

Microaggressions as Collective Harms but Individual Wrongs

Plan for Talk

1. Microaggression definition and example
2. The Problem of Collective Impact and a Collective Harm Case
3. What's at stake if microaggressions are just another Collective Harm Case
4. Morally salient details that distinguish microaggressions
5. Conclusion: Microaggressions are not reducible to Collective Harm Cases.

1. Microaggressions

- Microaggressions are small, almost negligible slights to members of marginalized populations that can accumulate into serious harms when repeated across long periods of time and in a variety of contexts.
- Verbal microinsults operate by saying something innocuous (or even complimentary) while simultaneously communicating a hidden derogatory message.
- Example: "You're not like other girls" (Hidden message: you shouldn't be like other girls.)
- Features of these interactions:
 - Negligibly harmful in isolation, may even be beneficial.
 - Harm becomes serious when a pattern of restrictive and demeaning expectations emerges that can affect the agency of the target.
 - No single interaction is necessary to the development of this pattern. Any one of them could be removed and the overall harm would still be just as serious.

2. Problem of Collective Impact

- "In a wide range of cases, people collectively cause a morally significant outcome but no individual act seems to make a difference... The problem in cases of this sort is that it seems each person can argue, 'it won't make a difference whether or not I do X, so I have no reason to do it'" (Nefsky, 245)
- Example:

Harmless Torturers: A victim is hooked up to an electric shock machine that has a thousand settings, controlled by a dial. There are a thousand 'torturers', each of whom turns the dial up a single notch. At the first setting there is no electric current. At the second setting there is a tiny electric current, but it is too tiny to be perceived by the victim. In general, the settings increase the voltage by increments so tiny that the difference between any two adjacent settings is too minuscule to make a difference to how the victim feels. But, while any two adjacent settings are indistinguishable, after many increases the victim feels pain, and by the thousandth setting the victim is in excruciating pain. While the torturers' dial-turns together result in a lot of pain for the victim, it seems that no individual makes a difference for the worse. Take any given torturer's dial-turn away, and the pain would be just as bad. (Nefsky, 248)

3. What is at Stake?

- Risk of abstracting away from morally salient details.
- Risk that working with such a pure case will lead us to reject solutions that could be useful in messy, real-world examples.

4. Morally salient details that distinguish microaggressions

A. Oppressive social context

Harmless Torturers in an Oppressive Society: Imagine that we are living in an alternate history version of Canada. The only difference from our society is that everyone is forced to wear an electric shock collar, controlled as described in the original example.

People in this society make the same excuses as the original harmless torturers. When asked why she turns the dial on other members of her society, one of the torturers says, “I don’t believe in this political correctness nonsense. I wouldn’t mind anyone turning my dial, so I don’t see why anyone else should mind their dials being turned either. It doesn’t make any difference!”

You look at the records of her dial-turning activity and find that over the course of her life, she has only turned the dials for collars on black people.

B. Personal interaction

Harmless Torturers on a Skype Call: Return to the original case. Add that the dial and the victim are in separate rooms. In each room, a computer screen displays two live feeds: one of the room with the victim and one of the room with the dial.

The torturer can always see both live feeds, but at first, the computer screen in the victim’s room is malfunctioning—displaying a clear picture of the room the victim is in, but only a grainy picture of what is occurring in the room with the dial. As the current increases, the picture quality also improves, until the victim can clearly see the torturer turning the dial (and the fact that the torturer can see a live feed of the victim’s room).

C. Linguistic delivery

Harmless Torturers who Activate the Device by Speaking: Return again to the original case, and add that the torturer doesn’t work by a turn of the dial, but by saying the words: “I think you’re less than me and your pain is not as important as my pleasure.” At first, the torturer is on mute, but as the current gets stronger, the victim can also hear the words more clearly.

You later hear one of the torturers telling his friends: “I say those words, but I don’t mean them. I don’t feel bad about saying them, because I know (and you know) what I intend to express. I actually think it’s only fine to participate because I know my dial turn doesn’t make any difference to the pain they feel. I certainly don’t think the victims are less than me!”

D. Making macro harms more permissible

Harmless Torturers who work with Harmful Torturers: Each torturer is given a choice about how far to turn up the dial, but there’s a confidentiality agreement in place that prevents torturers from talking about how much they have contributed. Although most torturers only turn up the dial in a harmless way, others—emboldened by the anonymity—turn up the dial enough that the victim feels pain.

As in the original example, everyone believes that there is nothing wrong with the actions of the harmless torturers. Harmless torturing is socially acceptable. No one ever admits to being a harmful torturer, so no one is ever ostracized for it.