MICROAGGRESSIONS AND PHILOSOPHY

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8 I Know What Happened to Me

The Epistemic Harms of Microaggression

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Introduction: Epistemic Solidarity and Building on Our Knowledges

In October 2016, Dr. Tamika Cross, a Black physician, was on a Delta flight when a fellow passenger suddenly required medical assistance. As she tried to assist, she was stopped by the flight attendants who doubted her credentials as a physician. In the name of the patient's health, they blocked Dr. Cross from responding. Making their biases even more evident, the flight attendants allowed another white male physician to respond to the patient's needs without having to show his credentials (Hauser 2016). Having heard this story, Dr. Fatima Cody, also a Black physician, began to carry a copy of her medical license with her. In November 2018, Dr. Cody was faced with a similar situation to Dr. Cross', where the flight attendants kept requiring reassurance that she was indeed a physician (Hauser 2018).

In both cases, the flight attendants' "disbelief" that Dr. Cross and Dr. Cody were physicians seemed to be grounded in the flight attendants' perception of what physicians look like: namely, not Black women. Many of us are able to recognize such dismissal for what it is – a belief that someone who looks or sounds like us[1] cannot occupy a position of expertise in the perpetrator's imagination. Dr. Cody learned from what had happened to Dr. Cross and to many before her. She was able to recognize the *microaggressive* dismissal of her physician license *precisely* because of her knowledge of incidents like Dr. Cross' flight experience. This particular type of microaggressive act has a long history, where one's authority is undermined due to societal racist, sexist, ageist assumptions and the like. In fact, one of the incidences that Chester M. Pierce – the psychologist who coined the term "microaggression" in 1970 – describes is that of having his authority as a professor constantly challenged in minor and subtle ways. He writes:

> I notice in a class I teach that after each session a white, not a black, will come up to me and tell me how the class should be structured or how the chairs should be placed or how there should be extra

meetings outside the classroom, etc … One could argue that I am hypersensitive, if not paranoid, about what I know every black will understand, is that it is not what the student says in this dialogue, it is how he approaches me, how he talks to me, how he seems to regard me. I was patronized. I was told, by my own perceptual distortions perhaps, that although I am a full professor on two faculties at a prestigious university, to him I was no more than a big black ni**&r. I had to be instructed and directed as to how to render him more pleasure!

(Pierce 1970, 277)

Thus, from the inception of the term microaggression to today, many people of color (POC) and other minorities have lived and learned through iterations of experiences where strangers, colleagues, bosses, and subordinates alike dismiss our expertise. If and when marginalized folks accumulate enough personal experience and/or gain access to our shared and collective knowledges, then we are able to recognize it for what it is when it happens to us.

Throughout this chapter, I develop the idea that our knowledge of what counts as microaggression generates from and builds upon the critical reflection of our cumulative experiences of marginalization. While most of my examples are from within the realm of academia – the environment I am most familiar with – the analysis itself is applicable to much broader contexts. The chapter proceeds as follows: in Section "Microaggressions: Some Background," I cover some necessary background about microaggressions. Section "Epistemic Harms of Microaggression," lays out the conceptual framework for analyzing the primary and two secondary epistemic harms of microaggression. In Section "Two Case Studies," I provide two cases of microaggression in academia in order to unpack these concepts. I then discuss the primary epistemic harms in these two cases in Section "Primary Epistemic Harms." Section "Knowing Our Worlds and Secondary Epistemic Harm" explores the two secondary harms of microaggressions, and the final section, "Ways Forward," delves into a possible avenue of resistance to microaggression.

Microaggressions: Some Background

In this section, I lay out some groundwork needed to understand the nature of microaggression, followed by a discussion of the particular value of sharing, a theme I return to in the concluding section of the paper. The scholarship on microaggression has flourished in the past couple of decades, mostly within the discipline of psychology. Recently though, philosophers too have delved into the issue (see, for example, Schroer 2015, Brennan 2016, Tschaepe 2016, Fatima 2017, Friedlaender 2017, McTernan 2018, Rini 2018, Freeman & Stewart 2018). Regina Rini describes microaggression as "a relatively minor insulting event made disproportionately

harmful by taking part in an oppressive pattern of insults" (2018). In other words, a microaggressive incident, whether it is verbal or not, is harmful in part because it fits into a larger system of domination.

Part of the definition of microaggression that has developed encompasses those insults or slights that are *unintentional* on the part of the microaggressor. That is to say, a person who is well-intentioned can say or do things that are microaggressive even if they don't know they are doing this and if they are not consciously doing it. Regardless of intention, their singular action fits into the larger pattern of the racist, sexist, ableist, transphobic structures and so on. Because they cause harm, microaggressions naturally invite questions of blameworthiness. Christina Friedlaender argues that although a person may microaggress another person unintentionally, we as individuals still have "a responsibility to respond to the cumulative harm to which we have individually contributed" (Friedlaender 2018, 6). She gestures toward creating an environment where individual responsibility includes initiatives such as self-education about microaggression, self-reflection about one's implicit biases, and learning about how these biases contribute to microaggressive behavior on one's part.

In response to the burgeoning scholarship on microaggression, there has also been some pushback. Lukianoff and Haidt claim in *Coddling of the American Mind* (2018) that American universities are cultivating fragile psyches in students, encouraging them to protest anything that makes them slightly uncomfortable. According to Lukianoff and Haidt, such policing of unintentional slights ensures that students cannot go on to counter the intellectual demands of life-after-college. Similarly, in *The Rise of Victimhood Culture*, Campbell and Manning (2018) argue that youth have become hypersensitive and that a focus on microaggression has created a "culture of victim-mentality." The claim is that youth have been coddled to perceive small innocuous incidents as microaggression and this culture of calling out these trivial slights is detrimental to youth's ability to function in the larger world. Furthermore, such a practice limits free speech and by shutting down certain topics perceived as possibly being offensive to the coddled mind. Regina Rini (2015) does an excellent job of responding to such claims:

> The new culture of victimhood is not new, and it is not about victimhood. It is a culture of solidarity, and it has always been with us, an underground moral culture of the disempowered. In the culture of solidarity, individuals who cannot enforce their honor or dignity instead make claim on recognition of their simple humanity. They publicize mistreatment not because they enjoy the status of victim but *because they need the support of others to remain strong*, and because public discomfort is the only possible route to redress.
> (emphasis mine)

In this chapter, I draw upon a particular aspect of Rini's response: the need for "the support of others to remain strong" (ibid.). This support often lies within sharing our experiences among ourselves, for it is the sharing of our stories within marginalized communities that allows us to critically reflect on our cumulative experiences. For some of the marginalized, that accumulation of knowledges happens very early on, out of a necessity to survive. Folks who exist on multiple axes of marginalized identities are inundated with microaggressions earlier and more frequently in life. And because these iterations of events follow similar patterns of marginalization, we sometimes *know* what just happened – with our brains and our hearts connecting seemingly disparate life experiences in a split second, even as others undercut and doubt our assessment of our experiences.[2]

Much like Lauren Freeman and Heather Stewart (2018), I want to center the discussion of microaggressions on the person who has been microaggressed, rather than on the microaggressor. There are many adverse ramifications of microaggressions and some may even be a matter of life and death, as could have been in case of delayed care in Dr. Cody and Dr. Cross' examples above. However, I here maintain my focus on the epistemic harms in particular, in order to have a more nuanced understanding of the microaggressed's ability to generate and participate in making knowledge claims.

Epistemic Harms of Microaggression

In this section, I explore the primary and two types of secondary epistemic harms of microaggression. By epistemic harm, I mean wrongs that result from being microaggressed that diminish a person's capacity as a knower to generate and participate in making knowledge claims (Fricker 2007, Dotson 2014). The primary epistemic harm is the direct epistemic harm to the microaggressed.

Consider this example: upon finding out that an African American professor at his university went to Stanford, an administrator remarks "Oh, …. you went to *Stanford*? … It must have been easy for you to get in." The first time that the Stanford graduate had heard a comment like that, he had just received his acceptance letter. He told a fellow white undergraduate about his acceptance to graduate school, and his friend remarked, "easy for you." The interaction left him feeling very perturbed and at the time, he was uncertain why it made him feel that way. His friend had said it laughingly. He thought, maybe it was a bad joke, or perhaps his friend meant that it was easy for him to get in to Stanford because of all that he had achieved thus far and how hard he worked on his application. He also wondered if it was true that he got in because he was Black, and this thought filled him with self-doubt. It is within these initial sentiments that there is a primary epistemic harm of

the microaggression, where the recipient is unable to be sure how to even process and generate knowledge claims about their experience, prior to their sharing of the incident with others. Here we see that the microaggressed feels uneasy but cannot develop epistemic certainty about the nature of their experience as it is occurring. As I have written elsewhere, "Sometimes, when undergoing an experience, it is difficult to recognize certain patterns of disrespect motivated by racism, sexism, and xenophobia" (Fatima 2017, 148). That failure to make knowledge claims to oneself (and to others) about the link between how these interactions make one feel (uneasy, embarrassment, etc.) and systemic oppression is itself a direct epistemic harm of microaggression. That is to say, often a primary epistemic harm of microaggression is the inability to generate knowledge claims with epistemic certainty about the nature of one's own uncomfortable experience (for more, see Fatima 2017).

As time passes, one may gain epistemic certainty about the nature of their experiences either because of critical reflection, and/or because they continue to encounter other similar microaggression, and/or because they hear about similar experiences of others. This becomes the case with our Ivy League graduate. Thus, when the administrator made that remark, she clearly implied that the professor was an affirmative action applicant to the Ivy League. Her statement undercuts the undergraduate accomplishments of the Ivy League graduate that enabled him to secure his seat at Stanford. Through the administrator's flippant remark, she swiftly undoes any knowledge claims that accompany the claim: "I went to Stanford for my PhD," such as: "I am crème de le crème, I am the smartest of the smartest folks out there." The Ivy League graduate can no longer assert those claims as implicit. This is yet another primary epistemic harm, a direct harm to his ability to generate and assert knowledge claims about himself because of this particular interaction, and more importantly, because of a history of similarly patterned interactions throughout his career. In that interaction and the many others like it, a common racist myth is sustained, namely that minorities can never truly belong in Ivy League institutions unless they are "let in" through affirmative action. It reinforces the harmful and false beliefs about his intellectual acumen not just to those who heard the remark, but also in himself. He is left in the awkward position of actively having to refute the administrator's seemingly "playful" remark.

The secondary epistemic harms of microaggression occur in the aftermath of the initial microaggression, when people around the microaggressed often cannot or do not see it as a microaggression. Consider the example where in a committee meeting of 15 white faculty members and 1 faculty member of color, a senior white man states, without any critical reflection, that students of color do not have the skills and academic competence to get into top graduate schools. While the comment is directed at students of color, the sole person of color in that

meeting reads the statement as the familiar indictment against all people of color, that they do not truly belong in academia. She is reminded of all the times that her own undergraduate- and graduate-level teachers underestimated her intellect and expressed surprise at her writing skills. In this moment, she points out to the senior colleague that this is not a factual statement. Not only does no one recognize that the white man was microaggressive in his statement, but two different white women reprimand her for "making others out to be racist" and asking the woman of color to be more "civil" in her discourse.

The primary epistemic harm of this interaction is the epistemic impact of the claim that the white male faculty perpetuates, namely, that students of color overall lack intellect. It not only piques doubt within the sole faculty of color about the intellectual abilities of students of color, it also places her in a position where she has to expend cognitive energy to make a decision about how to respond. Regardless of her outward response, the sole faculty of color is mentally fatigued because comments such as these have been a constant occurrence throughout her academic life. In that moment, she has to yet again make a choice between speaking up and probably encountering hostility in return, or keeping silent and possibly eroding at her sense of self. It affects the sort of claims she can make about her place in academia and her relationships with her colleagues. When no one speaks up, she can see that she is alone, isolated within her place of work. And the recurring nature of these types of comments that cast minorities as not belonging within academia further solidifies that claim for her about herself.

The sole faculty of color is not only microaggressed in virtue of her identity as a person of color in the room, but now has to expend energy undoing this false claim. This is where the secondary epistemic harm of microaggression comes in. She has to deal with the aftermath of the microaggression as two white women present an inverted reality where it is the woman of color who is the wrongdoer. This secondary interaction has its own epistemic impact, namely, doubt within her about whether she has overreacted, inadvertently implied that the white male faculty is a racist, and doubts about her approach to address the situation.

I explore two distinct types of secondary harms of microaggression, where the two often overlap and can be inseparable. The first sort is when folks around the microaggressed person doubt or gaslight them, resulting in the microaggressed questioning their own reality. Veronica Ivy [Rachel McKinnon] defines gaslighting as when "the hearer of testimony [typically about a harm or injustice committed against the speaker] raises doubts about the speaker's reliability at perceiving events accurately" (2017, 168). More importantly, it "is aimed at getting another not to take herself seriously as an interlocutor" (Abramson 2014, 2). For the purpose of this paper, it is not important if the interlocutor intends to gaslight or not, as long as they actively provide alternative explanations

to the assessment of the experience of the microaggressed. As I have discussed elsewhere (2017)

> One of the common responses to hearing someone tell of an incidence of microaggression is an attempt to offer either alternate explanations of what the listener thinks actually happened or an alternate account of the well-meaning motivations of the perpetrators. They may offer explanation such as "I don't think he meant it like that," or "It is very possible that she was actually trying to help you." They may also suggest other benign possibilities such as "well, I know it is not common that they do this, but they are simply following the letter of the law," etc. If the person from the marginalized social location is unsure about how to process the said microaggression, the listener's explanation compounds their doubt.
>
> (Fatima 2017, 152)

In our case above, when the sole faculty of color points out the microaggressive comment of the white male faculty, two faculty members who are white women undercut the reality perceived by the microaggressed. This results in the microaggressed doubting her own perception of reality.

The second form of secondary epistemic harm of microaggression is what I term as absence of shared *cumulative epistemic resources* that impedes the ability on part of the microaggressed to make knowledge claims about their experience of microaggression *to others*. This is often because of deficiency of shared cumulative hermeneutical resources.

In her book, *Epistemic Injustice* (2007), Miranda Fricker distinguishes between two forms of epistemic harms: testimonial and hermeneutic injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when a hearer does not give due credibility to the speaker due to prejudice (Fricker 2007, 1). José Medina (2013) points out that epistemic injustice does not just occur due to credibility *deficit* unfairly allotted to some (as Fricker points out), rather it is a function of both credibility deficits *and* excesses, and *in comparison* with the epistemic authority of the speaker. For example, imagine a female car mechanic tells a customer that the car's brake pads need changing. The customer dismisses her expert diagnosis, and looks around for another (male) mechanic. This microaggressive behavior, where his dismissal of her expertise in favor of someone who has more currency due to their gender, emanates from prejudice against women being experts in auto mechanics. Furthermore, the credibility deficit is disproportional to her actual expertise as a mechanic. The customer locates another mechanic who is a man and is wearing a badge with the word "trainee" on it. The customer asks this junior trainee mechanic to look over his car. This mechanic delivers the same report to

the customer as his female superior had delivered. The customer trusts the information coming from the second mechanic because of *credibility excess* placed in his testimony, in particular in proportion to his actual expertise (which is less than the female mechanic).

Hermeneutical injustice occurs when one's experiences are obscured from collective understanding because of unequal social power relationships (Fricker 2007, 154–155). In the case of microaggressions, the microaggressed is unfairly disadvantaged in their capacity to convey to others their experience of being microaggressed because of lack of shared resources that would help others understand their experiences as such. In both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice within cases of microaggression, the epistemic agency of the microaggressed participating in making knowledge claims is diminished. More importantly, in the context of the second type of secondary epistemic harm of microaggression, my claim here is that those collective resources provide an accumulation of knowledge about similarly patterned acts of microaggression, allowing folks to recognize how the act fits into larger structures of oppression and call out those behavioral configurations as such.

When an incident of microaggression is relayed to another person, a world is co-constructed between the confidant and the microaggressed. The communication builds a subjectivity together where within this co-constructed world, the microaggressed and the confidant situate themselves together and together, make sense of how the microaggressed view their own experience. That co-constructed subjectivity does not form in a vacuum. It relies on members of marginalized groups making sense of our experiences within societal narratives that are already familiar to others who are similarly marginalized, and more than often, those are the narratives (and often stereotypes and myths) perpetuated by those who are dominantly situated.

Building on the work of José Medina (2013), Audrey Yap (2017) argues that how much epistemic credibility we allot someone is also contingent on the narratives that are available to us in our social imaginary. She states that "[o]ur understanding of some concepts can be shaped by stories involving them, shaping our collective understanding of how certain events 'normally' take place" (Yap 2017, 8). This is to say, when stories do not follow the patterns we are familiar with, we have a hard time granting their narrator epistemic credibility. Furthermore, the recognition of those patterns as patterns is a result of an *accumulation* of being aware of similar experiences. Consequently, the lack of cumulative epistemic resources restricts the sorts of patterns of microaggression, and this deficit can contribute to gaslighting another person's sense of reality (this is where the two types of secondary harms become inseparable). When, as a microaggressed person, one is not familiar enough with similar patterns of microaggressions and one's testimony is repeatedly dismissed, gaslighting can begin to warp one's own sense

of reality. Kate Abramson writes about the toll of folks dismissing your perceptions as unwarranted. She states:

> This appearance is partly mitigated by remembering that these are vignettes [of gaslighting] in the lives of women for whom, as a rule of thumb, this sort of interaction has become pervasive. A single instance of one person saying to another, "that's crazy" may not appear – may not be – an instance of someone trying to destroy another's standing to make claims. But when that form of interaction is iterated over and over again, when counterevidence to "that's crazy" is dismissed, when nothing is treated as salient evidence for the possibility of disrupting the initial accusation, appearances shift.
> (Abramson 2014, 11)

That is to say, that the person loses epistemic credibility among their peers; subsequently, their standing to make claims about their own experiences erodes. But more importantly, they also begin to slowly distrust themselves as well as a reliable epistemic agent (Govier 1993). They may begin to see themselves as paranoid (Pierce 1970, Fatima 2017), not simply because those around them refuse to access epistemic resources of the marginalized, but also because the microaggressed *themselves* do not have the access to the cumulative experiences that allows them to recognize microaggressive patterns. This loss of epistemic creditability in oneself is further complicated by power relations, as Abramson (2014) notes. When the confidant doubts, or worse, gaslights the microaggressed and there is power inequity between them, it can further shake the microaggressed's sense of certainty of their own experience. The microaggressed may think, going back to a previous example, that if senior colleagues are insisting that she has misinterpreted the events, then perhaps she *should* trust their wisdom over her own sense of the events. She may begin to grant the dominantly situated person's claims and excessive credibility at the expense of her standing as a knower of her own experiences. The following three sections expand upon the primary epistemic harm and the two secondary epistemic harms of microaggression through the use of two case studies.

Two Case Studies

It would be helpful to further explore the epistemic harm of microaggression by working through a few instances of it. Here I describe two incidents and explore the ways that they are examples of microaggression. I find it worthwhile to examine how each incident is a microaggression because more often than not, the inability to understand an uncomfortable incident *as* a microaggression is itself linked to the primary epistemic harm of microaggression. By exploring the ways that each case

is a microaggression, I actively contribute to both the ability to make epistemic claims about such incidents, *and* to the cumulative epistemic resources that aid us in pattern recognition of future microaggressions.

Case 1: An academic researcher receives a paper back from a managing editor with feedback for improvement from two reviewers. The comments are unusually harsh. As the author initially reads through them, she is embarrassed and intellectually demoralized. She feels like an imposter who has nothing valuable to contribute to the field. However, after leaving the feedback alone for some time – as all academics are advised to do – the author begins to think that many of the comments are due to the reviewer's unfamiliarity with the literature. Moreover, it appears that some of the comments might possibly be motivated by reviewer #2's bias against non-native English speakers – the author had identified herself as an immigrant in her writing. The tone of review is condescending and sarcastic. For instance, the reviewer asks "Is this a country?" when the author first uses and explains the term "White spaces" in her paper. The reviewer does not ask the author to further explain the term "white spaces." Rather, it seems they are incredulous at the audacity of a POC to be generating knowledge in the white space of academia. They also ask if the author is "making terms up like 'minority mothers'" and whether LGBTQ mothers can "actually mother and give birth"! It became clear from their comments that the reviewer was not unfamiliar with critical feminist literature on the mothering, but rather, they were undercutting the author's expertise by constantly asking them to re-work well-established concepts within critical theory. And the reviewer did not stop there. They pinpointed linguistic "mistakes" that were more appropriately stylistic issues and suggested random substitutions for words throughout the paper, such as using the word "imperialism" instead of what the author used, namely, "colonialism," "demonstrated the fact" instead of "attested to the fact," and "parental commitment" instead of "parental engagement." In each case, the author had deliberately used the words she had found to be more fitting for the point she wanted to make. Not entirely sure of her assessment of bias, the author first consults a woman of color (WOC) friend, and then posts some of these comments in an online forum of WOC academics to get a sense of whether she is being hypersensitive – a common criticism when marginalized folks voice discontent at microaggressions. Hordes of other WOC academics share their own experiences of microaggressive non-constructive comments and confirm the author's initial inkling about the bias in the reviewer's comments. The reactions help the author tremendously. They allow her to gain some epistemic certainty about her preliminary suspicions. They allow her to respond to the reviewers' "objections" while holding her ground on theoretical and linguistic choices, and ultimately not to ditch the paper as she had originally planned. In a different conversation, the author brings up the microaggressive nature of the reviewer's comments

in a casual setting with her white colleagues who were discussing her paper. They all began to second guess the author's assessment of the review. "Perhaps, the reviewer meant this….," "are you sure, you didn't misread what the reviewer actually said," "oh, I have had a word or two substituted and I am a native speaker, so I don't think it has to do with the fact you are an immigrant," etc. It was only when the author, with the permission of concerned WOC, told the white colleagues the over-whelming affirmation she had received from other WOC that the white colleagues affirmed the author's assessment of her own reality.

Case 2: A hiring committee member asks a WOC education scholar job candidate, who works on social justice in education, "do you think your research fits within educational research?" Here an academic job candidate is asked about their research at an interview. It would be hard for some to think of the question as microaggressive, regardless of how it might have made the candidate feel. Some, especially those who are dominantly socially located within her discipline, might simply see the question as an attempt to see if and how the candidate's scholarship fits within the field of education. But note that the hiring committee did not ask *how* it fits, but rather *whether* it fits. The candidate has a hard time explaining to others, post-incident, why she knew that this question was microaggressive and knew that the hiring committee was not "ready" to hire a POC from the global south. Based on the candidate's account of the event, I want to argue below that this case is indeed an instance of microaggression. The candidate states:

> When the question of whether my scholarship belongs in education was asked, I immediately knew that they thought I did not belong there – just like the question "where are you *really* from?". Immedi-ately I felt like an alien to the discipline, and I thought my response to this question was risky given that I was the candidate. I told them, "yes it does, and if it does not, then these conversations need to be pushed into mainstream educational research." When I sat in the train, I felt my response was unintelligent and instead I should have said that bringing race, gender, ethnicity, – an intersectional lens, does not deem my research as outside the discipline of education, rather the inclusion of such analysis only provides validity to the existence of *our* discipline. I was really upset with myself that my re-sponse was quite reactive, but I was not expecting this question and it just made me feel that not only my physical being (being the only WOC there) but also my research was unwelcome there. This was a position for social justice research in education. I felt very angry that they knew my research from my application, why shortlist me, invite me, only to dismiss my work in the end? Maybe among the six candidates, they did indeed choose the best one, the most suitable one and that was probably the conclusion formed by the other four

candidates who did not get in. I was just upset at that question and I felt all the events of that day were perfectly summed up in that question. The all-white panel, the questions unrelated to my research, presentation, the informal but very formal lunch, and finally the interview. I just felt I was there being accommodated, a temporary guest, and tickbox exercise for diversity initiatives in HR recruitment policy. They doubted the place of my research, and I ended up doubting my scholarship, whether I will amount to anything, or will I just be a diversity token. All this from supposedly critical researchers that were concerned with social justice research.

(Anonymous, 2019, personal communication)

The candidate *knew* that the hiring department had a bias against hiring a POC – a bias of the following variety: we are committed to promoting diversity within our faculty, but just not through this particular diverse person.[3] The candidate could tell from the tone of the question that the hiring committee member did not regard her research as serious academic scholarship. She also learned that all of the other candidates for the job were white and that none of them had been asked this question (small subfield where the candidates knew one another). The question, "*does* your scholarship fit?," appears to be the only explicit comment that the candidate can remotely point to as an example of the fact that she was microaggressed, but throughout the interview, many other smaller things happened that *give context* to that question being justifiably experienced as a microaggression. For example, the committee did not engage at all with the candidate's scholarship that was on POC in education; instead, after the candidate's research presentation, they asked questions about how many dissertation students she can realistically supervise. This lack of engagement with her scholarship at a research-intensive institution showed her that an intersectional analysis of the field was not considered serious scholarship. Later, the candidate thought to herself that the department clearly was aware of all of her research projects from the initial application. With that realization, she became even surer that she was only shortlisted so that the department could feel good about their "commitment to diversity" by inviting a person of color to the campus interview round. The candidate knew that the question about her scholarship was microaggressive within this expanded context and the context of her lived experiences where time and time again, she has been shown her "place" within different academic situations.

Primary Epistemic Harms

In this section, I look at the primary epistemic harms of the microaggression cases above. In the first case, the author initially doubts her own intellectual ability as a result of the condescending review that she received

on a paper submission. This is the primary epistemic harm associated with the microaggression, the most direct harm. That is, the primary harm is the author's initial conclusion that her intellectual abilities are not on par with others in academia, an unwarranted claim about her intellectual acumen. The exclusionary and admonishing tone of the review fits into larger oppressive structures that have not only systemically kept life inside the ivory tower out of reach for POC, and have made it seem as though POC are incapable of being rational and intellectual enough. The other primary epistemic harm of microaggression in this case is that the comments from reviewer #2 could potentially halt the intellectual growth of the author as a researcher, if she had decided to give up the project altogether. Such comments maintain the exclusion of folks like the author from participating and generating knowledge to contribute to the construction of the discipline. This harm is both experienced by the microaggressed in terms of their scholarly development and career opportunities (non-epistemic harms), and, indirectly, also a harm to the larger discipline by robbing the discipline of much needed diverse perspectives (again, non-epistemic harms).

Upon reflection, she begins to think that the reviewers have not in fact offered much in the way of constructive feedback at all. None of the comments are helpful to the author insofar as none of them help to improve the clarity or the arguments of the paper. Instead, with time, the author realizes that the reviewers have dispensed gatekeeping steeped in bias and ignorance, where the comments simply mean to assert the intellectual dominance of the reviewers and the outsider status of the author. She voices her frustrations, first to another WOC, and then in a forum of WOC academics where she knows that she can trust others to set her straight if need be. The response from other WOC offers her the support she needs "to remain strong," as Rini writes (2015). Thus, in case #1, there are several different types of harm: the primary epistemic harm of the microaggressive comments that leave the author feeling like an imposter and the diminishing, through gatekeeping, of her ability to contribute as a knower to her field.

In case #2, the primary epistemic harm is the way that the candidate censors herself from participating in her epistemic communities. Unlike in case #1, the microaggressed is able to make epistemic claims about her experience to herself. Even in the moment, the candidate knows what is happening to her and can make epistemic claims about her reality rooted in truths. The primary epistemic harm then is what Kristie Dotson (2011) calls "testimonial smothering," a form of epistemic violence where a speaker truncates their own testimony, knowing that their audience cannot/will not give it appropriate uptake. In this particular case, knowing that her testimony about her experiences of the job market will be unintelligible, she smothers or buries it in polite smiles of "better luck next time." In that moment, she is censoring herself.

Knowing Our Worlds and Secondary Epistemic Harm

In this section, I concentrate on the secondary epistemic harms of microaggression, namely, harms that occur in the aftermath of the microaggression. The first type of secondary epistemic harm occurs when others doubt or gaslight the microaggressed on her assessment of her experiences. The second type of secondary epistemic harm occurs due to a lack of cumulative epistemic resources that make it difficult for the microaggressed to convey their reality to others.

> Imagine living in an epistemic twilight zone, a world where many of your lived experiences are regularly misunderstood, distorted, dismissed, erased, or simply rejected as unbelievable. Perhaps you can't find words to capture an experience that you know to be very real. Or, perhaps there is a local vernacular, but it is rendered nonsensical by listeners outside of your community. Are the "shared" epistemic resources that structure the unlevel knowing field so resilient in the long run that they absorb, erase, ridicule and repel your words?
>
> (Bailey 2014, 62)

Here Bailey speaks of, what she calls "unlevel knowing fields" where those that are non-dominantly situated are disadvantaged in ways that maintain their epistemic oppression. As Bailey states, the epistemic claims of folks who are non-dominantly situated are rendered nonsensical, erased, and/or even repulsive. In both case #1 and case #2, the microaggressed have to deal with the aftermath of the microaggression and experience secondary harms.

In case #1, when the reviewer nitpicked word choices for a non-native English speaker, initially, the WOC author only has an inkling that the comments are microaggressive, but does not have the cumulative knowledge of such experiences of gatekeeping. But her suspicion is then validated by other WOC peers who have had similar experiences of gatekeeping (see Dotson 2012a for an account of how gatekeeping operates within the discipline of philosophy). It was only when she accesses the collective hermeneutical resources of other WOC academics that she developed the "cognitive confidence, and increased communicative facility" (Fricker 207, 148) to make sense of her experience as a microaggression.

The feedback not only allows the author to become more epistemically confident in her assessment of the comments from reviewer #2 as microaggressive, but it also provides her with the appropriate epistemic community that has gone through similar experiences such that she can critically assess her own experience via her access to the collective epistemic resources of WOC. Finding this epistemic community, to a large extent, not only helps address the primary epistemic harm of

microaggression, but also helps her deal with the aftermath. Recall that when the author relays her assessment of the reviewers' comments as microaggressive, her white colleagues gaslight her. The author is able to resist this secondary harm of gaslighting and to hold her epistemic ground in large part due to epistemic support garnered from other WOC's experiences. In this scenario, as Ivy [McKinnon] and many other standpoint theorists before her have argued, the colleagues who have not believed her "ought to put their own perceptions largely aside and trust the testimony of the marginalized person" (2017, 171). This is because the marginalized person is more proximally socially situated in ways that allows them to more accurately evaluate the harm inflicted on them (for a discussion of standpoint theory within the context of microaggressions, see Freeman and Stewart's contribution to this volume).

Moreover, in response to her white colleagues' dismissal of her claims to have been microaggressed, if the author in case #1 did not have access to an online forum of WOC academics, then she might have altered her paper significantly to suit the reviewer's bias or simply abandoned the project altogether. But this would have caused harm to the author herself, as it would have stunted the growth of that particular research agenda. Furthermore, there would have also been an additional secondary harm to her discipline from the abandoned research paper, as the discipline would not grow as much and benefit from diverse perspectives, skill sets, and epistemological standpoints; instead the discipline would maintain its narrow focus.

In case #2, the job candidate is deeply affected by the outcome. The result of the committee's bias not only has a devastating impact on the candidate, that of being underemployed, but such bias is also harmful to academia more generally, since in not hiring a POC, the discipline is prevented from learning from the knowledge of a diverse pool of scholars. While it is indeed infuriating to see such harms time and again, here I focus on just the secondary epistemic harm of the microaggressive question in case #2: "do you think your research fits within educational research?" This knowledge of how and why that question is microaggressive is not something that the candidate can easily transfer to others, despite *her knowing* it. If the candidate attempts to relay her assessment to others, her testimony would not be considered sufficient evidence of microaggression occurring by those dominantly situated. And even if the description in Section "Two Case Studies" is sufficient to make the case for the existence of microaggression, most people who are dominantly situated do not want to spend the time or the energy to understand all these various threads of experiences: experiences of the interview day in its entirety, experiences of that particular POC's life, and experiences of POC life in academia in general. Most of those who are dominantly situated cannot/do not delve adequately into the epistemic pool of resources of the marginalized person to give context to the microaggression

(see, for example, Lukianoff and Haidt's dismissal of the reality of micro-aggressions for precisely this reason (2018)). As I have stated elsewhere,

> it requires much effort to see the world from other people's per-spectives. Most people do not care enough or are too far removed from another's social location to travel comfortably into "strange" worlds …. [where they] may be unable, unwilling, or uninterested in making the effort required to understand the values and experiences of others.
>
> (Fatima 2013, 352)

The microaggressed is painfully aware of this reality. Thus, the second form of secondary epistemic harm of microaggression is when the microaggressed suffers from a lack of shared cumulative epistemic resources of the marginalized that can give language to one's experience of microaggression. In such situations, the microaggressed is unable to make knowledge claims about the harm that has occurred to them *in a way that would get any uptake from others.*

Ways Forward

In this concluding section of the chapter, I look at the value of sharing our experiences of microaggression and explore possible avenues for epistemic certainty. In case #1 (about biased reviewers' comments), after confiding with other WOC, the microaggressed gains a good degree of epistemic certainty about their assessment of their own experiences. This is in large part because over the many cumulative experiences of the marginalized, sufficient collective hermeneutical resources have been de-veloped that allow the microaggressed to make sense of their experience, to have access to language that acknowledges microaggressive patterns, and for others around the microaggressed to understand and validate the experience as such via familiarity with the narrative of what micro-aggression look like. It is this familiarity of patterns that is one way to help us resist the secondary harm of microaggression. In case #1, those cumulative hermeneutical resources are at least shared among academic women of color, specifically among non-native English speakers. In such cases, once the pattern is recognized as fitting into structures and histo-ries of oppression and colonization of our languages, the microaggressed is able to deal with the aftermath in a way that is not as damaging to their capacity as a knower. Once the author is able to recognize and give language to the practice of gatekeeping scholarship by POC, she is better able to resist the subversion of her reality by her white colleagues, and is able to convey to others the harm (epistemic and otherwise) committed by the reviewers. But it matters greatly who the microaggressed is con-fiding in, because that determines the sorts of narratives the confidants

are familiar with, and consequently, can impact the subjectivity co-constructed between the microaggressed person and their confidant.

Case #2 is slightly different. It is not just that the job candidate will be disbelieved when she tries to convey to others that she was micro-aggressed in her job interview because of identity prejudice alone. It is also not simply the case that she lacks the collective hermeneutical resources of the marginalized, though that does plays a role. In case #2, the microaggressed knows that she was microaggressed. If she were to talk to women of color academics who have recently been through the wringer of academic job interviews, and told them how she felt wronged, they would probably understand her claims for they too have faced exclusion for the sort of scholarship they do. Yet, since she does not have access to similar previous experiences of her own or to the "right" confidants, she does not benefit from cumulative experiences that allow her to recognize her experience within a pattern of behavior and give language to the incident. She knows that the more she attempts to get some sort of validation of how she was microaggressed from others who are differentially situated, the more she will be exhausted and utterly dissatisfied (non-epistemic harms). Sarah Ahmed writes about the exhaustion of coming up against seemingly invisible barriers to equity:

> And also if we shatter because of what we come against, but what we come up against is not revealed, it might seem as if we are shattering ourselves … it might be assumed that we have tripped ourselves up, that we have wrong-footed ourselves; that our willfulness is behind our downfall.
>
> (Ahmed 2017, 175)

This is to say, our despondency/anger/affective-or-otherwise reaction to being microaggressed and, in particular, to suffering its secondary epistemic harms, *appears* to others to be a result of our own torturous mindset. Furthermore, because sometimes microaggressions are invisible to others, i.e. they are (willfully or otherwise) unfamiliar with the sorts of narratives that the microaggressed experience, articulating them makes one even more visible to those around them. One becomes visible as one begins to articulate experiences that make one stand out, look irrational, or incoherent, as their world makes little sense to knowers of dominant epistemic ideologies.

Dotson (2014) adds to the category of Fricker's first two epistemic harms, testimonial and hermeneutical harms. Dotson describes a third-order epistemic exclusion where epistemological systems are themselves inadequate. For Dotson, we must ask ourselves where the parameters and boundaries for our existing epistemological systems are (as opposed to the inefficiencies and insufficiencies *within* that system), and what our epistemological systems do not yet allow us to acknowledge. So even

while the knowers of dominant ideologies may think of the candidate in case #2 as a competent knower, and are willing to be epistemically open, they (those dominantly situated, but even the marginalized, the oppressed, the microaggressed) may still not be able to work outside the larger epistemological framework. Being contained within these dominant epistemological frameworks keeps us within environments where oppressive systems will inevitably exist, and consequently, micro-aggressions will inevitably occur. For example, in case #2, our commit-ment to the concept meritocracy within academia – a flawed concept at best – plays into how we review and assess applications of minority candidates, without acknowledging the limited (and colonial) ways we view our disciplines and our scholars. It is being confined within these dominant epistemological frameworks that create the epistemic environ-ment such that there is a general lack of understanding of the harmful nature of the question asked at the interview in case #2.

However, *all* is not lost. In case #2, the candidate knows from experi-ences of various iterations of discrimination over her life, where she has been dismissed, gaslit, and/or deemed unintelligible, that she will have a very difficult time articulating to others the bias within the interview and the countless ways she was microaggressed. One might think the difficulty is in part because the bias is not contained within a neat snide remark and that in case #2, it can only make sense when contextualized within a charitable and critical reflection of cumulative experiences of marginalized folks in academia. However, I want to claim that the rea-son that some cases appear to be a clear-cut case of microaggression is precisely because POC have already developed a shared knowledge base rooted in their shared, cumulative experiences about the nature of such incidents. In other words, cases such as case #2 are not different because they do not require contextualization and critical reflection of cumulative experiences, rather that work has already been done if we take seriously the narratives of marginalized folks. And herein lies hope. As we work through, unpack our experiences, explore why they make us feel uneasy, recognize certain patterns, and share them with other marginalized folks, we inevitably contribute to the cumulative epistemic resources needed to resist the epistemic harms of microaggression. In situations such as case #2 where it is a lifetime of messy experiences that contextualize the microaggressive utterance, that understanding has yet to be recognized as knowledge and is rendered unintelligible by domi-nant epistemically oppressive systems.

As Gaile Pohlhaus (2102) and Kristie Dotson (2012) argue, when others willfully refuse to employ hermeneutical resources of the marginalized, they do so in order to maintain their own epistemic comfort. They refuse to make any effort to inhabit the worlds of the marginalized, so that they can deflect any real epistemic friction away from their existing world view (Medina 2013). This refusal, especially at the hands of seemingly

progressive allies within academia, can make one resentful or defeated over time. That defeat bears its own cost for the microaggressed. It can erase hope or make a person feel despondent, such that their hope in future possibilities slowly begins to diminish. They may eventually give up on academia altogether (a non-epistemic harm, stemming from epistemic harm). I do want to note though that the bitterness, the resentfulness, anger, and even what appears to be defeat (and even liberation from shackles of toxic environments around us) all have their place within the context of being pigeonholed as irrational, unintelligent, not nuanced enough. For example, Rini (2018) makes a compelling argument that anger is a tactically useful and morally justified response to microaggression. At the very minimum, these feelings help us maintain our sense of dignity in these particular scenarios and all warranted responses to the epistemic harms of microaggressions.

I want to end by reiterating a point made by Dotson that "[a] catch-all theory of epistemic injustice is an unrealistic expectation. Epistemic oppression is simply too pervasive" (Dotson 2012, 41). In line with Dotson's insight, here I have only offered a preliminary analysis of the sorts of epistemic harms of microaggression, and while my examples cover cases within academia, the analysis itself is also very pertinent to microaggression outside of the academic settings. Furthermore, what has become clear from an analysis of the secondary harms of microaggression is that the mere act of attempting to articulate one's experience in microaggressive situations can be an act of resistance with heavy cost to the testifier. This is especially true in situations such as case #1 and #2 where knowledges of the marginalized have not become part and parcel of society's communal epistemic resources and in some cases – such as case #2, when they are beyond the parameters of existing epistemological systems. In these moments, where we simultaneously choose to take on the burden *and* the liberation of sharing our lived reality, we risk being seen as bitter/ irrational/ angry/ paranoid/ troublemaker; we risk being excluded from being participators in production of knowledge. When we relay these acts of microaggression, we may do it not simply for the chance of gaining some epistemic certainty for ourselves, some form of redress, but we also (inadvertently /intentionally) add to the voices of the lived realties of our communities, contributing to our collective knowledges, to the hermeneutical resources of the marginalized such that those liminals that experience microaggressions after us can have the epistemic tools to assert their capacity as knowers.

Notes

1 Throughout the paper, I use "us" to refer to marginalized folks, and sometimes more specifically to people of color.
2 I was once leading a class discussion and we were discussing our experiences of being stopped by the cops as POC. Then a young white woman asked

earnestly, "how do you know that's why you were stopped?" and almost in union, several POC responded "you just know." This form of knowledge is very valuable in assessing harm. It is not that we *just* know but *that* we know, that we know because of culmination of our experiences and/or access to the lived reality of other POC. (To her credit, the white woman did respond in the best way possible though – not by undercutting our assessment of POC student experiences – but by saying: "Oops, did I just let my white fly?")

3 A *New York Times* article lays out this variety of bias in their analysis of why people have a hard time voting for any particular woman for the job of the President of the United States (see Astor 2019).

Acknowledgments

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