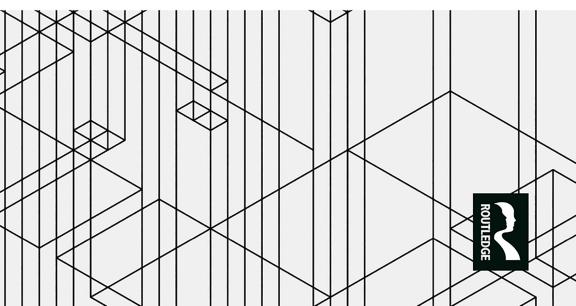# MICROAGGRESSIONS AND PHILOSOPHY

Edited by
Lauren Freeman and
Jeanine Weekes Schroer

"This book provides an important critique of some common conversations about micoaggressions, but it also shows us what more informed and more interesting conversations about them look like."
—*Stacey Goguen, Northeastern Illinois University, USA*

"*Microaggressions and Philosophy* is a bold volume whose contributions span the scope of the structural, the interpersonal, and the scientific. It is essential reading for anyone interested in philosophy that engages with oppression and social justice."
—*Nora Berenstain, University of Tennessee, USA*

Microaggressions and Philosophy

This is the first book to offer a philosophical engagement with microaggressions. It aims to provide an intersectional analysis of microaggressions that cuts across multiple dimensions of oppression and marginalization, and to engage a variety of perspectives that have been sidelined within the discipline of philosophy. The volume gathers a diverse group of contributors: philosophers of color, philosophers with disabilities, philosophers of various nationalities and ethnicities, and philosophers of several gender identities. Their unique frames of analysis articulate both how the concept of microaggressions can be used to clarify and sharpen our understanding of subtler aspects of oppression and how analysis, expansion, and reconceiving the notion of a microaggression can deepen and extend its explanatory power. The essays in the volume seek to defend microaggressions from common critiques and to explain their impact beyond the context of college students. Some of the guiding questions that this volume explores include, but are not limited to, the following: Can microaggressions be established as a viable scientific concept? What roles do microaggressions play in other oppressive phenomena like transphobia, fat phobia, and abelism? How can epistemological challenges around microaggressions be addressed via feminist theory, critical race theory, disability theory, or epistemologies of ignorance? What insights can be gleaned from intersectional analyses of microaggressions? Are there domain-specific analyses of microaggressions that would give insight to features of that domain, i.e. microaggressions related to sexuality, athletics, immigration status, national origin, body type, or ability.

Microaggressions and Philosophy features cutting-edge research on an important topic that will appeal to a wide range of students and scholars across disciplines. It includes perspectives from philosophy of psychology, empirically informed philosophy, feminist philosophy, critical race theory, disability theory, philosophy of language, philosophy of science, and social and political philosophy.

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Acknowledgments

1 Introduction

Microaggressions and Philosophy

Lauren Freeman

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Black psychiatrist and Harvard University professor Chester Pierce developed the concept of *offensive mechanisms* in his thinking about the framework of racial violence and the aggression that it facilitates within society. Within the context of understanding different types of offensive mechanisms, he took a creative, yet seemingly counter-intuitive path to move forward in his thinking about the concept. That is, Pierce began to attend and observe practices of the Harvard football team. In watching the players practice, and the coach offer directives, he noticed that contrary to what many might assume, much of the emphasis was not on the macro-elements or grand strategies of the game, but rather was focused on the minutiae – the micro-dimensions of play. Pierce marveled at how the coach grilled the players on the myriad ways in which the slightest change in body position, movement, and angle of the ball resulted in large-scale blunders, lost points, lost games, and potentially lost championships (1970, 269–270). For the players, such micro-movements and micro-maneuvers were necessary in order to gain advantages and ultimately to win games, yet they were almost entirely invisible to those who are not trained to notice these nuances of the game. Pierce combined his thinking about the importance of such micro-movements with his thinking about offensive mechanisms, and applied this lens to his own personal experiences as one of the few Black professors at an elite, predominantly white university, facing daily, subtle acts of discrimination. The result was his coining the term *microaggression*.

The following passage is one of the first times that the concept was articulated in print. Here, Pierce expounds upon the micro-harms that he encountered on a very regular basis, but which went entirely unnoticed to those around him who did not also occupy a marginalized racial position:

> Most offensive actions are not gross and 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. The study of microaggression by whites and blacks is the essential ingredient to the understanding of what manner the process of interactions must be changed before any program of action can succeed.

(1970, 265–266)

By 1977, Pierce et al. developed the concept further and defined (racial) microaggressions as follows:

[S]ubtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are "put downs" of blacks by offenders. These offensive mechanisms used against blacks are often innocuous. *The cumulative weight of their never-ending burden is the major ingredient in black-white interactions.* This accounts for a near inevitable perceptual clash between blacks and whites in regards to how a matter is described as well as the emotional charge involved.

(65, my emphasis)

Pierce broke radical ground with his concept of microaggression, which he developed specifically and exclusively within the context of racial oppression. Despite its explanatory power, however, the concept did not get much uptake for several decades. Between 1970 and 2006, there were only 365 articles published that engaged with the concept of microaggression, an average of only ten articles per year for 36 years (Google Scholar, April 27, 2018, cited in Sue 2019, 229).

All of this changed, however, in 2007, when Derald Wing Sue and his co-authors Christina M. Capodilupo, Gina C. Torino, Jennifer M. Bucceri, Aisha M. B. Holder, Kevin L. Nadal, and Marta Esquilin published "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice," in *American Psychologist* (2007a). This article resurrected Pierce's original discussion of racial microaggressions, while also updating, transforming, and further developing the concept. The publication of that article was followed, in 2010, by Sue's pivotal monograph, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* (2010a), that developed the concept of microaggression beyond Pierce's original account of *racial* microaggressions to include microaggressions experienced on the basis of other structurally marginalized identities. Sue's book thrust the concept into both popular and academic discussions with both defenders and critics alike.[1] In the years following Sue et al.'s 2007a article, there was a major uptick in interest in the

concept; the term "microaggression" received 2,701 citations (Google Scholar, April 27, 2018, cited in Sue 2019, 229). In 2015, "microaggression" was named the word of the year by the Global Language Monitor, and as of 2019, over 11,900 publications that engage the topic of micro-aggressions are in print (ibid.).

On Sue et al.'s 2007 account, racial microaggressions are understood to be "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (2007a, 271). Importantly, those who commit microaggressions are "often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities" (ibid.). Through a review of the social psychological literature on aversive racism, a consideration of the manifestation and impact of everyday racism, and from reading numerous personal narratives of both white counselors and counselors of color on their racial/cultural awakening, Sue and his co-authors developed a taxonomy of microaggressions which divides them into *microassaults, microinsults,* and *microinvalidations.*

According to the 2007 article, a *microassault* is "an explicit racial derogation characterized by a verbal or non-verbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions" (2007a, 274). Some of Sue et al.'s examples of microassaults include referring to someone as "colored" or "Oriental," using racial epithets, discouraging interracial interactions, or displaying a swastika (ibid.). This kind of microaggression is the least subtle of the three and the harms are more readily obvious. In fact, for many of their examples, it is not clear how there is anything "micro" about the encounter, either in terms of the intentional act, or in terms of the very macro, unambiguous harm that it causes.[2]

Microinsults, according to Sue et al., are "characterized by communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity" (ibid.). Frequently, without realizing it, perpetrators perform "subtle snubs [that] clearly convey a hidden insulting message to the recipient of color" (ibid.). Some examples of microinsults are when an employee of color is asked "How did you get your job?" or when a woman of color is told "you're pretty for a Black girl." In the first example, the implication in the question is that people of color are not qualified for their jobs and that as a person of color, they must have gotten their job through an affirmative action or quota program and not on the basis of their ability and qualifications for the position (ibid.). In the second example (not Sue et al.'s), the assumption is that standards of beauty are made on the basis of whiteness and that the woman of color is pretty only because she has white-looking features. In this case, the idea is that Blackness is not equated with beauty, therefore the Black woman could not be pretty *as* Black, but only insofar as in certain ways,

she looks white or has features that are generally associated with white women.

Finally, *microinvalidations*, according to Sue et al., are "communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color" (ibid.). Examples of microinvalidations that have received substantial attention in the literature are when non-white Americans are complimented for speaking English well (even though English is their first language), or when they are asked where they are *really* from (even though they were born in the United States) (ibid.). Sue has called these kinds of microinvalidations "alien in one's own land" microaggressions. These comments invalidate the non-white American's identity since they send the message that America belongs to whites and that if you are not white, then you don't really belong here. They also negate the recipient's American nationality and convey the message to them that they are and will always be "other" in their birth country.[3]

Importantly – and this is a point that is often missed, whether intentionally or not, by critics of microaggressions – microaggressions are never just a one-off experience for members of marginalized groups. As Pierce underscored in his original construal of the concept and as many of the contemporary discussions of the concept make clear, microaggressive comments and actions are so common and become a continual pattern in the lives of members of marginalized groups that they result in cumulative harm over extended periods of time (see Pierce 1970, 265; Pierce et al. 1977, 65; also see, for example, Sue 2010a, xv, Ch. 1]).[4] Sue et al.'s tripartite taxonomy (of microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations) has been expanded in the past decade to cover microaggressions beyond those that occur on the basis of race and thus to account for microaggressions that target members of other structurally marginalized groups. Their taxonomy has become nearly sacrosanct in the growing literature on the concept insofar as it has been drawn upon in virtually all of the scholarly and popular literature on microaggressions. However, Sue et al.'s original taxonomy has recently received some critical pushback in favor of an alternative taxonomy (see Freeman and Stewart 2018; Freeman and Stewart, MS in progress), which I discuss below.

In 2019, Gina Torino and her co-authors (almost all of whom were the original co-authors on the Sue et al. 2007a paper) define microaggressions as "derogatory slights or insults directed at a target person or persons who are members of oppressed groups" that communicate bias and can be delivered implicitly or explicitly (2019b, 3). Ultimately, they still embrace a version of Sue et al.'s original taxonomy (2007a), though it has been very slightly revamped (see Torino et al. 2019a). Among the several developments that the taxonomy has undergone, most noteworthy is that hate crimes are no longer considered to be a microaggression,

as they were in the 2007 understanding of "microassault." Sue has also dropped "forced sexual intercourse" as an example of "microassault" from his 2010 monograph, where he wrote that "men making unwanted sexual advances toward women, sexual harassment, and forced sexual intercourse are examples of gender microassaults" (2010a, 169). It is both unclear how and horrifying that anyone could think that any kind of unwanted sexual contact, violation, or intercourse could be equated with anything micro, both in terms of the act itself and the short- and long-term consequences for victims. It is also surprising how few people have been critical of Sue on this point.

Other important updates to the concept include expanding the different ways in which microaggressions can occur, especially the development of thinking about non-verbal microaggressions. Torino et al. discuss and provide examples of what they call non-verbal interpersonal behavioral and non-behavioral microaggressions that can be made with facial expressions (like rolling one's eyes), tonal sounds (like scoffing), and microaggressive gestures (like not paying attention when one is being spoken to, for example, looking at one's phone) (2019a, 314). They also discuss non-verbal, non-behavioral microaggressions that are symbolic/expressive (like wearing a "Redskins" jacket to a First Nations person's birthday party) or non-behavioral situational microaggressions (like an Orthodox Jewish person being invited to a non-Jewish colleague's holiday party where no kosher food is served), as well as environmental non-verbal microaggressions (which are physical and structured into the environment, like not using a microphone when addressing a large group of people) along the same categories as those just mentioned (ibid.).[5]

As just mentioned, since Sue et al.'s original taxonomy of racial microaggressions, the concept has been developed well beyond the domain of race to consider microaggressions along a range of other axes of marginalization and also in a variety of specific contexts. Because there have now been close to 12,000 articles published on microaggressions since 2007 (!), I do not claim to tell a comprehensive story of all of the various directions in which the research has gone; but I do hope to provide a roadmap of some of the main areas of concentration. In his 2010 monograph, Sue himself expands his consideration of microaggressions to consider gender and sexual orientation.[6] The study of microaggressions has expanded quite rapidly and extensively to also consider members of the following marginalized groups who frequently experience them: transgender folks (Nordmarken and Kelly 2014), Muslims (Husain and Howard 2017; Nadal et al. 2012a), Asian Americans (Lin 2010; Ong et al. 2013; Sue et al. 2007b), Filipino Americans (Nadal et al. 2012b), Latinx Americans (Rivera et al. 2010), Indigenous peoples (Hill et al. 2010), multiracial individuals (Johnson and Nadal 2010), African American educators (DeCuir-Gunby and Gunby 2016; Pittman 2012), scholars of color (Guzman et al. 2010), and people of

low socioeconomic status (SES) (Smith and Redington 2010). Problematically, at this time, there has only been one article written on microaggressions directed against people with disabilities (Keller and Galgay 2010); this is an area that needs far more work (see Schroer and Bain in this volume). Additionally, far more research needs to be done to consider the ways in which microaggressions work intersectionally and not just along a single axis of oppression, since, as feminist philosophers have been arguing for many decades now, identity does not work in the additive way that much of the research on microaggressions assumes (for example, see Collins 1998, 2009 [2000] and Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Lewis et al. coined the term *gendered racial microaggressions* to refer to "subtle everyday behavioral, verbal, and environmental expressions of oppression based on the intersection of one's race and gender"[7] (2016, 2019, 51; also see Nadal et al. 2015). Tempest Henning's contribution to this volume also takes an important step in the right direction on the topic of intersectionality; still, there is far more work to be done with regard to utilizing the concept of intersectionality in a robust way in the study of microaggressions both conceptually and empirically.

In terms of different contexts in which microaggressions have been studied, a great deal of current discussions, both academic and non-academic, focus on how they occur on university campuses and the myriad ways that they affect students who are members of marginalized groups (see, for example, Kanter et al. 2017; Levchak 2019; Lewis et al. 2013; Nadal et al. 2014; Solórzano et al. 2000; Williams 2019a). Discussions are also branching out to consider microaggressions in K-12 educational contexts (Kohli and Solórzano 2012; Kohli et al. 2018; Martin 2019), in the workplace (Holder 2019), online (Tynes et al. 2019), within and between members of marginalized groups (David et al. 2019), in health care contexts focusing on microaggressions that patients experience (Freeman and Stewart 2018), in health care contexts focusing on microaggressions that physicians experience (Bleich 2015; Lattimore 2018, Montenegro 2016; Stratton et al. 2005;), and microaggressions' impact on health outcomes (May 2017; Mazzula and Campón 2019). Steinfeldt et al. (2019) have considered how certain mascots create environmental microaggressions and Nadal (2018) has looked at microaggressions and traumatic stress.

Harms of Microaggressions

In his research over the last decade, Derald Sue has outlined the various axes along which recipients[8] of microaggressions experience harm. He breaks down the harms of microaggressions along the following lines: biological (microaggressive experiences may cause physiological reactions like elevated blood pressure and heart rate, etc., or changes in the immune system), cognitive (microaggressive experiences require and occupy

attentional resources to determine the meaning of the stressor), emotional (microaggressions can lead to anger, rage, anxiety, depression, and hopelessness in the victim), and behavioral (coping strategies or behavioral reactions utilized by the recipient may either help adjustment or make situation worse) (2010a, 123–134). From over a decade of empirical research, it has been made clear that the negative impact on the mental health of recipients of microaggressions can accumulate to become devastating to recipients' psychological well-being.[9] In addition to these four axes along which the harms of microaggressions have been discussed, philosophers have introduced further dimensions along which the harms of microaggressions occur (for example, on epistemic harm and harm to one's self-identity see Freeman and Stewart 2018, 2019, and MS in progress; also see Fatima 2017 and her contribution to this volume). More research – both conceptual and empirical – is needed in order to fully understand the harmful consequences that repeated microaggressions have for those who experience them.

Critics of Microaggressions

Importantly, research on microaggressions has not been without its critics, both within and outside of academia. Helpfully, Sue categorizes the backlash against microaggressions (or, the microaggression research program (MRP)) along the following lines in his most recent publication on the topic (2019, 229): critics tend to (i) minimize the harmful impact of microaggressions (see, for example, Lukianoff and Haidt 2015, 2018), (ii) claim that focusing on microaggressions (theory, research, and initiatives) fosters a dangerous culture of victimhood (see, for example, Campbell and Manning 2018), (iii) warn that trying to limit the occurrence of microaggressions imperils free speech (see, for example, Lukianoff and Haidt 2018), and (iv) advocate for a moratorium on microaggression initiatives (and related endeavors like safe spaces, trigger warnings, removal of offensive historical names and symbols, hiring of chief diversity officers, and creating required microaggression training programs for educators) until the research becomes more clear (see, for example, Lilienfeld 2017a, 2017c; Lukianoff and Haidt 2018). Many of the general critiques of initiatives trying to prevent the occurrence of microaggression on university campuses have been published in popular/non-academic venues (see, for example, Friedersdorf 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). Because several contributions to this volume offer philosophical responses to a number of these critiques (see, for example, Freeman and Stewart; Evans and Mallon; Thompson; Rini) I will not spend much time responding to them here.

Suffice it to say that most broadly, such criticisms fail to understand microaggressions (i) as a phenomenon that occurs within the context of structural and systematic oppression (for an elaboration of this position, see Freeman and Stewart's contribution to this volume; also see Rini

2018 and McTernan 2018); (ii) as a pattern of behavior in the lives of members of marginalized groups that bolster systems of oppression (see Fatima 2017). Criticisms also (iii) fail to acknowledge that victims of microaggressions might understand how oppression works better than members of dominant social positions do (see Freeman and Stewart's as well as Fatima's contributions to this volume, and Fatima 2017). It is tempting to conclude that what motivates such criticisms is a kind of willed ignorance (see Pohlhaus Jr. 2012) about the kinds of lives that members of marginalized groups live.

Adding to this general response to such criticisms of the MRP, Sue writes that criticisms are predicated on the following (problematic) underlying assumptions: (i) microaggressions are trivial, relatively harmless, and insignificant offences, (ii) microaggressions are no different from the ordinary incivilities that we all experience, regardless of whether we are a member of a marginalized group (on this matter, also see Rini 2015), (iii) such criticisms imply that those who experience microaggressions are themselves to blame for having such thin skin and that they need to "grow up," grow a spine, and stop "whining," and relatedly (iv), micro-aggression theory and advocacy encourages members of marginalized groups to *play the victim card* which encourages them to seek "special treatment and protection" (see Sue 2019, 232). Responding to such criticisms in a philosophically informed way was one of the motivations behind this volume and we hope that a number of contributions to push this debate further by offering compelling and philosophically grounded responses to the problematic criticisms that have been launched against the MRP.

Why Microaggressions and Philosophy?

It is noteworthy that in the most recent edited volume on the topic of microaggressions, *Microaggression Theory: Influence and Implications* (2019), in listing all of the disciplines other than psychology that have contributed to the debates on microaggressions – the editors note sociology, education, law, and political science – philosophy is markedly absent (Torino et al. 2019b, 7). This should come as no great surprise, given that to date, only a handful of peer-reviewed academic articles specifically dedicated to the topic of microaggressions have been published by philosophers (I counted 11 as of October 2019).[10] It is this lacuna that the present volume aims to begin to fill. The hope is that this volume changes the terrain of the literature on microaggressions by introducing important contributions that philosophers can make to our collective thinking on and understanding both of the concept itself and also of how microaggressions function, phenomenologically or experientially, in everyday life. It is also noteworthy that few, if any, articles on micro-aggressions by psychologists cite any of the work that has been done on

the concept by philosophers (in Torino et al. 2019c, Rini's popular 2015 article is the only piece by a philosopher that is cited). It is our hope that this volume also helps to resolve this problem.

In their volume, Torino and her co-editors and co-authors, including Sue himself, write that

> [i]n thinking about the future of microaggressions, it seems likely to become an increasingly contested concept that will no doubt frequently be misconstrued, misrepresented, and maligned. The controversy surrounding the concept of microaggressions will most readily be resolved *if researchers continue to empirically investigate the* phenomenon.
>
> <div align="right">(2019a, 310, my emphasis)</div>

Here is where I disagree, in part, with Torino et al. and from this partial disagreement the seeds for this volume began to germinate. Indeed, more empirical work on a new concept/phenomenon is always a good idea, so I applaud continued empirical investigations that continue to consider microaggressions and to bring microaggression research into heretofore unexamined territories. However, as philosophers know well, empirical work alone will not resolve the kinds of conceptual disagreements that often lie at the core of many debates in psychology and that surround many of the debates on microaggressions. In order to better develop, clarify, and make more precise the concept of microaggression, deep philosophical engagement is necessary, in addition to the empirical work. And this is precisely what philosophers are trained to do – to engage in conceptual analysis and clarify the bounds of our concepts and how we use them, to examine the methodologies with which we put their study into practice, and to draw normative conclusions. Careful conceptual analyses and methodological critiques of philosophers are imperative in order to effectively move discussions about microaggressions forward, but so far, have been missing, if not altogether absent from the literature.

Within the literature on microaggressions, philosophers tend to cite the research in psychology, but psychologists do not cite or engage with any of the work that has been done by philosophers. It is our hope that the work featured in this volume elevates the contributions of philosophers who write on microaggressions and makes them better known to psychologists and others working on the topic, so that the work in these respective fields can start to inform each other in meaningful ways. On that note, it is worth discussing some of the important work that philosophers have done in the last few years on the concept of microaggressions. I summarize the literature for several reasons. First, it is a small enough literature that it *can* be summarized entirely in this introduction! Second, I do so in order to make clear to readers who might be unfamiliar with

the literature the exciting and informative work that has already been done on the topic by philosophers. Third, it is important to broadcast to readers from a variety of disciplines that philosophers have already taken important stakes in the debates about microaggressions; have already spilled a good deal of ink responding to many of the criticisms that have been launched; and indeed, have carved out important conceptual territory in the debates that need to receive more uptake, and ideally, empirical study. Finally, presenting a detailed overview of the work that has already been done by philosophers provides an important context to enable the reader to see how the papers in the present volume both respond to and in so doing, continue many of these important discussions, in addition to pushing the dialogues further. Here I summarize only articles that are entirely (or, almost entirely) dedicated to microaggressions, and not articles that only mention the concept, or use microaggressions as an example in making a different or broader sort of argument.

Jeanine Weekes Schroer, the co-editor of this book, was the first philosopher to dedicate a substantial portion of an academic article to the topic of microaggressions. In "Giving Them Something They Can Feel: On the Strategy of Scientizing the Phenomenology of Race and Racism" (2015), she embarks upon a comparison of microaggression research – which at the time was still in its relative infancy – and research on stereotype threat, which was a far more robust and developed literature. The purpose of the comparison was to consider the consequences that each literature has on what she calls the *scientization* of the phenomenology of race and racism. More specifically, Schroer's aim is to bring much needed attention to the following issue: on the one hand, academic disciplines try to understand experiences of racism and what it is like to live a racialized existence in a white supremacist society; but on the other hand, and in so doing, such studies tend to stall progress on the most significant challenges for current conversations about race and racism: namely, how to better listen to groups who are being studied and how to ensure that they are in fact being heard. She argues that scientizing the study of race in both microaggression and stereotype threat research "explicitly invests in the quantifying of the harms of racism, while implicitly insisting upon the fact that racism hurts as well as harms and that this fact *must* matter" (93). She tracks an important difference between the literature on microaggressions and the literature on stereotype threat, namely, that microaggression research is perceived to lack what she calls the "robustness" of the research on stereotype threat (99) because "despite best intentions and real contributions to clarifying the features of contemporary racism, both stereotype threat and microaggression research have become entangled in a corrupted system of knowledge that produces semi-truths while disguising its own corruption" (101). Her conclusion is that ultimately, "the testimonies of people of color to their experience of the hurts and harms of racism

are still excluded perspectives" (102). Since 2015, much has changed with regard to the terrain, scope, breadth, and depth of the literature on microaggressions, so it's not clear whether this conclusion still holds now as much as it did in 2015, especially with the increase in qualitative work that has been done and continues to be done on race and racism. On the other hand, given the kinds of (pithy) criticisms that have been raised against MRP – most of which spring from a place of willed ignorance – perhaps Schroer's conclusion is just as true now as it was then.

The next academic article on microaggressions to be published by a philosopher is Mark Tschaepe's 2016 article, "Addressing Microaggressions and Epistemic Injustice: Flourishing from the Work of Audre Lorde." The goal of the article is to argue that Audre Lorde's writings provide useful tools that help to acknowledge, address, and ultimately, to remedy epistemic injustices. But in making this point, Tschaepe also considers the important question of what can be done to address microaggressions as causes of epistemic injustice, especially since most people are unaware of ever having committing them. More generally, he asks by what means people can address microaggressions and concomitantly decrease epistemic injustice while increasing human flourishing? Importantly, in answering these questions, Tschaepe proposes that we actively engage with narratives that present cases of microaggressions as they are contextualized in the daily experiences of victims (87). This approach lies in stark contrast to the way that many critics of microaggressions understand the phenomenon, leading to scathing, uninformed (and ultimately, entirely problematic) critiques that have been launched (as discussed in Section "Critics of Microaggressions"). As Tschaepe writes, his contextualist approach to understanding microaggressions "is in contrast with separating microaggressions from the persons to whom indignities are directed and merely listing or describing the microaggressions apart from those persons and the situations in which they are embedded" (ibid.). It would have been very helpful and would have avoided many confusions and misinformation about what microaggressions are, had many of the contemporary critics of microaggressions taken note of this approach. That is because such an approach underscores how crucial it is to contextualize our understandings and discussions of microaggressions within a pattern of oppression rather than to assume, incorrectly, yet as most critics do, that microaggressions are one-offs that might happen to occur to members of marginalized groups and/or, that microaggressions are no different from the kinds of incivilities that everybody faces on a daily basis.

Saba Fatima's 2017 essay on microaggressions, "On the Edge of Knowing: Microaggression and Epistemic Uncertainty as a Woman of Color," explores the epistemic toll that microaggressions can take on recipients. Her first personal testimony provides a rich account of what it looks like to endure the on-going harms of microaggressions as an immigrant

woman of color and looks at what she calls the social conditions around the epistemic border of thinking of oneself as paranoid and of being secure in one's perception of reality. That suffering microaggressions has the consequence of making one paranoid about one's perception of reality is a notion that Pierce introduced in his seminal work on microaggressions, but did not develop in any systematic way. Most important in Fatima's account is her description of how women of color very often just *know* when they have been microaggressed, often in ways that are difficult to convey to people who do not also occupy that social position (see, for example, 149, 152–153). Echoing many of the claims that are central to Tschaepe's contextualist account, Fatima also shows how difficult it can be to pinpoint the enduring harm of any single instance of microaggression yet, when considered more holistically and cumulatively, how microaggressions work in the service of supporting and bolstering larger systems of oppression and can cause serious and continued harm.

In 2018, Emily McTernan published "Microaggressions, Equality, and Social Practices," which accomplishes two important goals. First, it provides an account of what microaggressions are and what makes them objectionable and a distinct form of injustice. On her account, microaggressions are an everyday experience for members of marginalized groups that make a specific contribution to relations of oppression and marginalization. Second, the paper argues that microaggressions ought to be of greater interest to political philosophers. She makes this case by locating microaggressions among the social practices that constitute broader structures, and by examining what incorporating such social practices into thinking about equality might look like. Most novel in McTernan's approach is her focus on how microaggressions collectively structure our relationships, instead of concentrating on how single instances of microaggressions result in individual harms. This move is so important in general, but it's also important in responding to critics of MRP who tend to focus on individual instances of microaggressions, thereby minimizing their harm and impact, and who fail to consider the collective and cumulative harm that they cause and the context of structural and systemic oppression in which they occur. McTernan's contention is that in order to understand the collective role that microaggressions play in structuring unequal relations, we must consider their impact collectively; once we do so, it becomes easier to see how reacting to a single microaggression might be made out to be an overreaction when in fact, given the cumulative harm of microaggressions and how pervasive they are in the lives of members of marginalized groups, one is never really only reacting to a single instance of a microaggression (on this point, also see Friedlaender's very helpful discussion (2018, 10–11), Fatima 2017, and Evans and Mallon's contribution to this volume).

One factor that unites all of the articles mentioned so far, and all of the articles by philosophers that have been written to date on the topic

of microaggressions, is their (at least implicit) acceptance of Sue's (and Sue et al. 2007a's) tripartite taxonomy of the phenomenon into microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. In our 2018 article, "Microaggressions in Clinical Contexts," Heather Stewart and I challenge what we have called Sue's action-based account of microaggressions (namely, theorizing the concept from the perspective of the one *committing* microaggressions). Instead, we propose a harm-based account of microaggressions, one that begins to theorize microaggressions from the perspective of the recipient and the harms they suffer. Instead of Sue's tripartite understanding of microaggression, we propose understanding the phenomenon in terms of epistemic, emotional, and self-identity microaggressions, which result, respectively, in epistemic, emotional, and existential harms. We demonstrate how and why Sue's account cannot derive the precise conclusions about the kinds of harms that result from microaggressions, conclusions that can be reached on our proposed harm-based approach. We develop this account within the context of medicine, focusing on microaggressions in this domain and specifically, on the kinds of harms that patients experience.

Heather Stewart and I develop and focus this project in our 2019 chapter, "Epistemic Microaggressions and Epistemic Injustices in Clinical Medicine," published in *Overcoming Epistemic Injustice: Social and Psychological Perspectives* (ed. Benjamin R. Sherman and Stacey Goguen). The chapter concentrates on the first type of microaggression we outlined in our 2019 paper, *epistemic microaggressions*, and further develops the concept within a medical context. We problematize how microaggressions have been conceptualized in the psychology literature, introduce our alternative harm-based account of microaggressions to discuss the concept of *epistemic microaggressions*, consider several examples of the phenomenon within medicine (mostly along the lines of gender and race), demonstrate how they lead to a variety of harms for patients, and discuss the serious short- and long-term consequences of such microaggressions. On the basis of our analysis, we argue that epistemic microaggressions in medicine are real, can cause serious harm, and therefore ought to be avoided by health care providers.

The next two papers published on the topic delve into the moral fabric and the moral consequences of microaggressions. Ornaith O'Dowd's 2018 paper, "Microaggressions: A Kantian Account," asks what the moral significance of microaggressions is by considering what kind of moral wrong a microaggression is. In so doing, she also considers how we should understand the moral responsibility for microaggressions. In answering these questions, O'Dowd offers an explanation of the moral significance of microaggressions by employing a Kantian approach and argues for a broadly Kantian account of the wrongs of microaggressions. One might ask "why a Kantian approach to microaggressions?" To this, O'Dowd provides several answers. First, she notes that if one finds

Kantian ethics to be the best framework for understanding moral life generally, then, since microaggressions are morally significant incidents, Kantian ethics must have a satisfactory account of them (1222). But a second, perhaps more compelling reason – especially to the non-Kantians among us – is that a Kantian analysis can illuminate certain features of microaggressions in a distinctively helpful way. Specifically, employing such an approach allows her to argue that microaggressions risk damaging targets' self-respect and rational agency. Along these lines, on a Kantian account, whatever the damage, a serious wrong is committed whenever someone expresses an attitude of disrespect to another (1223). Furthermore, with a focus on the will of the agent, if properly understood within the context of Kant's aim of facilitating first-person action guidance, O'Dowd illustrates how a Kantian approach can help to navigate questions of moral responsibility. Her most important contribution to the debate – bringing to bear how a key figure in moral philosophy can be used to unpack the moral significance of microaggressions – is captured in the following passage:

> Critiques of microaggressions discourse has often ignored the lived reality of targets and the cumulative nature of the damage caused, as well as mischaracterizing those who complain in ways that bear the hallmarks of epistemic oppression and injustice. A Kantian account of microaggressions foregrounds the ways in which these incidents damage targets' self-respect and dignity and offers a nuanced account of moral responsibility for such incidents. In particular, this framework decenters the question of third-person blame, instead focusing on more fruitful moral questions of first-person action-guidance not only for those who commit microaggressions, and not only at the level of person-to-person interaction, but in a wider social context.
>
> (1231)

Christina Friedlaender's 2018 paper, "On Microaggressions: Cumulative Harm and Individual Responsibility," explains from a very different perspective why microaggressions are morally significant and argues that we are responsible for their harms. Their position is that microaggressions present a unique case for how we understand cumulative harm, blame-allocation, and responsibility within structural oppression. Echoing Tschaepe and McTernan, Friedlaender contends that if perpetrators argue that their specific act is not a microaggression, we can respond by pointing to a pattern of similar acts that have historically and currently manifested in relation to an objectively existing form of structural oppression (5). Friedlaender also contends that one can experience a microaggression, even if one is unaware that they've experienced one. With regard to responsibility for cumulative harm – and working in the tradition of Iris Marion Young, particularly her social connection model

as presented in *Responsibility for Justice* (2011) – Friedlaender's point is that it cannot be understood on the basis of an account of individual blame because not all individuals who contribute to the cumulative harm are blameworthy for doing so. Matters are far more complex and require a nuanced account of blame and responsibility. Friedlaender believes that if people commit microaggressions unknowingly, then we are justified in making this clear to them; we are also justified in expecting them to take responsibility for their harmful actions going forward. But, on their account, we are not required to blame them, nor are we justified in blaming them if their ignorance is genuine. Their discussion of the cumulative harm of microaggressions is particularly helpful. Microaggressions, Friedlaender contends, can result in a certain amount of harm as individual events, but the quantity of the harm is not specifiable in isolation because, going back to understanding them as a part of systemic oppression, microaggressions are not just isolated events or one-off actions. For this reason, we cannot treat the cumulative harm of microaggressions as the sum of all individual instances. Such a model fails to capture the holistic nature of cumulative harm and the holistic effect it has on the individual (11). Ultimately, Friedlaender argues that as perpetrators of individual microaggressions, we have a responsibility to respond to the cumulative harm to which we have individually contributed.

Regina Rini's 2018 paper, "How To Take Offense: Responding to Microaggressions," considers how one should respond when one is made the victim of a microaggression. Her account considers a number of morally salient factors, including the effects of microaggressions upon victims, perpetrators, and third parties. In determining how to respond to microaggressions, Rini surveys two popular views, both of which construe a far too simplistic response. The first response, popular with cultural conservative critics of microaggressions (see, for example, Lukianoff and Haidt 2015, 2018; also Campbell and Manning 2018), is what she calls the "thicker skin" response, which calls on victims of microaggressions to simply brush off the offense and move on. Rini shows how such a response misconstrues the nature of microaggression as mere insult rather than understanding them as one part of a systemic pattern of oppression. On the other end of the spectrum, the second view she considers prescribes anger as an appropriate, even obligatory, response to microaggressions. Rini demonstrates how this view is also too simple for non-ideal social contexts in which we find ourselves where oppression is still rampant and in which members of marginalized groups continue to suffer. She goes even further to show that sometimes, expressing anger can diminish the effectiveness of anti-oppression efforts. In the remainder of the article, Rini outlines a range of factors that are important to any response decision. She concludes that there is no one single best response to all microaggressions. Rather, in line with a more

contextualist approach espoused by others like Tschaepe, she contends that it is necessary to determine which situational factors can make one sort of response better than another.

Emma McClure's 2019 paper, "Theorizing a Spectrum of Aggression: Microaggressions, Creepiness, and Sexual Assault" takes as its point of departure one of the criticisms launched at MRP by Scott O. Lilienfeld, namely, that the very concept *micro*aggression is non-sensical since any kind of aggression is by definition intentional and almost always not small. She contends that in order to respond to Lilienfeld's critique, a richer theoretical framework is necessary to defend the legitimacy of the concept "microaggression." For such an account, she turns to a position put forth by Bonnie Mann in her 2012 article "Creepers, Flirts, Heroes and Allies: Four Theses on Men and Sexual Harassment." Mann explores what unintentional creepiness has in common with more explicit threats like sexual harassment and rape. One of the similarities McClure notes is the way in which unintentional creepiness, like more explicit threats and assaults, can undermine the victim's sense of self-worth. Considering this account alongside the concept of microaggression, McClure argues that Mann's account clarifies the most threatening aspect of microaggressions, which are not the momentary aggravation of a single problematic interaction, but rather, the slow corrosion of our self-definition and our capacity to choose for ourselves what to value. Ultimately, McClure's point is that gender-based microinsults and microinvalidations participate in the same patriarchal structures as overt harassment and assault. She argues for a position – that she hones and develops in her contribution to this volume – that these phenomena lie on a spectrum of misogynistic aggression. In response to Lilienfeld then, the main issue with microaggressions is not intention (and the inability to easily attribute it to perpetrators), but rather the aggressive encroachment on the target's autonomy.

The final publication to date that engages with microaggressions in a substantive way is Mary Kate McGowan's 2018 chapter, "On Political Correctness, Microaggressions, and Silencing in the Academy," in *Academic Freedom* (ed. Jennifer Lackey). McGowan compares two cases of alleged silencing in the academy: a case of political correctness (where a conservative student in a liberal university feels uncomfortable voicing their views in a political philosophy class) and a case of a microaggression (where a professor and students in a classroom consistently mistake the two Asian students for one another even though they look nothing alike). Although each case involves a speaker who decides against voicing their beliefs in fear of having to face the responses by the audience, and although there is a structural similarity between the two cases, she argues that both kinds of alleged silencing are not on par. Through her investigation, she shows that there are importantly different reasons that can motivate a decision to stay silent. Whereas a case of mere disagreement does not involve silencing, other sorts of cases, like

microaggressions, do. McGowan begins to outline some criteria for determining the differences between cases of alleged silencing, highlighting the differences between microaggressions and other kinds of speech. Her chapter is another important response to some of the criticisms that were discussed above.[11]

This volume continues many of the discussions and arguments just summarized, in addition to adding many others to the mix. It contains a philosophical engagement with, as well as, an analysis and critique of microaggressions and the surrounding literature. It includes contributions from diverse and significant figures working on philosophy of psychology, empirically informed philosophy, feminist philosophy, critical race theory, disability theory, philosophy of language, philosophy of science, and social and political philosophy. The scholars who have contributed to this volume engage and invigorate many of the debates about microaggressions from diverse philosophical perspectives. In addition to philosophical efforts to criticize and clarify the notion of microaggressions, contributions to the volume use unique frames of analysis to articulate both how the concept of microaggressions can be used to clarify and sharpen our understanding of subtler aspects of oppression *and* how analysis, expansion, and reconceiving the notion of a microaggression can deepen and extend its explanatory power.

Some of the guiding questions that this volume explores include, but are not limited to, the following: Can microaggressions be established as a viable scientific concept? What roles do microaggressions play in other oppressive phenomena like transphobia, fat phobia, and abelism? How can epistemological challenges around microaggressions be addressed via feminist theory, critical race theory, disability theory, or epistemologies of ignorance? What insights can be gleaned from intersectional analyses of microaggressions? Are there domain-specific analyses of microaggressions that would give insight to features of that domain, i.e. microaggressions related to sexuality, athletics, immigration status, national origin, body type, or ability.

There have not yet been any published books by philosophers that engage with the MRP (though at the time of writing this introduction, we know that several are in the works); Jeanine and I hope that this volume paves the way for a new sub-discipline within philosophy of psychology. But unlike most philosophical engagements with specific areas of psychology, ours is radically diverse given its intersectional approach, the array of different perspectives, and specifically, in terms of the identities of the authors. The demographics of philosophy as a discipline – upwards of 75%–80% male and 99% white – lends itself to discussions of oppression that tend to be reductive and objectifying. This volume aims to learn from the difficult lessons of philosophy's recent past – these objectifying tendencies are not only harmful to those subjected to them, they also undermine the likelihood of a successfully

rich intellectual inquiry. For this reason, we have made sure that there is diversity along many axes of identity in the contributing authors of the volume (i.e. along the lines of race, gender, sexual orientation, class, dis/ability status, body type, and others).

No other book of this sort exists. Whereas philosophers have taken stands on the literature on implicit bias and stereotype threat (see Brownstein and Saul, 2016a, 2016b), the MRP is a much newer literature, and thus, has so far received little attention outside of psychology. The time is ripe for a philosophical engagement with and analysis of microaggressions and it is our hope that our volume opens up this door.

Future Directions in Microaggression Research

Having said that, this volume is not comprehensive: because it is the first of its kind, it is only the beginning. There is still far more work to be done. The vast majority of scholarly work on microaggressions so far has been taken up by those who are sympathetic to the concept. This volume continues to engage in the debate from this perspective, though we hope that doing so invites substantive (and fair) philosophical criticisms of the literature, in an effort to keep the debate progressing forward in positive directions.

There are other important gaps to fill as well. As mentioned above, to my knowledge, to date, there has only been one academic article that's been written on microaggressions experienced by people with disabilities (Keller and Galgay 2010). Jeanine Weekes Schroer and Zara Bain make an important contribution to this topic in their chapter in this volume. The potential for the development of both the notion of microaggression and the analysis of the social oppression of those labeled as "disabled" through microaggressions research is difficult to overstate. The microaggressions experienced by disabled people have an unrestricted character that has the potential to considerably expand and develop the taxonomies of precursors to microaggression and of types of microaggressions. The variation in microaggressive experiences for those with different disabilities is another fruitful avenue of research that could provide deeper insight about the ways that the harms of microaggressions may compound in some instances and may not in others.

Another topic that has not received nearly enough attention in the academic literature is microaggressions that fat folks experience. Alison Reiheld's chapter in this volume takes up this issue. Reiheld's insight about how the harms of microaggressions can target and land on those *not* in marginalized groups could be incredibly revealing about how microaggressions can be used to police social borders by targeting those who are "approved" by our normative social categories as well as those who are not. Disability- and fat-focused microaggressions are more likely to be defended as appropriate or even necessary. There is fruitful research to be done on the difference in the occurrence and the effect of

microaggressions that are morally accepted as opposed to those that are morally condemned.

As mentioned above, discussions of intersectional microaggressions has begun (see Lewis et al. 2019 and Henning's contribution to this volume), but more work in this area needs to be done, both conceptually and empirically. Differences between how folks at the intersections (like Black women, disabled queer folks, etc.) experience and are affected by microaggressions targeting one aspect of their identities are an arena much in need of analysis. Do Black women experience anti-Black microaggressions differently (more or less severe, more or less lasting in their impact) than Black men do; do disabled queer folks experience specific types or instances of microaggression?

There are several avenues of empirical/practical research to be done on microaggressions. There is the question of how to diminish the occurrence of microaggressions. This is not a question that we take up in this volume because philosophy's first pass at microaggressions unsurprisingly focuses on conceptual clarity. There is still much taxonomical work to be done in orienting microaggressions to other similar oppressive phenomenon. A more precise conception of microaggressions, however, does poise researchers to do more effective work in trying to diminish both the occurrence and the consequences of microaggressions. While some work has been done to connect microaggressions to their physiological effects (effects on cortisol levels, effects on stress, effects on anxiety and depression), clarity about the character and function of microaggressions and their effects on different groups will allow empirical research on health and well-being consequences of microaggressions to be more meaningful. This research will also position us to do research on how to diminish the effects of microaggressions even if we cannot diminish their frequency. A clearer conception of microaggression also creates the possibility for more cognitive research on microaggressions. For example, we will be able to better consider what kind of brain activity is created by microaggressions; how that brain activity correlates with stress, anxiety, and other harms of microaggressions; and whether the brains of those routinely exposed to microaggressions changes on the basis of those experiences. Now that we have a brief introduction to microaggressions, some of the pathways of research both in psychology and in philosophy, some criticisms of MRP, an answer to the question of what philosophy has to contribute to the debates, and some directions for future research, we can turn to consider the content of this volume by providing brief summaries of the chapters.

Chapter Summaries

In "Sticks and Stones Can Break Your Bones and Words Can Really Hurt You: A Standpoint Epistemological Reply to Critics of the Microaggression Research Program," Heather Stewart and I take on some of