

Microaggressions, Blame, and Moral Responsibility

Microaggressions—small, everyday slights that can accumulate into serious damage when repeated over time—capture a common experience of marginalized groups, yet skeptics raise significant worries about how best to recognize and respond to these slights. Descriptively, are microaggressions a unified type or a hodgepodge of discrete examples? Normatively, can perpetrators be blamed, especially if their microaggressions are unintentional and only become harmful when repeated by other agents? My dissertation engages with both these debates: it presents an account that unifies different types of microaggressions and demonstrates that blame is warranted.

I clarify what's aggressive and what's micro about microaggressions by positioning microaggressions and hate speech on a spectrum of linguistic aggression. In the 1980s, critical race theorists argued that hate speech is aggressive, and I show how their arguments can be applied to modern microaggression debates. Like hate speech, microaggressions threaten and constrict the autonomy of their targets; however, the two differ in that hate speech is overtly threatening, whereas microaggressions are covert, masking their aggressive content behind seemingly innocuous and reasonable meanings.

I further flesh out this spectrum of aggression by offering a new taxonomy of microaggressions. Philosophers have uncritically employed psychologist Derald Wing Sue's categories of microinsult and microinvalidation, even though his examples of microinsult also invalidate their target, and vice versa. I draw from Black, POC, and Trans Feminists to revise these categories: microinsults perpetuate constrictive stereotypes about the "natural" behavior of marginalized groups, while microinvalidations demonstrate ignorance of systemic oppression in a way that silences members of marginalized groups.

Having answered descriptive challenges, I turn to normative questions. First I engage in some ground clearing. Many moral philosophers treat microaggressions as a subset of collective harm problems, akin to climate change. While I agree that microaggressions contribute to collective harm at both the societal and individual level, I argue that a full account of moral responsibility for microaggressions must also capture their individually wrongful features: dehumanization and denial of oppression.

Microaggressive perpetrators dehumanize their targets, even if the targets are not (immediately) harmed by that dehumanization. To model this wrongful treatment, I draw from tort law—a branch of law that adjudicates private wrongs between individuals. In my *Trespass Model*, consent is primary. Just as I have the right to object to incursions onto my property, so too do I have the right to object to microaggressive attacks on my mental capacities. Microaggressions violate my right to control my own mind by forcing me to see myself through demeaning, constrictive stereotypes.

My *Negligence Model* focuses on failures of due consideration. When perpetrators deny the existence of systemic oppression, they demonstrate a lack of care for marginalized groups. Just as I can object when I am harmed because a business failed to take sufficient safety precautions, I can object when a microaggressive perpetrator failed to foresee the harm their careless words could cause. Negligent perpetrators should have taken steps to correct their dangerous ignorance.

In addition to showing why microaggressive perpetrators are blameworthy, my *Tort Law Models* also reveal the appropriate remedy: apology. On other accounts, apologies are mysterious—why apologize for blameless microaggressions? But I argue that apologies undo the wrong, restoring the target to their rightful position of equality. Furthermore, apologies can also mitigate the harm, helping the target avoid damaging uncertainty and self-doubt. Thus, my dissertation provides an ameliorative account of both what microaggressions are and how we should respond to them.