

## Taking the Measure of Microaggression: How to Put Boundaries on a Nebulous Concept

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### Abstract

How can we tell whether an incident counts as a microaggression? How do we draw the boundary between microaggressions and weightier forms of oppression, such as hate crimes? I address these questions by exploring the ontology and epistemology of microaggression, in particular the constitutive relationship between microaggression and systemic social oppression. I argue that we ought to define microaggression in terms of the *ambiguous* experience that its victims undergo, focusing attention on their perspectives while providing criteria for distinguishing microaggression.

What's the difference between a get-together and a party? Both are social gatherings, probably with some food and drink, maybe some music. But how do we draw the boundary between the two? Is it just the number of attendees? If you have five people at a get-together, and then two more turn up, is it now a party? Suppose no one cranks up the music – if 15 people are quietly talking to one another around the living room, is that a small party or a big get-together? However you answer, the question doesn't seem all that important. Maybe a party is just a get-together, but more so.

What's the difference between a microaggression and a hate crime? The answer had better not be: a hate crime is just a microaggression, but more so. Because this boundary really matters. Committing a hate crime has serious legal and moral consequences. We rightly ostracize or even imprison hate crime perpetrators. But microaggressions are commonplace, sometimes unavoidable screwups, certainly not the sort of thing for which people should be heavily punished. Yet if hate crimes are just bigger microaggressions – like parties are just bigger get-togethers – then we seem to be hanging a lot of moral weight on a scale that no one knows quite how to calibrate.

Sometimes an uncalibrated measure is no big deal: it doesn't really matter whether we call the gathering a party when your two extra friends turn up. But it matters deeply how we measure the size of oppressive harms.

The existing literature on microaggression tends to confuse rather than clarify this point. We're told that microaggressions are "brief and commonplace" incidents that happen in "everyday life".<sup>1</sup> Yet we're also told – by Derald Wing Sue, the most influential contemporary expositor of the concept – that all of the following are microaggressions: "using racial epithets, discouraging interracial interactions, deliberately serving a White patron before someone of color, and displaying a swastika".<sup>2</sup> These last examples don't seem right; they seem too 'big', too 'heavy', to count as microaggressions. It sounds like calling 300 people moshing around the speakers a get-together. But not as quaint as that mistake.

It matters that we draw an upper boundary on microaggression because the lack of one encourages scientific and political error. Psychologist Scott Lilienfeld argues that the concept is too vague to be scientifically tractable.<sup>3</sup> Cultural critics like former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg dismiss the concept with quips like: "a microaggression is exactly that: micro".<sup>4</sup>

The aim of this chapter is to articulate a principled basis for taking the measure of microaggression. I clarify two different senses we can attribute to the 'micro-' prefix: a *parametric* sense referring to quantitative extent (as in 'microwave radiation') and a *constitutive* sense referring to a part-whole relationship (as in 'microeconomics'). I argue that the latter sense is the best interpretation of 'microaggression', and that this resolves some confused critiques of the concept.

I then turn to drawing an upper boundary on the concept of microaggression. I survey two extant approaches, focused respectively on overtness of prejudice and the functional role of microaggression in oppressive social systems. I argue that neither account works. Instead, I propose my own account of microaggression, centered on the painfully ambiguous experience felt by victims. I argue that this account allows us to identify the boundaries of microaggression without the theoretical liabilities of other views.

Doing all of this will help to clarify some unresolved features of current psychological and theoretical work on microaggression. More importantly, it will also put us in a better position to grapple with the ethics and politics of microaggression. I believe that many cultural anxieties surrounding microaggression relate to its uncertain boundaries, and especially to a fear of comingling responsibility for microaggression with responsibility for serious hate crimes. Once we are able to draw a boundary between the two, we will be in a much better position to make progress on addressing our collective responsibility to address the role we all play in perpetuating microaggression.

### What's in a prefix: 'Micro-' as a part/whole relation

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<sup>1</sup> Sue et al 2007, 271.

<sup>2</sup> Sue et al 2007, 274

<sup>3</sup> Lilienfeld 2017, 143; 148.

<sup>4</sup> Brendan O'Connor, 'Reclusive Billionaire Lectures College Students About the Dangers of "Safe Spaces"'. *Gawker* May 2, 2016. <http://gawker.com/reclusive-billionaire-lectures-college-students-about-t-1774206648> [Accessed February 28, 2018]

The prefix ‘micro-’ can be misleading. It seems to mean a smaller version. A microphone is a small device for conveying sound. A microscope is an instrument for looking at tiny little things. Micropayments are financial transactions of very small amounts. The semantic formula seems pretty simple: take whatever you are ‘micro-’ing and make it smaller along an obvious dimension. (Perhaps a two person get-together is just a microparty.)

If we follow this pattern, then a ‘microaggression’ ought to be a tiny little aggression - something like shoving a stranger, only smaller. But there’s an immediate problem with this notion. What is the relevant dimension for measuring aggressions? Is the thought that a typical aggression means shoving a stranger two feet, while a microaggression means shoving a stranger two inches?

I’m being a bit silly here (microsilly?), but for a good reason. This simplistic ‘micro-’ pattern has gotten the concept of microaggression into a lot of needless scientific and cultural difficulty. When Chester Pierce coined ‘microaggression’ in 1970, he very reasonably did not foresee that a half-century later pundits and professors would haggle over the prefix. His introduction of the term was somewhat informal, more ostensive than analytic:

Most offensive actions are not gross or crippling. They are subtle and stunning. The enormity of the complications they cause can be appreciated only when one considers that these subtle blows are delivered incessantly. Even though any single negotiation of offense can in justice be considered of itself to be relatively innocuous, the cumulative effect to the victim and to the victimizer is of an unimaginable magnitude. Hence, the therapist is obliged to pose the idea that offensive mechanisms are usually a *micro-aggression*, as opposed to a gross, dramatic, obvious *macro-aggression* such as lynching.<sup>5</sup>

A lot is going on here. First, Pierce relies on another concept of his, ‘offensive mechanisms’: “automatic and perhaps almost obligatory” psychological dispositions in white people to subtly put down blacks refusing to keep to a derogated social status.<sup>6</sup> Second, Pierce draws attention to the essential *repetition* of microaggression, the way that mild unpleasantness becomes something more when unceasingly reapplied. In the evocative image of Mary Rowe, who later introduced the related concept ‘micro-inequity’: “Like the dripping of water, random drops do little damage; endless drops in one place can have profound effects.”<sup>7</sup> Finally, Pierce makes a contrastive claim about scale, setting microaggressions against an “obvious macro-aggression” like lynching.

It’s on the last point that I think Pierce made a linguistic mistake. The appropriate size contrast for microaggression – the thing we should be calling a macroaggression - isn’t just a *bigger* single act of aggression. It’s the entire social system of oppression. *Macroaggression* is racism itself, sexism itself, homophobia itself. Or so I’ll now argue.

We need to distinguish two different conceptions of scale. The first is a simple size contrast, by which items differ along a distinct quantifiable dimension, typically spatial extension. I’ll call this *parametric* scale. This is the sense of ‘micro-’ in ‘micropig’ (a tiny pig), ‘microcephaly’ (a medical condition characterized by a statistically abnormal small head), and ‘microquake’ (a small earthquake). In these

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<sup>5</sup> Pierce 1970, 265-266. Emphases in original.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 271-272.

<sup>7</sup> Rowe 1977, 64.

cases, the ‘micro-’ prefix is simply telling us to picture a smaller version of the prototypical pig, or head, or quake. The appropriate contrasting prefix is ‘mega-’: a ‘megapig’ is a very hefty porcine, ‘megacephaly’ means an unusually large head, a ‘megaquake’ is an especially powerful earthquake. It’s this sort of contrast that would make a ‘microaggression’ simply a tiny aggression.

But there is a second concept of scale, which I’ll call *constitutive*. The relationship here is *not* variance along quantifiable dimensions, but instead a part-whole relationship. When thinking about complex systems, we can examine the thing-as-a-whole, the ‘macro’ scale, or we can examine its parts, the ‘micro’ scale. We can see this distinction in the contrasting terms ‘macroeconomics’ and ‘microeconomics’. The former refers to economic systems at (inter)national level. The latter refers to corporate and consumer decisions made *within* macroscale economic systems. Importantly, calling a phenomenon ‘microeconomic’ does not necessarily place it on the smaller end of any absolute quantitative scale. Some microeconomic phenomena are *larger*, in currency terms, than some macroeconomic phenomena; some large corporations (microeconomic actors) have greater total dollar valuation than the entire GDP of some small countries (macroeconomic phenomena).

Another example is the computer science term ‘macro’, short for ‘macroinstruction’. In programming, a macro is a short bit of code that stands in for a long set of instructions. This is an especially clear case where the contrast cannot simply be along a quantitative dimension. The macroinstruction is a *shortened* version of the long list of microinstructions; it is only a few characters long, rather than hundreds or thousands. The microinstructions are the parts of the (expanded) macro whole.

What both these examples show is that the micro/macro relationship can be understood as *functional* rather than as dimensional. The micro is a functional part of the macro whole. A microeconomic actor is a functional element of the macroeconomic system. A microinstruction is a functional piece of the macroinstruction whole.

Following this pattern, I suggest that it was a mistake for Pierce to frame the microaggression/macroaggression distinction as any form of dimensional contrast. A microaggression is not just a tiny little aggression, nor is a macroaggression one great big aggression. Rather, a microaggression is a functional component of a macroaggressive systemic whole.

### **Sneaky functions of oppressive societies**

So we can stop worrying about the *terminology*: what makes a microaggression ‘micro’ isn’t its size. But we still have a boundary problem. How do we draw the line between a microaggression and a hate crime? We already know, now, that a hate crime isn’t just more of a microaggression. Yet it’s still hard to say what separates the two.

The functional part-whole relationship we explored in the last section is not, by itself, sufficient to draw a clear boundary. After all, hate crimes *also* play functional roles in sustaining oppressive social systems. Hate crimes serve to intimidate and constrain marginalized people, especially those who attempt to organize against oppression. The Ku Klux Klan, for example, engaged in cross burnings with the deliberate goal of ‘reminding’ African American civil rights campaigners of their ‘place’ in society.

Something similar is true of overt discrimination. Refusing to hire women, people of color, or LGBT people into positions of power and wealth clearly functions to keep them from overcoming structural oppression. Similarly, governmental actions can overtly aim at keeping marginalized people from becoming full citizens. In the UK, the notorious Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act banned schools from teaching “the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship”.<sup>8</sup> Keeping LGBT children from learning about their identity or encountering queer teachers as role models clearly functioned to perpetuate oppression into the next generation.

But if hate crimes and discrimination also function to perpetuate oppression, then what distinguishes them from microaggression? There is, of course, supposed to be a conceptual distinction here. As Derald Wing Sue and colleagues put it in a highly influential article, hate crimes and overt discriminations are types of “old fashioned” prejudice, occurring when “overt... hatred and bigotry is consciously and publicly displayed”. Microaggressions, by contrast, are a form of “modern” bigotry, a “more ambiguous and nebulous form that is more difficult to identify and acknowledge”.<sup>9</sup>

Put that way, it looks as if the upper boundary on microaggression has something to do with overtness. A microaggression is an “ambiguous” or “nebulous” expression of bigotry. So long as the bigoted purpose of an act stays below a threshold of ambiguity, that act counts as microaggression. Beyond the threshold, once bigotry becomes “consciously and publicly displayed”, then the act is a hate crime, or overt discrimination, or some other category of oppressive harm.

There’s something to this idea, clearly, though I think that it too much resembles the parametric conception of scale that we’ve set aside. The idea seems to be that oppressive actions vary along a (theoretically) quantifiable dimension called *overtness*. A microaggression is an oppressive action low on the overtness scale, while a hate crime is much higher on that same scale.

But there is a significant problem with this way of thinking. It requires that we explain *by whom* overtness is measured. Whose perceptions of overtness are at stake? The motives behind one action can be more or less obvious to different observers, and they may sincerely disagree.

Suppose an elderly professor is known for his formal manner; he insists on referring to colleagues by their titles and surnames, never by their first names. But people have noticed that he’s inconsistent in how he applies this rule. He always refers to male colleagues as ‘Professor So-and-so’. But with female colleagues the pattern is more complicated; sometimes he also calls them ‘Professor’, but sometimes he refers to them as ‘Ms. So-and-So’. He doesn’t do it all the time, and if a female colleague points out the slip he apologizes and corrects himself. But eventually it happens again.

How should we describe this case on the parametric overtness scale? It might depend on who you ask. Suppose one of this man’s female colleagues perceives him as engaged in conscious and public display of sexism. She thinks the reason he hasn’t stopped making this mistake is that he *wants* to put female colleagues off-guard. On her view, his apologies are insincere, meant only to evade a Human Resources complaint. But now suppose another female colleague has a different perception. She thinks the old

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<sup>8</sup> UK parliament, Local Government Act of 1988. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/9/section/28/enacted> [Accessed 13 February 2019]. This section was repealed 12 years later.

<sup>9</sup> Sue et al 2007, 272.

professor *might* be engaged in overt sexism. But she also thinks he might just be forgetful and a victim of his long-ago upbringing in an exclusively male academic world. She's not sure.

These two colleagues *agree* that sexism plays some role in the old professor's behavior. But they differ in their perception of the overtness of this sexism. According to the first colleague, the old professor's sexist behavior is blatant and public. According to the second, the role of sexism in his behavior is ambiguous and nebulous. So on the parametric overtness scale we're currently imagining, only the second colleague's perception allows us to count the old professor as engaged in microaggression. According to the first colleague, his sexism is conscious and public, too overt to fall below the threshold.

Which of these colleagues is correct? Does the old professor's linguistic awkwardness count as a microaggression or not? It's not clear how the parametric overtness scale even *could* answer this question, because it leaves the assessment of overtness unspecified. Is an action too overt to be a microaggression if *any* person perceives it as overtly bigoted? Or is it sufficiently ambiguous to count as a microaggression if any person does not perceive it as bigoted (though others do)?

It's important to be clear about the force of this problem. The point here isn't *just* that people might disagree about whether something counts as a microaggression. After all, microaggression is a controversial topic and people will inevitably disagree about some cases. Rather, the point is that the parametric scale conception *itself* does not provide an unambiguous answer to the question. Whether an act counts as ambiguous and nebulous or instead as overt and public depends on *how it is perceived*. An act counts as ambiguous just in case people are unsure how to interpret it, and an act counts as overtly bigoted just in case its motivations are clear to perceivers. But how do we apply these concepts when people's perceptions are themselves conflicting and muddled?

It seems that the parametric overtness model imports ambiguity from the *phenomenon* of microaggression into the *concept*. We cannot provide an upper boundary along the overtness scale because we have no clear reference for fixing judgments of overtness. But in that case, it seems like we aren't getting very much out of thinking in parametric terms. A scale that promised contrastive clarity does not seem to be delivering.

As I suggested in the last section, we might try to reconstruct the idea of overtness on a functional analysis. Maybe it's true that hate crimes, discrimination, and microaggression all play functional roles in sustaining oppression, yet they play *distinctive* functional roles. And maybe overtness, rather than defining a parametric scale, is instead the conceptual key to drawing that distinction.

This is essentially what political theorist Emily McTernan has proposed. On her analysis, microaggressive behavior has three individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. First, the behavior is subtle enough to "seem innocuous". Second, it needs to be "plausible that the perpetrator did not intend it to have the effect of degrading or putting down the other". Third, microaggressions target "members of subordinated groups: those that are oppressed or marginalized".<sup>10</sup>

These conditions work together to distinguish the functional role of microaggressions: they accomplish "degradation or putdown while appearing innocuous and plausibly unintentional."<sup>11</sup> Their lack of overtness is what gives plausible deniability to microaggressive incidents, making it difficult for victims

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<sup>10</sup> McTernan 2018, 263-265.

<sup>11</sup> McTernan 2018, 266. A similar theory of racial microaggression appears in Pérez Huber and Solorzano 2015.

to identify their mistreatment. This also impedes the sort of activism that can confront hate crimes and overt discrimination. As McTernan puts it: “the very innocuousness of microaggressions is essential to their being able to perform these roles in perpetuating troubling status hierarchies, through contributing to the pervasiveness of the ranking system across a life.”<sup>12</sup>

This seems like a promising way to distinguish the functional role of microaggression from those of hate crimes and discrimination. All have *some* functional relationship to sustaining oppression, but they do so in different ways. The latter are bluntly oppressive forces, doing their work in full view as a warning to marginalized people and as a symbol of dominant groups’ strength. Microaggressions function more quietly, from the background, reminding marginalized people of their position without attracting general attention. The key distinction here is precisely about overtness and publicity: hate crimes and discrimination function to sustain oppression in a *public* way, while microaggressions function to sustain oppression away from public view.

This functional analysis solves a problem with the parametric overtness analysis. We can specify overtness in terms of *general social attitudes*, not the mental states of any one person, and we can further specify these general social attitudes in terms of systemic function. Overtness, then, is just a mode of perpetuating oppression bluntly, out where everyone can see it. We can say it is overt simply because a lot of people – including many who are not direct victims – publicly recognize and denounce it *as* oppression. By contrast, subtle and nebulous oppression, like microaggression, is non-overt precisely because people don’t publicly recognize it. The standard for ‘overtness’ no longer varies by observer, because the standard is defined in functional terms across an entire social system.<sup>13</sup>

On this account, oppression itself is an objective phenomenon constituted from systemically unjust mistreatment of particular groups. ‘Overtness’ is a property of functional organizations within that system, defined in terms of attitudes of public (non)recognition of a practice as an instance of oppression. Overtness isn’t just a description, it plays a functional role itself; non-overt oppression perpetuates the oppressive system in a distinctively sneaky way.

McTernan’s functional account accomplishes much of what this chapter set out to do. It provides clear criteria for drawing an upper boundary on microaggression. It coherently articulates the part-whole constitutive relationship of microaggression to macroaggressive oppression. And it avoids the conceptual ambiguity of the parametric overtness analysis.

But, for all that, I do not think we should settle on the functional account. Though it does offer *a* way to draw the upper boundary on microaggression, I think that it introduces a new problem.

### **God’s-eye concepts and contentious disagreement**

The problem with the functional analysis is that it makes microaggression into a *god’s-eye-view* concept. A god’s-eye-view concept is one that cannot be confidently applied in the world without god-like

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<sup>12</sup> McTernan 2018, 271.

<sup>13</sup> An important implication of this view, as McTernan points out, is that some action types will change overtness status over time, as they come to play different functional roles in society. For example, Pierce’s 1970s example of a white woman uncomfortable sitting next to a black man on an airplane now strikes us as overt racism (McTernan 2018, 267).

knowledge. Typically, a god's-eye-view concept pertains to an objective state of the world so complex that it is epistemically irresolvable for limited human minds. For example, 'the entire causal history of the atoms comprising this cup of coffee' is a god's-eye-view concept. There is an objective fact about where all these atoms have been and how they wound up in this coffee, but no human will ever be in a position to make interesting claims about it with any rational confidence.

Why does the functional analysis make microaggression into this sort of concept? The problem comes when we try to decide whether any concrete incident counts as a microaggression. In order to count, two things must be true at once: the incident must play a particular causal role in sustaining oppression *and* it must do so in a way that prevents this role from being overtly apparent to most people. These two conditions add up to make the concept very hard to confidently apply. After all, social systems are immensely complicated, a bit like the causal history of coffee atoms, so we should be modest about our ability to trace the functional role of concrete incidents within them. And if we are talking about a category of incidents that we insist are not overt – such that *most* people *must* fail to recognize them for what they are – then our confidence in applying the concept really ought to be quite low. Not only are we talking about an immensely complex system, but we are talking about the parts of it that we *know* tend to mislead people most of the time. We should not expect to get it right ourselves.<sup>14</sup>

Why is this a problem? There isn't anything intrinsically wrong with god's-eye-view concepts; they do, after all, refer to objective phenomena of the world. The problem is with social context. We should be very worried about deploying a god's-eye-view concept in the middle of contentious moral/political debate. For one thing, such applications are unlikely to be persuasive. They amount to saying, 'listen, there's this big terrible thing going on in the background here and even though this incident *looks* innocuous to you, that's only because it's the sort of thing that most people can't detect, but you should trust that *I* have figured it out even though you already think I'm wrong about the case'. That sounds like a conspiracy theorist talking.

And it's not clear anyone *should* be persuaded by the invocation of a god's-eye-view concept, especially one like the functional analysis of microaggression. On this account, it is built into the definition that *most* people will apply the concept incorrectly. If I am trying to convince you that such-and-such incident counts as a microaggression, it is reasonable for you to be dubious. After all, per the point about non-overtness, most people are simply wrong when applying the concept, so the odds are pretty good that I'm wrong. Generally speaking, you shouldn't put much evidential weight on testimony about a topic people usually get wrong.

Of course, we can avoid this problem if we make one important assumption: that the propensity to misapply the microaggression concept is *not evenly distributed*. That is, it turns out that some people are better at spotting microaggressions than others, and the better-spotters are in a minority. If that is true,

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<sup>14</sup> You might think: wait, we have sophisticated social science techniques for studying complex social phenomena; surely those will be able to handle this problem. Well, maybe. But so far this is just hopeful hand-waving; we shouldn't assume that the problem is solvable until we've seen a convincing solution. And there are two problems with any solution. First, it's very hard for social scientists to operationalize a value-loaded term like 'oppression'. Second, psychologist Scott Lilienfeld (2017), who is a specialist in social science methodology, has launched a far-ranging critique of microaggression research on exactly the claim that the concept is not empirically tractable. I think there are serious problems with Lilienfeld's argument (see Rini [manuscript] chapter 2). But it is revealing that Sue's response to Lilienfeld suggests that we shouldn't judge microaggression research by the standards of empirical western science (Sue 2017, 171).



then we can tell a non-conspiratorial story about why we should trust some people rather than others in their application of the concept. Something like this is how scientific expertise works. Many technical scientific concepts are such that most people can't confidently apply them, though a certain minority can. Most of us are no good at identifying worrisome shadows in CT scans, but trained experts can. This provides an explanation both for why most people get it wrong and why we should nevertheless believe the experts when they make confident claims.

Could microaggression work like this? Could there be microaggression experts, a minority who are better than everyone else at detecting incidents that play functional roles in sustaining oppression? In fact, I think the answer is probably yes! People who have extensive personal experience with oppression – that is, oppression's victims – are likely to have a good deal more knowledge of its functions than most. As Sue puts this: "If you want to understand sexism, do you ask men or women? If you want to understand homophobia or heterosexism, do you ask straights or gays? If you want to understand racism, do you ask Whites or people of color? In general, if you want to understand oppression, do you ask the oppressor or the oppressed? The answers seem obvious."<sup>15</sup> This is true for the same reason that people who live with bunnies are likely to know more about interpreting bunny noises than the rest of us; experience leads to epistemic superiority over the unexperienced. The same is true of social positions; people tend to know more about how their own social position is constructed – including oppressive social positions – than people outside it. This is a familiar point from the branch of feminist philosophy known as standpoint epistemology.<sup>16</sup>

Does this point solve our problem? Not quite. Even if we accept a strong dose of standpoint epistemology, it only helps in certain disagreements. We can see this point if we imagine two people, Agnes and Beau, who disagree about whether some concrete incident counts as a microaggression (per the functional analysis). Agnes says it doesn't count; she doesn't think the incident plays any causal role at all in oppressive social systems. Beau thinks it does. As it happens, Agnes is *not* a member of the social group targeted by the alleged form of oppression, but Beau is.

In this case, standpoint epistemology tells us that we should probably trust Beau over Agnes. As a member of a marginalized group, Beau probably knows more about (this type of) oppression than Agnes, so when they disagree he's more likely to be correct. This is exactly what we wanted for the functional analysis of microaggression.

The problem, however, is that this is only one possible disagreement permutation. Consider what happens in an identity-reversed case. Now we have Carmella and Davide. Carmella *is* a member of a marginalized group, but she doesn't think this incident has anything to do with oppression. Davide is *not* a member of the marginalized group, but he thinks that the incident does count as a microaggression against that group.

The schema is not that uncommon. I give public talks about microaggression often, and frequently provide the example of non-white people being asked "where are you really from?" (which is the first example in Sue et al (2007, 276)'s influential table of microaggressions). On more than one occasion, I've been challenged on this example by self-identified people of color, who say that they get asked this

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<sup>15</sup> Sue 2010, 47-48.

<sup>16</sup> See Code 1991, Anderson 1995. For exploration regarding the complexities of locating a 'standpoint', see Wylie 2003.

question often and don't mind it at all. In fact, at least one person claimed to positively *welcome* the question, as an opportunity for an interesting conversation about family history. Of course people of color get asked this more often – explained this person of color – because the conversation is just more *interesting* with them. Nothing oppressive at all about it.

In these situations, I do not feel that I, as a white person, should just barrel right over these people's avowed lived experience and insist that, actually, they really were microaggressed all along, no matter what they think. Indeed, doing so might itself be a microaggression; yet another white person erasing the testimony of a person of color about their own life.

And there is still an epistemic problem. We might think that standpoint epistemology is again decisive here; if Carmella is a member of the marginalized group and Davide is not, then Carmella is more likely to be right – so, in fact, we should conclude that there probably is no microaggression here. But this is an unstable position.

Imagine we merge our two cases. Suppose all our characters are at a party. Carmella and Beau, both members of the same non-white ethnic group, are addressed by a clueless white dude who keeps asking, “so, where are you two *really* from?”. A few minutes later, Beau goes over to tell his friend Agnes about the incident, which he regards as a microaggression, though Agnes (who is white) disagrees. At the same time, Carmella is on the other side of the room happily recounting the same incident to her friend Davide (white) who tries to point out that it was a microaggression.

If we go on the standpoint principle that members of marginalized groups are more likely to be correct, we end up with an unstable duality. Over here, Beau is probably right when he tells Agnes that it was a microaggression, while over there, Carmella is probably right when she tells Davide that it was *not* a microaggression. Yet they are talking about the very same incident – which cannot be both a microaggression and not a microaggression at the same time, since on the functional analysis a microaggression is an objective functional property of the social system, not a matter of anyone's opinion.

We can simplify this case just by having Beau and Carmella talk to each other. They are both members of the same marginalized group, both victims of the same oppressive system and both targets of the same concrete incident. Yet now they are disagreeing over whether this incident plays any functional role in oppression – in other words, whether or not it was a microaggression at all. And now we come back to the fundamental epistemic problem that began this section, except now we cannot appeal to standpoint epistemology to resolve the problem. Beau and Carmella have the same epistemic relationship to the oppressive social circumstances affecting their group. Neither is more likely than the other to be right. And, since we know that microaggressions are (per the functional analysis) exactly the sort of social functions that people tend to be wrong about, we should once again be doubtful that anyone can confidently resolve this disagreement.<sup>17</sup>

So we return to the problem with making microaggression a god's-eye-view concept. According to the functional analysis, there *is* an objective fact of the matter about whether Beau and Carmella were microaggressed at that party. But the two of them have equal epistemic credentials on the subject, and

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<sup>17</sup> Lilienfeld (2017, 143) uses just such a case to claim that Sue's conception of microaggression is scientifically untenable.

we know that we ought to be humble in drawing conclusions about a definitionally hard-to-detect phenomenon. We end up unable to resolve who is right, and the god's-eye-view concept of microaggression won't help us make any progress in contentious moral/political disagreement.

I can imagine one last response on behalf of the functional analysis. Here it is: perhaps the non-overt functional role played by microaggression is epistemically asymmetric in a different way. Rather than appealing to standpoint epistemology, we might appeal to the *specific* way in which microaggressions hide their oppressive function. Maybe *people who think something is a microaggression* are more likely to be right than *people who think something isn't a microaggression*. This proposal isn't ad hoc; the functional theory claims that microaggressions hide their oppressive nature in order to keep decent people from catching on to the injustice. In other words, the theory predicts that lots of people will *fail to recognize* actual microaggressions, but it doesn't predict that people will *falsely recognize* microaggressions where there are none. So there does seem to be an asymmetry between Beau and Carmella.

Unfortunately, there are at least two problems with this defense. First, it has a worrisome amount in common with the epistemology of conspiracy theories. After all, a conspiracy theory says that *They* are trying to keep the plot hidden, which predicts that most people will fail to recognize the plot in action, and does *not* predict that people will falsely recognize the plot. That's why the conspiracy theorist is so sure he's got it right and all you sheeple are wrong. A theory that predicts people are epistemically superior to doubters with respect to application of the theory precisely *when and because* they apply the theory... seems like a very unhealthy epistemic framework. This would be a dangerous way to defend the microaggression concept.

Second, this approach seems to imply that when Davide (not a member of the marginalized group) disagrees with Carmella about whether she was microaggressed, then *he* is probably right. We're back again to white people telling people of color about the content of their lived experience, never a great entailment for a theory of social justice.<sup>18</sup>

We could now try combining the last two proposals: maybe a person is more likely to be right about spotting microaggression just in case they are simultaneously a member of the marginalized group *and* affirming rather than denying microaggression. This would have the happy result of settling all the above disagreements (Beau is always right) and would not entail that Davide has any authority to tell Carmella about her own life. But at this point it looks rather like we are jury-rigging the concept simply to give the result that people are usually right when they claim something is a microaggression, and usually wrong when they claim it isn't.

And – plot twist! – I think that is the right place to end up. But we shouldn't jury-rig the epistemology of social functions in order to get there. I'll now briefly propose an alternative account of microaggression, one that solves the same problems as the functional analysis, without introducing additional theoretical baggage.

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<sup>18</sup> I am aware that on some views of false consciousness or internalized oppression (Bartky 1990; Cudd 2006) it is possible for victims to fail to recognize their own oppressed status – and it might even be possible for helpful allies to guide them out. But I am very wary of this way of thinking. I cannot defend my hesitation here, though some of the reasons should be apparent in the next section. Also, see Narayan (2001) for a number of reasons to worry about uses of the internalized oppression framework by white western feminists.

### The Ambiguous Experience Account of Microaggression

A different way of characterizing the problem with the functional analysis is this: it takes the focus off the personal experiences of victims of microaggression. At most, on this analysis, the experience of being microaggressed is *evidence* of oppression as work, but what actually *makes* something count as microaggression is an objective, impersonal social function. My proposal aims to reverse this priority. I will offer a conception of microaggression that provides an upper boundary while centering the experience of microaggression victims.<sup>19</sup>

To understand why the experience of microaggression is so important, return again to Chester Pierce, creator of the concept. Describing his own experiences as a black man teaching uncooperative white students at Harvard in the 1960s, he wrote:

One could argue that I am hypersensitive, if not paranoid, about what must not be an unusual kind of student-faculty dialogue. This I concede. What I cannot explain, but what I know every black will understand, is that it is not what the student says in this dialogue, it is how he approaches me, how he talks to me, how he seems to regard me. 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 nigger. I had to be instructed and directed as to how to render him more pleasure!<sup>20</sup>

Pierce is ready to “concede” that he may be “hypersensitive, if not paranoid”, that the situation may be nothing more than his “own perceptual distortions perhaps”. This self-doubt is a common element of the experience of being microaggressed. A microaggressive incident displays what psychologists now call *attributional ambiguity*: the target of the incident is simply uncertain whether unjust prejudice played a role in how they were treated.<sup>21</sup> Kristen Jones and her colleagues suggest that this ambiguity explains much of the psychological harm done by non-overt oppression:

[T]he ambiguity surrounding subtle discrimination likely prolongs the attribution process, causing targets to ruminate on the incident long after it occurs because they have no clear cause to reference. Therefore, even if targets attribute the behavior to themselves or to something external, they may continue spending time wavering between various explanations for the incident, which can be emotionally and cognitively taxing. Thus, although somewhat counterintuitive, the fact that subtle discrimination is not obvious may be the characteristic that makes it so harmful to targets. These harmful effects may build and accumulate over time.<sup>22</sup>

This feature also makes microaggression victims easily vulnerable to gaslighting; if you already have some doubts about what you experienced, it is much easier for unsympathetic witnesses to undermine the experiential evidence you do have, and, as philosopher Saba Fatima puts it, to drive you to “the epistemic borderland of thinking of oneself as paranoid and of being secure in one’s perception of reality.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This section contains an abbreviated version of a position I describe at length elsewhere [Rini manuscript, chapters 2-3]. For another account of microaggression that centers the experience of victims, see Freeman and Stewart 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Chester Pierce, ‘Offensive Mechanisms’. 1970. 277.

<sup>21</sup> Crocker et al. 1991.

<sup>22</sup> Jones et al 2017, 57.

<sup>23</sup> Fatima 2017, 148.

All of this is *compatible* with the functional analysis of microaggression, but it is not central. According to the functional analysis, victims' experience of attributional ambiguity is a by-product of the more functionally important *social* non-overtness of oppression. On this view, victims are unsure of what they have experienced *because* microaggression operates in a way that is unclear to everyone – and this general nebulosity is what does the causal work in perpetuating oppression. This explains why victims might experience attributional ambiguity, but it does not make that experience a necessary condition of identifying microaggressions. On the functional analysis, an incident is microaggressive (or not) in virtue of its systemic functional properties, not what anyone (including the victim) perceives about it.

My proposal is to make attributional ambiguity a necessary condition for microaggression. I offer an **Ambiguous Experience Account of Microaggression**: A microaggression is an event that a member of an oppressed group perceives as possibly but not certainly caused by oppression.

On this account, an incident counts as a microaggression in virtue of the experience of the victim. If a person is confused by an event, thinking that *maybe* they were unjustly treated by oppressive circumstances but *maybe* it was an innocuous misunderstanding, then the incident counts as a microaggression. However, if they lack any suspicion of oppressive mistreatment, then it is not a microaggression (even if someone else thinks otherwise, and even if from a god's-eye-view the incident really is implicated in functional oppression). Similarly, if a person is *certain* that they have been targeted by oppression, then the incident also does not count as a microaggression; this certainly is what makes the incident too 'big' to qualify.<sup>24</sup>

This account accomplishes several of the things we've been looking for throughout this chapter. It accounts for the constitutive sense of the micro/macro relationship. A microaggression is not simply a smaller version of a hate crime or blatant discrimination. Rather, it is an *epistemically distinctive* part of a macroaggressive social system. It is that part which induces attributional ambiguity in victims, hampering their ability to interpret and react to their own experiences.

This may sound like the parametric overtness scale that I rejected earlier. But that is not right. This account does not presuppose a scale of overtness on which oppressive incidents may be ranked. Rather, it assumes only a small set of epistemic relations between particular people and the contents of their own experiences (suspicion, certainty, ambiguity). One could try to unify these relations along some parametric scale, but that is not required by the concept.

Still, you might suspect that my Ambiguous Experience Account is vulnerable to the same objection I lodged against the parametric overtness account. Recall that I posed a case of differing perceptions, where two female colleagues disagreed whether an old-fashioned male colleague's sexism was overt. I said that the parametric overtness account owed a way of deciding between differing perceptions; if two people disagree over whether an act is overtly oppressive, who is right?

It might seem like my account faces the same problem, but that isn't quite right. The challenge in this case is that two people are disagreeing about attributing a property (overtness) to an event in the world.

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<sup>24</sup> Here I am using the word 'certainty' in a colloquial sense, not the philosophers' technical sense. After all, according to some philosophers we cannot be certain that we exist in space/time. The standards here are not that demanding.

Only one of them can be right about whether the property obtains. But on my account, we needn't interpret them as attributing a property to the external event. Rather, they are attributing an epistemic property *to their own experiences*. And, since each can have different experiences, their attributions needn't be in conflict.

This last point may sound pedantic, but it's actually quite radical when stated simply. In effect, what I am claiming is this: two people, both members of the same marginalized group, can be affected by the same incident and yet the incident *counts* as a microaggression for one of them, but *doesn't count* as a microaggression for the other. This is because whether the incidents counts as a microaggression is determined (in part) by epistemic features of the person's experience, which can differ between them.

This same point also shows how my account overcomes the difficulties I posed for the functional analysis. Remember Beau and Carmella, who disagree about whether being asked "where are you really from?" counts as a microaggression against them. I said that the functional analysis is unable to resolve this disagreement, relying upon a god's-eye-view conception of society that leaves finite human minds unequipped to determine who is correct.

My Ambiguous Experience Account does not have this problem, because it does not have to resolve the disagreement. If Beau suspects (but is not certain) that he has been targeted by microaggression, then what happened to him counts as a microaggression. And if Carmella does *not* believe the situation is linked to oppression, then what happened to her does not count as a microaggression. If Beau says 'I was microaggressed!' and Carmella says 'that was no microaggression', then they are *both* right, even though they are talking about the same incident.

To be clear: I am not denying that there are objective social facts about whether oppression played a role in this situation, nor am I denying that, in *this* sense, one of Beau and Carmella is right and the other is not. However, I am claiming that if we want talk about microaggression to do useful social work in contentious circumstances, then its application should not be held hostage to a god's-eye-view conception that often cannot be confidently resolved.

Finally, the Ambiguous Experience Account provides a decisive way to draw an upper boundary on microaggression, without having to insist that hate crimes are microaggressions but more so. The boundary cuts through a victim's epistemic relations to the incident. If she suspects but is not certain about the role of oppressive derogation, then the incident is a microaggression. If she is certain that the incident enacts oppression, then it is too 'big'. Virtually all hate crimes will fall on the 'big' side of this boundary by virtue of their obviousness to the victim.

To conclude, I'll quickly trace three important implications of my Ambiguous Experience Account for the study and use of the microaggression concept. First, my view entails that only *token* incidents count as microaggressions. It is not, strictly speaking, accurate to claim that an incident *type* counts as microaggressive.<sup>25</sup> This is because different tokens of the same type may differ in their epistemic reception by individuals, as in the Beau/Carmella case. Nevertheless, we can still speak of thematic categories of microaggression along the lines of empirical causal generalizations: such-and-such type of incident is *likely* to lead to experiences by many people such that they will count as microaggressed.

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<sup>25</sup> Here I am using 'type' and 'token' in the technical senses used by metaphysicians, not in colloquial sense. See Wetzel (2006).

Though this formulation seems awkward, it is justified by a desire to maintain deference for individual victims' lived experiences of their own circumstances.

This leads to a second implication, this time for Derald Wing Sue's influential taxonomy of microaggressions, which includes the category 'microassault':

A microassault is an explicit racial derogation characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions. Referring to someone as "colored" or "Oriental," using racial epithets, discouraging interracial interactions, deliberately serving a White patron before someone of color, and displaying a swastika are examples.<sup>26</sup>

A number of critics have suggested that we should not consider these sorts of incidents to be microaggressions at all.<sup>27</sup> My account helps to show why this criticism makes sense. Most 'microassault' incidents are unlikely to lead to ambiguous experiences in victims. Most people understand very well that slurs, swastikas, and overt discrimination are emblems of oppression; their epistemic relation to the incident will approach certainty, making the incident too 'big' to count as a microaggression.

Finally, my account helps to clarify what is at stake in public moral/political disputes about microaggression.<sup>28</sup> Some public criticisms of the microaggression concept say it is unfair to blame anyone for small acts of oppression, especially when oppression may be in the eye of beholder. Some (e.g. Lilienfeld 2017) frame this moral critique within a challenge to the scientific credentials of microaggression research. My account *concedes* that the criteria for microaggression simply *is* a matter of personal experience, undercutting this sort of challenge. Instead, by highlighting the victim's own ambiguous experience, the account draws attention to an inescapable moral predicament; refusing to give moral weight to microaggression allegations might spare the feelings of alleged perpetrators, but it leaves victims languishing in lonesome uncertainty. The ambiguity of microaggression is a crucial part of what our social practice needs to solve; keeping it at the center of the concept will help us as we begin taking measures.

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<sup>26</sup> Sue et al 2007, 274

<sup>27</sup> See Minikel-Lacocque 2013, 454; Wong et al 2014, 191; Garcia and Johnston-Guerrero 2015; McTernan 2018, 267.

<sup>28</sup> For views on moral responsibility for microaggression, see Friedlaender 2018, O'Dowd 2018, and Rini 2018. I say much more about the moral implications of my account in Rini [manuscript].

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