones, due to the lack of evidence or the presence of epistemic obstacles that cannot be overcome by fulfilling one's epistemic and moral duties (e.g. one's membership in a dominant, privileged social group makes it harder for them to understand the experience of dominated people, despite their sincere effort). In this case, their ignorance might be genuinely non-culpable, in the sense that there were no more obligations for them to have fulfilled.<sup>69</sup> Second is when one cannot be brought to see reliable counterevidence as what it is, due to their lack of the *Sanity* condition, or "the minimally sufficient ability cognitively and normatively to recognize and appreciate the world for what it is."<sup>70</sup> In this case, their moral ignorance is *unavoidable*, for they lack the ability to "understand and appreciate right and wrong, and to change [their] characters and [their] actions accordingly."<sup>71</sup> Yet, it is not hard to imagine that these two cases where the agent is genuinely non-culpable for the ignorance would describe only a *few* cases of microaggressions. In most cases, perpetrators of microaggressions who resist being targets of blaming and critical responses from victims are at fault not only of acting in a way that violates their moral demand to treat others with respect, but also of not having taken proper steps to be informed about the permissibility of their conducts and the objectionability of their beliefs.

While genuinely non-culpable ignorance can be a proper excusing condition for one's wrongful behaviors, it would characterize only a few cases of microaggressions, and even in those

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<sup>69</sup> For a contrasting view, see Medina 2014, who claims that one is culpable not only for the *objective-level* ignorance (i.e. not knowing), but also for the *meta-level* ignorance (i.e. not knowing that one does not know).

<sup>70</sup> Wolf 1987, p.335. I don't agree with the particular examples she lists as the agents lacking the *Sanity* condition, such as "the slave owners of the 1850s, the Nazis of the 1930s, and many male chauvinists of our fathers' generation." To me, it is not obvious that their ignorance is *inevitable* due to their social circumstances, hence genuinely non-culpable. But if there are agents whose ignorance is inevitable, they would not be the proper targets of responses such as blame.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p.337.

cases, protesting responses from the victims can still remain justified. That being said, when the act is done from the agent's ignorance, the fittingness of a particular protesting responses would depend not only on the kinds and degree of demands and expectations in particular interpersonal relationships, but also on the degree of epistemic and ethical culpability for the agent's ignorance. While I stated that the goal of this paper is not to give a positive account of when each response is more fitting than others in a specific context, in cases where culpability for ignorance is considerably low or absent, I find it plausible that some of the weaker protesting responses, such as blameless critical responses, would be more fitting.

## V. Objections and Replies

So far, I have argued for the thesis that individual instances of microaggressions are moral offenses that merit blaming and critical responses from the victims, and responded to three popular excuses for these acts given by the perpetrators and unsympathetic third-party listeners. Now I will discuss two objections focusing on the unwelcome repercussions of treating microaggressions the way I propose. One is that such treatment undesirably “coddles” the victims, and the other is that such treatment unfairly “silences” the perpetrators.

### (1) The *coddling* objection

Recently, several authors have voiced their concerns about the current movement to sanction micro-aggressive behaviors and secure ‘political correctness’ in our community. In their article in *The Atlantic*, Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff claim that this movement creates a culture of “vindictive protectiveness,” through which we teach a young generation to develop “extra-thin skin” and respond with “zero tolerance” to any disagreement they may encounter in life.<sup>72</sup> They claim that this new trend is not only detrimental to democratic culture in our society, but also bad for the victims, for it teaches them to think *pathologically*, i.e. to identify themselves as victims, and to label innocuous events as offensive, which might cause damages to their careers, friendship, and mental health.<sup>73</sup> A similar concern is raised by Clare Fox in her article in *The Spectator*, where she claims that the collective effort of parents and institutions to protect our children from potential

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<sup>72</sup> Haidt and Lukianoff 2014.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

abuses and to boost their self-esteem has led to a “generation snowflake,” which, combined with “apparent hypersensitivity” and a “belligerent sense of entitlement,” creates an “overanxious, easily offended, censoriously thin-skinned Frankenstein monster.”<sup>74</sup> The sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning also argue that complaints about microaggressions, and the society’s acceptance of such complaints as legitimate, have led to the emergence of a new moral culture, which they call “the culture of victimhood,” in which the aggrieved victims advertise the events of wrongdoings of which they become the targets, and demand public sanctions against the perpetrators.<sup>75</sup> In sum, the shared claims made by these authors are as follows. First, microaggressions should not be taken as personal offenses; second, microaggressions are not actually offensive and are innocuous events simply labeled as offensive by hypersensitive victims; third, treating the victims’ testimony of being offended as an unbeatable trump card undesirably coddles members of oppressed groups.<sup>76</sup>

These popular claims that microaggressions should not be seen as individually offensive acts, and that victims should not take these incidents personally or even as offensive, are precisely what have given rise to *the problem of invisible wrongdoers*, which invalidates the victims’ perception of events, and renders them speechless. Facing constant criticisms that what they’re experiencing is what’s in their head, oppressed victims begin to doubt their own sense of reality, and learn to simply accept being targets of these mistreatments. This is the situation that this paper has attempted to alleviate, by showing that microaggressions *are* and *ought to be* understood as personal offenses with individual victims and culpable wrongdoers, and that victims are justified in properly protesting these aggressions. By explaining that allegedly benign and innocuous events might still communicate denigrating messages and express active disrespect toward a person who deserves to be treated with

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<sup>74</sup> Fox 2015.

<sup>75</sup> Campbell and Manning 2014.

<sup>76</sup> Haidt and Lukianoff 2014.

respect, I hope to have shown that the victims' testimonies should be given weight, in order to bridge the gap between the two versions of realities seen by two different perspectives. Not understanding, or not being willing to understand that these are moral offenses, that there are victims, and that these victims are entitled to voice out their concerns, is what keeps the wrongdoers invisible, and the victims confused and silenced.

Moreover, contrary to what Haidt and Lukianoff claim, the victims' testimony of having been offended by a microaggression is hardly an unbeatable card in our community. This claim is again the very sign of the two completely different worlds experienced by members of oppressed groups, and those of dominant social groups, as well as the sign of a clear disparity in the epistemic positions of the two groups in discerning the patterns of oppression and understanding their significance. From one perspective, the claim of having been offended is an unbeatable card; from another perspective, such claims are often instantly denied, resisted, and used against the speaker to question her sanity and silence her voice. For victims, to claim that they are offended is not a victory card. It takes overcoming the fear of being called out as paranoid, and enduring their own doubt about their perception of the event. It is a card that victims decide to play *nonetheless*, in the hope of sending the message that they will no longer remain silent to mistreatments, and will take steps to promote a culture where they are rightfully treated as members deserving equal respect.

This does not mean that it *should* be played as a victory card, or that we should always take the victims' perception of events over alternative explanations. There will plausibly be cases of misinterpreting the events in question, mistaken accusations, or even vindictive false alarms. The solution, however, cannot be systematically neglecting one version of the story, and dismissing it as unjustified complaints of think-skinned babies. Rather, we should acknowledge the difference in our perspectives and provide a ground where both versions of the same story can be told, reasonably discussed, contested and reconciled, with the goal of building the community of mutual



understanding and shared respect. It will take discussing what microaggressions are, what makes them problematic, why the victims feel offended and insulted when being targets of these aggressions, and why they are entitled to feel that way. It will also take discussing what fitting responses to each event given the context might be, instead of applying a fixed sanction to all cases. This is so that victims are no longer rendered frustrated and speechless, and perpetrators left ignorant. The recognition of microaggressions as personal offenses that victimize the recipients is not an attempt to coddle the victims, or members of oppressed groups in general. As Regina Rini points out, it is a part of our struggle to move on to a new moral culture, in which no one is denied full moral recognition, for, as Rini says, teaching the young generation that they should just accept being the targets of abuses, instead of teaching them what they can do to fight them, is a recipe for allowing these practices to continue.<sup>77</sup>

(2) The *silencing* objection<sup>78</sup>

The idea behind this objection is that the recent movement to treat microaggressions as offensive will result in excluding a group of speakers from public discourse, and ostracizing them from our community. There are two components to the argument. The first one claims that publicly imposed sanctions on people for having engaged in micro-aggressive behaviors serve to discourage differently minded people from engaging in genuine discussion.<sup>79</sup> The second one claims that the practice of labeling certain behaviors and remarks as “offensive” or “micro-aggressive” is mainly driven by intellectual and cultural elites in our community, and will cause or reinforce a deep cultural divide between the elites, who attempt to enforce new norms, and non-elite groups, who are slow to

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<sup>77</sup> Rini 2015.

<sup>78</sup> I thank Luc Bovens for pointing out this important objection.

<sup>79</sup> Haidt and Lukianoff 2014.

follow the trend and become culpable of having acted wrongly by the new standards.<sup>80</sup> If this is what's happening, then a new moral culture that we seek to establish via the movement is not the culture where no one is left out, but rather the one that excludes its members based on their lack of membership in elite groups.

While similar concerns have been raised regarding a wide range of cultural norms, let's focus on the cases of microaggressions. It is observed correctly that microaggressions are subtle and hard to identify, especially for people who do not experience them on a daily basis. It is also true that these new trends to replace the problematic traditions with 'politically correct' ones are not easily accessible to everyone.<sup>81</sup> For instance, consider the term "blind-reviewing." It has been only recently brought to our attention that the term in question is reasonably offensive to blind people, and should be replaced with "anonymous reviewing."<sup>82</sup> Use of this term is stigmatizing and contributes to oppressive practices against the group of visually impaired individuals, or to *ableism* in general, for, by using the term 'blind' to indicate the idea of 'not knowing,' it furthers the stereotype that blind individuals are less capable of knowing. It is true that lots of well-intentioned people were not aware of the fact that a commonly used term in our language can be offensive and stigmatizing. It is also true that the movement to implement this relatively new norm in our society has been driven by individuals or groups whom one might reasonably describe as intellectual and cultural elites.

I believe I can respond to this concern by recalling the two important distinctions I made in this paper. First, there should be a distinction between one's engaging in discriminatory behaviors (e.g. acting in a sexist or racist way) and being the person endorsing such behaviors (e.g. being a

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<sup>80</sup> See e.g. Schwarz 2017, Bartholomew 2015, Hanson 2016 for their discussion of *virtue signaling*.

<sup>81</sup> There also seems to be disagreement *within* the oppressed community about what counts as "politically correct" attitudes toward them.

<sup>82</sup> Similarly, terms like "blind spot" or "blind faith" are also problematic.

sexist or racist), and different sanctions appropriate in each case. Second, these sanctions include a range of blaming and critical responses toward the individuals who engaged in wrongful behaviors, and do not necessarily entail a penalty in their social lives. With these distinctions in mind, we can have respectful discussion on both the right ways of behaving, and the right ways of responding to wrongful behaviors, given the relevant context. Instead of taking one side of the story as the right one, whether it be calling for these acts to be sanctioned in a universal way, or regarding them all-together as too trivial to merit any protests, we should discuss ways in which we can move forward to a culture where no one has to silently accept being targets of abuse, and no one is considered left out from public discourse simply by not having known better, with the shared goal of better understanding each other's perspectives.

I wish to end this section with the following thoughts. My proposal to treat microaggressions as moral offenses meriting blaming and critical responses does not serve to either “coddle” the victims or “silence” the perpetrators. In order to move forward to a moral culture of inclusion and shared respect, there are burdens on both sides.<sup>83</sup> In responding to incidents of microaggressions, victims are asked to understand, and lots of them already do by experiencing constant resistance to their testimony of having been wronged, that not everyone is in a good epistemic position to understand the structure of oppression, and to discern particular instances of aggression as part of discriminatory practices. There are varying kinds and degrees of appropriate responses, which they will find more fitting in some situations than in others. Victims are asked to understand that properly responding to these situations, instead of giving up discoursing with wrongdoers, is an essential step to cultivate a culture of inclusion.

There are burdens on perpetrators as well. By being targets of blaming and critical responses for their wrongful behaviors, perpetrators are asked to reexamine their views, and acknowledge that

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<sup>83</sup> I thank Susan Wolf for this valuable point.

their acts, benign as those seem to their eyes, can both express disrespect toward individuals and contribute to a larger pattern of stigmatization against oppressed groups in society. They will face blame or criticism, sometimes stronger and other times milder, with the readiness to learn and to become more responsible members of the community, which will involve taking the testimonies of people who are in a good position to discern oppressive practices as reliable evidence for revising their beliefs and behaviors. They are asked to understand that these responses will lead us to a better moral community, and should not be met with defensiveness or hasty denials.

## VI. Conclusion

In this paper, I claimed that we can tackle *the problem of invisible wrongdoers* routinely and systematically faced by victims of oppression by analyzing the significance of individual incidents of microaggression as moral offenses taking place in interpersonal interactions between the victims and the perpetrators. As Moody-Adams says, “a culture is a way of life shaped by normative expectations embodied in social rule,” and “both cultural adaptation and cultural change depend for their success upon the preservation of the individual’s capacities for the exercise of judgment and discretion.”<sup>84</sup> Fighting oppression and promoting a moral culture where no one is left out requires discerning and properly responding to situations of wrongdoing. Instead of simply moving past them, we need to face them, but with an open mind to understand and embrace the different perspectives coming from different experiences.

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<sup>84</sup> Moody-Adams 1994, p.304.

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