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# A Critical Philosophy of Microaggressions

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## Ewan Swift

Supervised by:

**Professor Christopher Woodard**

**Dr Koshka Duff**

Department of Philosophy


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# Abstract

This thesis addresses three main questions: (1) 'what are microaggressions?'; (2) 'how do they harm marginalised people?'; and (3) 'how should we deal with them?'.

I begin by offering a brief review of the psychological and philosophical literature on microaggressions, with a particular focus on the critique that the microaggression concept is too ill-defined to offer certainty over what counts as a microaggression. I intervene in this debate by rejecting the claim that we require this level of certainty and defend a structural account of microaggressions which characterises them as a *subtly oppressive social practice*. Following this, I motivate why microaggressions are oppressive by exploring the ways in which they constitute a form of violence against marginalised people. More specifically, I introduce the concept of *existential violence* to describe how microaggressions diminish the subjectivity of their targets by *denying*, *homogenising*, and *inferiorising* their identities and experiences, and substantiate this by offering a phenomenological account of microaggressions.

To address how we should deal with microaggressions, I first consider how we might respond to the microaggressor. Starting with anger, I warn against uncritically buying into the argument that anger is a 'counterproductive' response to microaggressions by exposing how this critique promotes a *masterful* form of disciplinary control which reinforces the oppression of marginalised people. Next, I explore the potential for disarming microaggressions through cringe, putting forward my own account of 'cringeworthiness' in order to show how microaggressions can be understood as cringeworthy, and outlining some of the benefits and drawbacks of cringing at microaggressors. Finally, I consider what each of us can do to reduce the likelihood that we engage in microaggressions. Moving beyond popular rhetorics around acknowledging our bias and privilege, I argue that we should embrace a *politics of disorientation*, characterised by an openness to being transformed by those moments of discomfort where our habits of oppression, like microaggressions, become disrupted.

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# Contents

# Introduction

'I'm surprised you sang, y'know…

**in English'**

'You remind me of her!'

'Sandra Oh?'

'Huh…'

'What, Sandra Oh or Luci Liu?'

**'Oh, literally either'**

'So, are you uh… like you're… you're mixed?

'Cause you don't look… you know…

**like *Japa*-Japanese'**

(Sawayama, 2019)

In the opening sequence of the music video for Rina Sawayama's aptly titled 'STFU!', the British Japanese singer sits at a dining table whilst her white date launches a barrage of potentially well-intended, but racially insensitive comments and questions at her. Throughout the scene, Sawayama looks both visibly confused by what her date is trying to imply, and also uncomfortable as she picks up on the offensive messages they communicate. Ultimately, the scene ends with Sawayama becoming so clearly frustrated with her date's behaviour that, when he asks if she is '*Japa*-Japanese' whilst using his chopsticks to pull back the corner of his eyes, she snaps. Sawayama has described her song as being about 'releasing the RAGE against microaggressions' (in Megarry, 2019), a term that has been increasingly used to describe the sorts of subtly offensive remarks that her fictional date directed at her, and the central topic of this thesis.

Originally coined by Black psychologist Chester Pierce (1970), the term 'microaggression' was used by Pierce to describe the majority of racial discrimination faced by Black Americans in the wake of the Civil Rights movement. Rather than being overt, explicit acts of hate, microaggressions are subtle and seemingly innocuous behaviours which are often enacted unintentionally and unwittingly. It was not, however, until a landmark

paper published by psychologist Derald Wing Sue and his colleagues (2007) that the term began to enjoy more mainstream popularity. This paper brought a fresh light to the sorts of microaggressions experienced by people of colour and ethnic minorities, including things such as being asked 'where are you *really* from?', being followed around a store by a security guard, and being mistaken for a service worker (2007, pp. 276–277). Within their paper, Sue and his colleagues outline the various psychological harms correlated with repeated exposure to subtle and ambiguous racism, and how it places recipients in a 'catch-22' where they must decide between addressing the microaggression and risk facing backlash, or bottling up their torment (Sue et al., 2007, p. 279). Ultimately, this prompted an explosion in psychological studies into microaggressions, with researchers also expanding our understanding of the sorts of microaggressions faced by other marginalised groups. These include treating women as though they are less competent than men (Capodilupo et al., 2010), assuming that all gay men are interested in fashion (Nadal et al., 2011), rushing to help a wheelchair user without asking (Keller & Galgay, 2010), and so on.

All of this has helped to bring wider attention to how oppression manifests itself in subtle and ambiguous ways. For example, a campaign launched by Black students at Harvard University, titled '*I, Too, Am Harvard*', featured a series of photos of students holding signs with racial microaggressions written on them to raise awareness of their experiences of subtle and ambiguous racism (see Williams, 2014). In the UK, several universities have begun to provide their students with EDI learning resources about microaggressions (see University of Bristol, no date; University of Edinburgh, 2024; Imperial College London, no date). The London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, and law firm Hogan Lovells, have also attracted attention for their introduction of anonymous tools for reporting microaggressions (see Simpson, 2022; Hyde, 2024). Finally, just as Sawayama explores microaggressions through the medium of song, director Jordan Peele highlights their pernicious nature in his film *Get Out*, which has been commended for its use of horror tropes to unpack how microaggressions dehumanise people of colour (Alemoru, 2017; Romano, 2017).

With this increased interest in microaggressions, however, come various criticisms of the concept and its everyday usage. Scott Lilienfeld, a prominent microaggression sceptic

within psychology, argues that there is insufficient consensus over what counts as a microaggression to 'afford rigorous scientific investigation' (2017, p. 140). Instead, he claims that the methodologies used by researchers rely too much on self-reporting tools without investigating the role that personal dispositions play in people's interpretations of what they see as microaggressions (2017, pp. 152–153). Following this, other sceptics have decried the wider uptake of the concept, offering sociopolitical critiques of it. Psychologists Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt argue that taking microaggressions seriously involves engaging in emotional reasoning, jumping to uncharitable conclusions about the microaggressor's intentions (2018, pp. 40–41). Elsewhere, sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning claim that if what counts as a microaggression is left up to the target's interpretation, then it offers a way for people to claim 'victimhood' and attract sympathy (2014, p. 707). This relates to the concern that educating people about microaggressions might have a negative effect on freedom of speech, creating a 'chilling effect' (Young, 2021) which prompts people to 'walk on eggshells' (Cantu & Jussim, 2022, p. 258) around marginalised people.

Although academic interest in microaggressions has largely stayed within the purview of psychology, philosophers have recently begun to pay attention to microaggressions and the interesting conceptual and ethical questions they raise. For example, responding to the conceptual challenges as to what counts as a microaggression, various philosophers have offered their own definitions (McTernan, 2018; McClure, 2019; Rini, 2020; Liebow, 2021; Perez Gomez, 2021). Furthermore, given the sociopolitical concerns raised above, philosophers have also asked whether morally ignorant microaggressors can be considered blameworthy for their behaviours (Friedlaender, 2018; O'Dowd, 2018; Rini, 2020), and how we should respond to microaggressions (Friedlaender, 2018; Rini, 2018; Gallegos-Ordorica & Perez Gomez, 2023). Beyond this, philosophical analyses have unpacked the sorts of harms they enact on marginalised people (Freeman & Stewart, 2021), with particular interest in the *epistemic* harms they result in (Fatima, 2020; Stewart, 2021; Perez Gomez, 2022).

Amongst this ever-growing philosophical interest in microaggressions, the broad aim of this thesis is to offer a *critical* philosophy of microaggressions that addresses three main questions: (1) 'what are microaggressions?'; (2) 'how do they harm marginalised

people?'; and (3) 'how should we (as target, bystander, or microaggressor) deal with them?'. What makes this a critical philosophy is that it is deeply influenced by fields of inquiry such as critical race theory, Black and decolonial feminisms, queer theory, and critical phenomenology. Approaching the topic from these perspectives offers rich language and conceptual apparatus for unpacking and challenging the oppressive status quo, which as this thesis will make apparent, is exactly what microaggressions represent. In doing so, this thesis offers some much-needed texture to the current discourse on microaggressions within philosophy, which I argue sometimes too hastily tries to respond to the microaggression sceptics without first assessing the political purpose of their claims.

Chapter 1 responds to the first question, 'what are microaggressions?', by offering a review of, and intervention in, the literature on microaggressions. In addressing the claims made by microaggression sceptics, Rini agrees that any account of microaggressions should offer certainty when it comes to detecting a microaggression (2020, p. 67). In response, I criticise Rini's own definition of microaggressions and argue that trying to rigorously define the concept with necessary and sufficient conditions is misguided, a distraction from more important considerations. Instead, I lend support to a looser '*structural*' account of microaggressions (see McTernan, 2018), characterising them as a *subtly oppressive social practice*. Following this, in Chapter 2 I address the second question, 'how do microaggressions harm marginalised people'. To move beyond popular analyses of the epistemic harms of microaggressions, this chapter analyses microaggressions as a form of *existential* violence which contribute to the unjust foreclosing of possibilities for marginalised people to experience themselves as multiplicitous subjects. To show this, I unpack how microaggressions *deny, homogenise,* and *inferiorise* marginalised people and their identities, making it more difficult for them to retain a positive and meaningful sense of self. I follow this up by offering a phenomenology of microaggressions, describing how microaggressions can 'derivatize' (Cahill, 2010) their targets, and result in them experiencing an 'inhibited intentionality' (see Young, 1980; Freeman, 2017), ultimately diminishing their subjectivity.

The remaining three chapters turn to the final question, 'how should we deal with microaggressions?'. In Chapters 3 and 4, I approach this question by considering how

targets and bystanders might respond to microaggressions. According to Rini (2018), there are two main views within the literature – either get angry, or grow 'thicker skin' – both of which she rejects for different reasons. In Chapter 3, I critique Rini's arguments against responding to microaggressions with anger on account of her investing in a particular narrative which promotes emotional regulation as a tool of neoliberal disciplinary control. By introducing Julietta Singh's (2017) analysis of how oppressive logics of 'mastery' operate in seemingly harmless ways, I warn against uncritically buying into the counterproductivity critique of anger because, at its core, it demands the marginalised subject to 'master thyself' without being afforded the tools to actually do so. To expand our thinking beyond these two main views that Rini offers, in Chapter 4 I argue that we might respond to microaggressions with 'cringe'. To motivate this, I put forward my own account of 'cringeworthiness' as describing behaviours where someone unknowingly fails to come across in the way they thought they were. By showing how typical cases of unintentional microaggressions can be understood as cringeworthy, I then address various benefits and drawbacks to responding with cringe, opening up the conversation for how we might creatively respond not only to microaggressions but oppressive social practices more broadly.

Finally, in Chapter 5 I ask what we can all do to reduce the likelihood that we engage in microaggressive behaviours. I start by critiquing popular discourses around addressing one's unconscious biases and paying attention to one's privilege, for how they devolve into an individualistic, psychologistic, and self-serving 'politics of self-transformation' (Kruks, 2005). Instead, I put forward what Sara Ahmed (2006) terms a 'politics of disorientation', building upon her *Queer Phenomenology* to suggest that this politics involves an openness to being transformed by moments of disorientation where we command attention. Placing Ahmed in conversation with Lugones' concept of 'world-travelling' (1987), I show how a politics of disorientation can be put into practice to disrupt our habits of oppression, such as microaggressions, and allow us to recognise the self as multiplicitous (see Ortega, 2016). It concludes the thesis by exploring how our attitudes towards moments of discomfort, uncertainty, and difference can influence our own tendencies to comfortably slide into oppressive habits.

CHAPTER 1

# Oppression Repackaged

*What are Microaggressions?*

## Introduction

From its first use by psychologist Chester Pierce (1970) in the 1970s to its popularisation in the 2010s following a landmark paper by Derald Wing Sue and his colleagues (2007), the term 'microaggressions' has been increasingly used to describe how oppression can manifest in subtle, ambiguous, and unintentional ways. This work, and the research it has inspired, has made important contributions to understanding how oppression is able to repackage itself as it adapts to shifting societal attitudes (see Friedlaender, 2021). Nevertheless, there is scepticism about the methodological approaches of psychological studies of microaggressions (Lilienfeld, 2017, 2020), and concerns that taking microaggressions seriously may threaten free speech and encourage people to paint themselves as victims (Campbell & Manning, 2014; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; Cantu & Jussim, 2022). At the heart of these worries lies the claim that the microaggression concept remains too loosely defined to be operationally useful as we cannot accurately determine what counts as a microaggression. Therefore, the question that remains for microaggression researchers, and the one that I shall begin this thesis by addressing here, is '*what exactly are microaggressions?*'.

To answer this question, I begin by offering a review of the psychological and philosophical literature on microaggressions. Through this, I highlight the need to take microaggressions seriously due to the various harms that have been shown to be correlated with repeated exposure to these subtle and ambiguous forms of oppression. To support the integrity of these analyses against the criticisms of 'microaggression sceptics', I first take note of the methodological, conceptual, and sociopolitical concerns the sceptics raise. I show how many of their claims can be boiled down to a worry that, on Sue's original definition, what counts as a microaggression is just a matter of the target's interpretation. This generates what Regina Rini calls the 'subjectivity problem'

(2020b, p. 24), which states that there are no objective criteria against which we can resolve differing interpretations. To address this problem, I present Rini's *ambiguous experience* account (2020a, 2020b) and Emily McTernan's *structural* account (2018) as the two most promising solutions to the sceptic's problem. Yet, given the complexities of microaggressions, I show how both accounts face their own unique problems. Taking stock of these issues, I ultimately defend a structural account of microaggressions, addressing Rini's criticisms that it does not properly centre marginalised people and their experiences and cannot achieve certainty in detection. In response to the question 'what are microaggressions?', I therefore argue that they are a *subtly oppressive social practice*.

## 1.1 Microaggressions and their Harms

Despite the term 'microaggression' mostly being attributed to psychologist Derald Wing Sue, it was first coined in the 1970s by another psychologist, Chester Pierce, to describe the everyday subtle prejudice experienced by Black Americans. In his paper, 'Offensive Mechanisms', Pierce analyses how most of the racial discrimination faced by Black Americans at the time no longer took the form of 'gross and crippling' acts such as hate speech or lynching, but instead was 'subtle and stunning' (1970, pp. 265-266). Pierce claimed that the 'offensive mechanisms' through which the majority of racism now operates takes the form of 'microaggressions' – seemingly innocuous acts whose cumulative effect magnifies the harm of subsequent acts (1970, p. 266). Recounting his experience as a Black professor, Pierce describes these offensive mechanisms in action:

> I notice in a class I teach that after each session a white, not a black, will come up to me and tell me how the class should be structured or how the chairs should be placed or how there should be extra meetings outside the classroom, etc… One could argue that I am hypersensitive, if not paranoid… 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 n[****]r (Pierce, 1970, p. 177).

In later work, Pierce more concretely characterises microaggressions, as 'subtle, innocuous, preconscious, or unconscious degradations, and putdowns, often kinetic but capable of being verbal' (1995, p. 281). The notion that microaggressions are 'preconscious' or 'unconscious' highlights the important role which they play, according to Pierce, as a mechanism through which racism functions. This is because it makes their instantiation somewhat automatic, and perhaps, within a white supremacist culture, even obligatory (1970, p. 171). Through this language, Pierce paints a picture of white people continuously enacting racial microaggressions, whether consciously or otherwise, which reinforces a white supremacist social order. Yet, microaggressions remain subtle and innocuous enough to evade being properly challenged.

Building on Pierce's work, Derald Wing Sue and his colleagues (2007) generated much more interest in microaggressions through their landmark paper, 'Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life'. In this paper, they provide the following popular definition that has been used in the vast majority of research following its publication:

> Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental[1] indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of colour (2007, p. 271).

In this definition, Sue et al. are faithful to Pierce's original conceptualisation, capturing microaggressions' subtle and everyday nature. Expanding upon Pierce's work, however, they also offer a theoretically grounded taxonomy which divides microaggressions into three identifiable forms: 'microassaults', 'microinsults', and 'microinvalidations'. 'Microassaults' are the closest to what can be understood as 'old-fashioned' racism,

[1] 'Environmental' microaggressions are those which are not necessarily carried out by any individual or group but are produced by the configuration of some space or setting being insulting or demeaning to marginalised groups. For example, if all the therapists at a counselling service are white, then it can communicate to people of colour that they are not welcome there, or signal that any negative experiences they might discuss that are related to racism will not be properly understood (Sue et al., 2007, pp. 273; 283).

characterised by explicitly derogatory attacks that intend to hurt their victims through the use of racial epithets or terms such as 'coloured'[2] and 'Oriental'. 'Microinsults' are those which demean the racial heritage or identity of their targets through rudeness and insensitivity. For example, when someone asks a person of colour 'how did you get your job', that person may feel that their abilities are being questioned by a potential suggestion that they have been employed through some quota program. Finally, 'microinvalidations' include comments and behaviours which 'exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality' of their targets, such as when someone compliments people of colour for having good English. An underlying message of this microaggression is that the speaker is surprised at their fluency on account of them not being perceived to be a native English speaker, or in other words, not being white (2007, p. 274).

On top of this taxonomy, Sue and his colleagues also highlight patterns in the types of microaggressions faced by racial minorities, identifying nine themes that underpin common racial microaggressions. These include 'assumptions of criminality' such as when a security guard follows a Black customer around a shop, the 'denial of individual racism' when someone claims that they are not racist because they have Black friends, and 'ascriptions of intelligence' such as when someone stereotypes an Asian person when asking for help with their maths homework (2007, pp. 276–277). Although these examples show how microaggressions can communicate underlying hostile messages to people of colour and ethnic minorities, Sue and his colleagues maintain that microaggressions are more often than not done unintentionally, and without the microaggressor realising (2007, p. 278). This links the concept of 'microaggressions' to various other social-psychological concepts, such as 'modern' (McConahay, 1986), 'symbolic' (Sears, 1988), and 'aversive' (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000) racism, which have all been used to describe the behaviour of people who may claim to harbour progressive

[2] Whilst the term 'coloured' is generally taken to be an offensive term for Black people, in some contexts it has a different meaning, such as in South Africa where it is used to describe a particular racial identity. This highlights the importance of social context when considering microaggressions, as well as the fact that microaggression research has been conducted in an overwhelmingly WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and 'Democratic') setting (see Bettache, 2022).

attitudes towards people of colour, but nonetheless unknowingly discriminate in subtle ways.

Because microaggressors often act unwittingly and unintentionally, this makes microaggressions 'attributionally ambiguous', as the target is left uncertain of whether the microaggressor intended their behaviour to be offensive or not (Sue et al., 2007, p. 279). As such, Sue et al. point out that this places marginalised people into a 'catch-22', whereby they must choose between speaking up and risking backlash, or keeping silent and just bottling up their feelings (2007, pp. 277–279). It is this subtle and ambiguous nature of microaggressions, and the psychological dilemma they place marginalised people in, which makes them an 'adaptive mechanism of oppression' (Friedlaender, 2021, p. 243) that is both philosophically interesting and politically insidious. One reason why they are interesting is because this lack of intention or awareness[3] raises important questions about whether or not microaggressors are blameworthy, and consequently, how we should respond to them. As we will see later in the thesis, this is a complex question, and the ambiguous nature of microaggressions makes them a highly effective way of enacting oppression in ways that are not always obvious. As such, increased interest in microaggressions is important for shedding light on oppression's ability to repackage itself under the guise of innocuity, and impact the lives of marginalised people in subtle, everyday ways.

Although most research still focusses on racial microaggressions, there are increasing numbers of studies which investigate the sorts of microaggressions experienced by other marginalised groups. For example, researchers have identified sexist microaggressions such as men being given preferential treatment over women (Capodilupo et al., 2010), homophobic microaggressions that pressure gay men to act more 'masculine' (Nadal et al., 2011; Munro et al., 2019), and ableist microaggressions which assume that disabled

[3] Though the typical case might involve a microaggressor who acts unintentionally, Christina Friedlaender (2021, p. 238) warns against letting the image of the well-intended progressive who 'slips up' obscure how microaggressions can be weaponised by bigots as a way of flying their hate under the radar. This presents another reason why microaggressions are an insidious form of oppression.

people are 'helpless' (Keller & Galgay, 2010). This is not an exhaustive list,[4] but a snapshot of the ways in which microaggressions are experienced by a range of marginalised groups. Whilst there are thematic differences between the sorts of microaggressions that these groups face, accounting for the different ways that they are stereotyped,[5] research has shown that routine exposure to microaggressions in general is correlated with various negative outcomes that I shall now explore.

To start with, psychologists have identified how routinely experiencing microaggressions is correlated with various negative *psychological* and *physiological* effects. For example, experiencing a microaggression can activate 'stereotype threat' whereby the target becomes concerned about being reduced to, and treated on the basis of, the negative stereotypes communicated through the microaggression (Sue, 2010, p. 15; also see Steele, 1997). This may lead to added pressure to positively represent one's marginalised group (Sue et al., 2008, p. 334). The cumulative impact of microaggressions is also correlated with an increased risk of anxiety and depression (Wang et al., 2011), lower self-esteem (Nadal et al., 2014), and a greater sense of burdening others which can contribute to higher levels of suicidal ideation (Hollingsworth et al., 2017). Given the relationship between mental and physical health, these potential outcomes can also manifest in negative physiological impacts on microaggression recipients. Exposure to microaggressive stress is associated with higher blood pressure and an increased risk of cardiovascular disease (Wang et al., 2011), as well as reduced energy levels and fatigue (Nadal et al., 2017). More generally, because microaggressions are a source of chronic stress for their targets, they may also be associated with increased susceptibility to diseases (Miller et al., 2007).

All of this can lead to negative *material* effects on the lives of marginalised people. Where microaggressions are experienced in the workplace, this can have a negative impact on job satisfaction (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby Jr., 2016, p. 396) and lower work productivity

[4] See the following analyses for examples of biphobic (Stewart, 2021), transphobic (Nadal, Skolnik, et al., 2012), islamophobic (Nadal, Griffin, et al., 2012), fatphobic (Munro, 2017), sanist (Gonzales et al., 2015; Gosselin, 2022), and anti-homeless (Torino & Sisselman-Borgia, 2016) microaggressions.

[5] For example, treating disabled people as though they are 'helpless' is a theme that is specific to ableist microaggressions (Keller & Galgay, 2010, p. 249), much like how assumptions of 'sexual pathology' are more strongly associated with heterosexist and transphobic microaggressions (Nadal et al., 2011, p. 238).

(Sue, 2010, p. 14). In educational settings, microaggressive stress has been linked to lower academic attainment (Guzman et al., 2010), poor academic self-concept, and a feeling of 'institutional betrayal' (Lett et al., 2020, pp. 1451–1454). Betrayal in this sense involves the failure of an institution to carry out 'protective, preventative, or responsive' measures with respect to the harms its members face (C. P. Smith & Freyd, 2014, p. 279). This betrayal has also been shown to occur within mental health care settings where microaggressions are a common occurrence (Gómez, 2015), and the long-term impact of microaggressions within medical settings can impact physician-patient relationships, diminishing trust and compromising quality of care (Freeman & Stewart, 2018).

More recently, philosophers have begun to consider how microaggressions can also generate negative *epistemic* outcomes. To start with, microaggressions themselves can take the form of 'testimonial injustice' when the microaggressor fails to give proper credibility to the target's knowledge claims due to identity-based prejudice (Freeman & Stewart, 2021). To take a specific example, people with psychotic disorders are often dismissed as generally less credible testifiers, even when not experiencing a psychotic episode,[6] due to stereotypes that depict them as 'unpredictable' and 'incompetent' (Gosselin, 2022). Repeated exposure can then cultivate self-doubt within marginalised people as to the nature of their experiences (Fatima, 2020; Liebow, 2021; Perez Gomez, 2022). In cases where targets choose to respond, if a microaggressor becomes defensive or hostile this can lead to targets experiencing 'gaslighting', a term used to describe behaviours which 'manipulate less powerful others to doubt themselves or question their own sanity or memory', such as when microaggressions are downplayed, or even denied (Johnson et al., 2021, p. 1029). Some microaggressions can also cause *emotional* harms, such as in cases of 'tone policing' where the target is told to 'calm down' when they respond with any perceived anger or frustration. By policing marginalised people's responses to oppression, the microaggressor disrupts any potential behaviour correcting effect of their emotional expression (Freeman & Stewart, 2021, p. 1018). This can ultimately lead to what Amia Srinivasan (2018) calls 'affective injustice', whereby targets

[6] Gosselin accepts that symptoms of psychotic disorders such as delusions and paranoia *can* have an impact upon the credibility of people with these disorders, but that they face epistemic injustice when this is overgeneralised (2022, p. 296).

have to negotiate between responding emotionally, perhaps with anger, and acting prudentially. Given that microaggressions place their recipients in a catch-22, where they must choose between responding or keeping quiet, such injustice is likely to be a common feature of experiencing microaggressions.

Finally, Lauren Freeman and Heather Stewart show how microaggressions can result in 'self-identity' or *'existential'* harms, which undermine and impair the target's capacities for self-understanding and expression (2021, p. 1018). Here, they use the example of misgendering trans and non-binary people to argue that repeated experiences of misgendering can destabilise the target's gender identity, and impose an authoritative interpretation of their experiences (2021, p. 1019). These sorts of harms are also likely to occur when disabled people are continuously treated as helpless, women as objects of heterosexual male desire, and gay people as deviant. Each impacts self-understanding and expression by reinforcing stereotypes, communicating expected behaviours, putting down marginalised people, or even denying their identities and experiences altogether. Acknowledging how detrimental these existential harms can be for marginalised people's self-understanding helps us to more clearly see why microaggressions are correlated with the psychological harms outlined above.

What this literature shows, then, is that the routine experience of microaggressions can result in serious cumulative harms for marginalised people. Yet, their ambiguous and hard-to-pin-down nature, as well as the fact that the stereotypical microaggressor is unaware of any wrongdoing, raises various questions that have piqued the interest of philosophers. How should we define microaggressions? (McTernan, 2018; Rini, 2020a; Liebow, 2021; Perez Gomez, 2021). Are microaggressors blameworthy? (Friedlaender, 2018; O'Dowd, 2018; Rini, 2020b; Jones, 2024). How should we respond? (Rini, 2018; Gallegos-Ordorica & Perez Gomez, 2023). Given the pushback that microaggression research has received for its conceptual vagueness (Lilienfeld, 2017, 2020), it seems fitting to begin by addressing the first of these questions, and explain why I believe that the demand for a rigorously defined concept is misguided. Before I can do this, however, I will survey the main criticisms of microaggression research in order to paint a picture of why concretely defining the microaggression concept is thought to be important.

## 1.2 Microaggression Scepticism

Alongside the proliferation of microaggression research seen over the last couple of decades, there have been various challenges raised by those who are sceptical about the construction of the microaggression concept, and the methodologies employed in microaggression research. Some critics have also presented various sociopolitical concerns about taking microaggressions seriously in day-to-day life. These arguments form part of what I shall refer to as 'microaggression scepticism'. Whilst I will use the term 'scepticism', this does not entail that each of the critics mentioned deny the reality of the phenomenon altogether. Rather than a 'total scepticism', we will see that most critics defend a 'diagnostic' and 'frequency' scepticism about microaggressions (Rini, 2020b, p. 47). Of these sceptics, the most prominent critique of microaggressions is presented by the psychologist Scott Lilienfeld, who challenges some of the unfounded assumptions he believes that microaggression researchers make. One of these assumptions is that the microaggression concept is 'operationalized with sufficient clarity and consensus to afford rigorous scientific investigation' (Lilienfeld, 2017, p. 140). In response, Lilienfeld argues that the microaggression concept as articulated by Sue, is an 'open concept' that is so imprecisely defined that it is unclear where its 'fuzzy boundaries' begin and end (2017, p. 143). Due to this, he claims that it can 'accommodate virtually any and all behaviours that non-trivial proportions of individuals find offensive', and that this does not afford the consensus required for proper scientific investigation (2020, p. 29).

Lilienfeld supports this argument by raising two problems. To start with, he notes how the inclusion of the category of 'microassaults' within Sue's taxonomy overlaps with more overt forms of discrimination such as the use of racial epithets (2017, p. 148; also see, Sue et al., 2007, p. 274). If these examples are to be classed as microaggressions, but the concept is more generally understood as involving subtle and unintentional behaviours, then Lilienfeld claims that the 'microassaults' category leaves the concept with imprecise boundaries for determining whether something is considered a microaggression, and what type of microaggression it might be (2017, p. 143). Acknowledging this, several microaggression researchers have accepted that the inclusion of this category within the taxonomy is a problem, especially because it risks minimising the severity of other forms

of harassment and violence[7] (Wong et al., 2014; Friedlaender, 2018; Rini, 2020a; Freeman & Stewart, 2021). This leads Freeman and Stewart to argue that the reason why Sue's taxonomy creates such imprecise boundaries for distinguishing between different types of microaggressions is because it focusses on the nature of the microaggressive *act*. For example, it introduces uncertainty over whether we characterise the misgendering of a trans person as an insult or an invalidation of their identity, or both (2021, pp. 1011–1013).

In response, Freeman and Stewart (2021) argue for a revised taxonomy which defines microaggressions based on the *harms* they cause. On this account, they identify three types of harms enacted by microaggressions – *epistemic*, *emotional*, and *existential* – and offer definitions to describe the sorts of microaggressions that result in these harms (2021, pp. 1016; 1018). However, whilst this shores up some of the internal boundaries within the concept, it does little to offer a proper definition for what constitutes a microaggression to satisfy Lilienfeld's broader concern. For example, imagine that someone says something microaggressive but the person that they are addressing does not properly hear what they said, or they heard it but were not impacted by it in any way. In these cases, it does not seem that any harm has occurred, making it unclear whether the comment can legitimately be considered a microaggression on the 'harm-based' account. Furthermore, examples such as 'tone policing', which they refer to as an emotional microaggression (2021, p. 1018), could plausibly result in epistemic harms for marginalised people who begin to doubt the seriousness of the behaviour that they initially responded to. This leaves us with the same problem of unclear internal boundaries.

Relatedly, the second problem raised by Lilienfeld is that there are no objective criteria against which we can decide whether or not something counts as a microaggression. Instead, he believes that it is open to interpretation, prompting the question of what 'non-trivial proportio[n]' of people must find them offensive for them to properly count (2017, p. 143). This worry is exacerbated by Lilienfeld's claim that microaggression research has

[7] This is not to say that the impacts of microaggressions are not also severe, especially given that Friedlaender and Ivy (2020) show how microaggressions can be intentionally used to harass marginalised people.

paid little interest in how microaggressors interpret their own behaviours (see 2017, p. 149), with researchers deferring to the experiences of those who receive microaggressions. If our understanding of microaggressions is reliant on the accounts given by marginalised people, then his worry is that the concept is simply 'subjective', and so fails to have the external reality that microaggression researchers claim (2020, p. 31). Here, the term 'subjective' is used by the sceptics to criticise how what counts as a microaggression is determined solely by the *target's* interpretation, as opposed to a general agreement amongst the parties involved. This drives their 'diagnostic' scepticism, as ultimately, we cannot know if a microaggression has actually occurred without understanding, and trusting, the subjective experiences of the target (Rini, 2020b, p. 47).

These arguments have also influenced various sociopolitical concerns about taking microaggressions seriously in everyday life. I will expand upon these claims in more detail in Chapter 3, but to offer a brief survey of their worries, a notable claim made by sceptics is that if we must defer to the target's interpretation, then calling things 'microaggressions' could be a way for marginalised people to wrongly claim 'victimhood' and attract sympathy (Campbell & Manning, 2014, p. 707). Since the ability for marginalised people to paint themselves as 'victims' has the secondary effects of labelling the microaggressor a 'perpetrator' (see Lilienfeld, 2017, p. 147), taking microaggressions seriously might then lead to people 'walking on eggshells' around marginalised people for fear of being labelled in this way (Cantu & Jussim, 2022, p. 258). Some sceptics are particularly worried about microaggressions being taken seriously by institutions with the power to pass sanctions on individuals. For example, the founder and director of the Free Speech Union, Toby Young, wrote a letter to Cambridge University claiming that the inclusion of microaggressions as a category within their Report and Support[8] tool would have a 'chilling effect on free speech' (Young, 2021). If the diagnostic sceptic is correct to argue that we cannot know if a microaggression has actually occurred, then there is a potential 'moral risk' in getting things wrong when we label behaviours as microaggressive. As Regina Rini notes, 'no one wants to be erroneously accused of committing a racist or sexist act' (2020b, p. 51).

[8] Report and Support tools are anonymous reporting systems used by universities that allow students to report instances of bullying, harassment, discrimination, hate, sexual misconduct, and so on.

The issue of subjectivity also generates further scientific and methodological concerns. I briefly mentioned above that Lilienfeld rejects the claim that microaggressions have an external reality. Instead, he argues that the conclusions drawn in microaggression research conflate any objective features of the microaggression stimulus with the subjective experience of respondents (2020, p. 31). This is because the methodological approach of microaggression research has an overreliance on self-reporting tools to gather data (2017, p. 152). A common methodology employed by researchers is to ask participants to report and recall their own experiences, often through interviews and surveys. However, this only captures the target's subjective experience of the event, at the expense of gathering a wider range of information from the perspective of the microaggressor and any bystanders (2020, p. 31). The consequence of this overreliance is that it generates a 'mono-source bias', making it difficult to evaluate how robust the data is across a range of informants, and therefore how generalisable the findings are (2017, p. 152). Additionally, since participants often come from university psychology departments (Wong et al., 2014, p. 195), whose students are already predisposed to accept the microaggression concept (Lilienfeld, 2017, p. 149), there may be an overestimation of the frequency at which microaggressions occur (Thomas & Skowronski, 2020, p. 52).

One factor that aggravates the problem of this overreliance on self-reporting is that Lilienfeld believes that microaggression researchers have also neglected the role of 'negative emotionality' within their studies. As he states, negative emotionality can be described as:

> A pervasive temperamental disposition to experience aversive emotions of many kinds, including anxiety, worry, moodiness, guilt, shame, hostility, irritability, and perceived victimisation (2017, p. 153).

The problem here is that negative emotionality can result in individuals being hypervigilant towards potential stressors, and vulnerable to distress (2017, p. 153). By failing to investigate the potential role that these negative emotions may play in the perception of microaggressive behaviours, the legitimacy of any asserted relationship between microaggressive experiences and negative mental-health outcomes is weakened

(2017, p. 154). Such a sentiment is echoed by other critics of microaggressions, such as Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, who argue that by defining microaggressions subjectively Sue has encouraged people to engage in 'emotional reasoning' and assume the worst about people. This is opposed to giving microaggressors the benefit of the doubt and charitably interpreting their behaviours (2018, pp. 40–41). These arguments lend support to a 'frequency' scepticism of microaggressions – that they do not occur as frequently as microaggression researchers claim (Rini, 2020b, p. 47) – by promoting the idea that marginalised people have a propensity to let their emotions cloud their judgement and see offense where there is none. Rather than having an external reality then, sceptics push the line that microaggressions are 'all in the eye of the beholder' (see Rini, 2020b, pp. 42–53).

One response that Sue (2017) gives to this problematisation of subjectivity is that it subscribes too heavily to an empiricist framework of science in order to determine the 'truth' of the microaggression construct. As he states:

> The study of microaggressions… is more than quantification, objectification, and logic/rationality. It is a study of powerful emotions, subjective experiences, biases, values, and beliefs, as well as especially the pain and suffering of oppression (2017, p. 171).

What Sue is arguing here is that microaggression research should involve a privileging of that gritty experiential reality of microaggressions which is going to be difficult to quantify and generalise across all experiences. Whilst this might run counter to the dominant principles of psychological science, it in fact exposes the limitations of those principles (2017, p. 171). We might therefore think it misguided to believe that any objective knowledge of microaggressions can be achieved, and as I will later argue, this is not problematic. Instead, self-reporting is a powerful tool to investigate the lived reality of marginalised people, listening to the voices of the oppressed, and appreciating the value of 'situated knowledge' (see Haraway, 1988; Sue & Spanierman, 2020).

We can also push back against Lilienfeld's claim that the role of negative emotionality has been ignored, and that respondents are simply 'hypervigilant'. As psychologist Monnica Williams argues, even if negative emotionality does play a role in how marginalised

people interpret microaggressions, the direction of fit might move in the opposite direction. People who are repeatedly exposed to oppressive behaviours may experience more psychological distress, as shown in the case of microaggressions, and therefore develop those traits indicative of negative emotionality (2020, p. 17). What Lilienfeld appears to be arguing is that this exposure to oppression in fact makes marginalised people 'less reliable perceivers of discrimination' (McClure & Rini, 2020, p. 4). On the other hand, proponents of microaggression research are suggesting that marginalised people are simply more vigilant of discrimination because they routinely experience it. Whilst self-reporting tools might introduce some mono-source bias, and so should be supported with more quantitative analysis (Torino et al., 2019, p. 319), sceptics should take care not to fundamentally problematise subjective reporting. Doing so risks minimising, or even dismissing, the oppressive experiences of marginalised people.

Alongside these methodological concerns, sceptics have also taken issue with the term 'microaggression' itself. Lilienfeld points out that within the framework of social psychology, an 'aggression' is understood to be something that is done intentionally, yet most microaggression researchers operate with an assumption that microaggressive behaviours are typically *unintentional* (2017, p. 147). If this is the case, then it is unclear how targets can appropriately deem such behaviours 'aggressive' when they do not have access to the microaggressor's mental states to know their intentions. Additionally, Lilienfeld claims that for behaviours to be legitimately referred to as 'aggressive', this would imply 'at least some degree of consensus, ideally across independent observers, regarding its nature and intent' (2017, p. 143). However, we have seen that the concept appears to have fuzzy boundaries which leave it open to the target's interpretation, and so critics take these subjective reports as unreliable indicators that a microaggression has in fact occurred.

In response to Lilienfeld, I find it unclear why 'aggression' has to be something done with the intention to be aggressive. For example, imagine that someone who routinely experiences racism has a knee jerk reaction to a microaggression and angrily responds by shouting at the microaggressor. This person's anger is likely to be perceived by many as 'aggressive' behaviour, but it is not necessarily fuelled by an intention to be aggressive or harm the microaggressor in any way. It seems to just be a frustrated emotional

outburst. Moreover, we might even want to think of the 'aggressive' nature of microaggressions in terms of their impacts on the targets instead.[9] Emma McClure makes such an argument when showing how microaggressions restrict their target's agency (2019) and threaten their dignity (2020). Williams also endorses focussing on the impacts of microaggressions, though she goes one step further by arguing that they actually *can* be understood as intentional in the sense that they achieve the intended effects of oppressive ideologies. As she states, microaggressors still manifest the 'aggressive goals of the dominant group' which they have unconsciously internalised through 'observational learning or other social mechanisms' (2020, p. 8). Here, Williams adopts a more structural view of microaggressions, placing them within a wider context of oppression, and prompting us to understand them as a form of 'violence' that leads to negative mental and physical health outcomes for marginalised people (2020, p. 10).

Although these strategies appear to circumvent Lilienfeld's argument, they nonetheless face a different problem raised by sceptics – that the microaggression concept contributes to 'concept creep'. This term describes the process by which concepts relating to harm come to encompass an ever-growing set of behaviours and take on ever-expanding meanings (Haslam, 2016). This process is understood to occur in two 'directions'. Concepts can creep 'vertically' when they begin to refer to 'smaller' and less extreme phenomena, whilst 'horizontal' creep occurs when the concept extends to new classes of phenomena (2016, p. 2). In the context of microaggressions then, the extension of 'aggression' to unintentional behaviours would constitute a horizontal creep within social psychology. Similarly, the microaggression concept represents a vertical creep in our understanding of racism, for example, as more subtle and innocuous behaviours become incorporated into this category. The problem with concept creep is that it can weaken the utility of concepts relating to harm by lowering the criteria needed for something to be considered harmful.[10] The meaning of such terms therefore becomes so expansive as to lose their original explanatory bite (2016, p. 10).

[9] By shifting our focus to the harms of microaggressions when taxonomising them, Freeman and Stewart (2021) also seem to implicitly endorse this move.

[10] For example, the sceptics' concern that taking microaggressions seriously promotes 'victimhood' is one of concept creep as it involves the lowering of entry requirements for something to be considered harmful.

The idea that microaggressions are 'aggressions' is not the only part of the term that has faced criticism. Anti-racist activist Ibram X. Kendi is critical of the prefix 'micro' for how it minimises the impacts of such behaviours on marginalised people, instead preferring to more directly describe the phenomena as 'racist abuse' (2019, p. 25). This worry is not unfounded. Whilst addressing a graduation ceremony at the University of Michigan, businessman and politician Michael Bloomberg (2016) touched on the topic of microaggressions, stating that they are 'exactly that: micro'. In response to this, Rini identifies two ways of interpreting the prefix – 'parametrically' in the sense of referring to its size, or as a 'constitutive' part of a larger whole (2020a, p. 102). With this understanding, Kendi's apprehension is that reading 'micro' in the parametric sense gives the impression that these behaviours are not as severe or important. Given this, Rini endorses reading the term in its constitutive sense, suggesting that microaggressions are a 'functional part of a macroaggressive whole' (Rini, 2020a, p. 104), where 'macroaggressions' refers to systems of oppression and the ideologies that drive them (see Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015). Nevertheless, I think that both 'senses' of the prefix can illuminate something important about the concept. For example, rather than read 'micro' as suggesting that microaggressions are *quantitatively* smaller in impact, we might think that it describes how microaggressions are *qualitatively* smaller than other forms of oppression in their appearance and how they are communicated. For example, Emily McTernan claims that microaggressions are 'micro' because they are subtle and seemingly innocuous (2018, p. 264), whilst McClure points to the fact that they are implicitly rather than explicitly threatening to explain this (2020, p. 125).

What you might notice here is that where we draw these qualitative parameters actually helps to offer some boundaries for what can be considered microaggressive. For example, slurs also play a functional role in perpetuating oppression, meaning that the constitutive view offers little to distinguish between slurs and microaggressions, whereas the parametric view can rule out slurs by showing that they are not subtle, seemingly innocuous, implicitly threatening, and so on. Although these two views do not explicitly feature in philosophical accounts of microaggressions, they highlight ways in which we might shore up the seemingly 'fuzzy boundaries' of the concept. Following this, in the next section I will introduce some of these accounts to determine how effectively they handle the sceptics' conceptual challenges. More specifically, I evaluate their ability to address

the worry that what counts as a microaggression is simply a matter of the target's interpretation.

## 1.3 The Subjectivity Problem

The conceptual challenge surrounding what counts as a microaggression has piqued the interest of various philosophers, prompting them to offer their own accounts of the concept. Some of these accounts are more general characterisations of microaggressions. For example, McClure analyses microaggressions on a spectrum of escalating linguistic violence, whereby they 'say by implication what hate speech takes for granted' (2020, p. 141). Elsewhere, Javiera Perez Gomez characterises verbal microaggressions as 'hyper-implicatures', which communicate background attitudes or value judgements about the target based upon their perceived social group membership (2021, pp. 389–390). In a similar vein, Nabina Liebow suggests that microaggressions implicitly signal that the microaggressor supports a 'larger pattern of oppression in the broader social context' (2021, p. 199). Whilst each of these accounts offer a useful characterisation of microaggressions, they do not necessarily settle the conceptual disputes brought forward by the sceptic.[11] This is because they do not help us to address what Rini terms the 'subjectivity problem' – 'the apparent irresolvability of differing perceptions' when it comes to interpreting microaggressions (2020b, p. 42).

To help frame the discussion around how we might define microaggressions to address this problem, let us consider the following example:

> **Staring Strangers:** Rory and Archie, a gay couple, are holding hands whilst walking down the street when they both notice that some strangers are staring at them. Rory begins to feel uncomfortable, unsure of exactly why they are staring. Archie, however, is unfazed by the staring, and is confused when Rory lets go of his hand. Unbeknownst to them, one of the strangers, Lexie, has been struggling

[11] This is not to say that these accounts offer no conceptual boundaries. For example, on McClure's account, something no longer constitutes a microaggression if it communicates its message *explicitly* rather than *implicitly*.

with her sexuality and finds herself accidentally staring because she is proud to see a happy gay couple. She wishes that she could also be as confidently open about her sexuality in public. However, the other stranger, Dave, finds homosexuality perverse and is staring out of disgust, but chooses to just stare at the couple, rather than cause a scene, as he has learned not to be overtly homophobic to avoid reproach.

Here, we have two 'targets' of a microaggression, one who is affected by it and another who is not. Similarly, we have two potential microaggressors, one who is using microaggressions as a way to let his bigotry fly under the radar, whilst the other is staring out of pride. If microaggressions are simply subjective, then Rory might interpret both Lexie's and Dave's staring as microaggressive because they make him feel uncomfortable displaying his sexuality in public. Yet, Rory's discomfort also appears to be, in part, an effect of the ambiguity he experiences when he is not entirely sure why he is being stared at. If this ambiguity is a crucial part of something being a microaggression, then whilst Rory experiences a microaggression, Archie's unfazed response would mean that he does not.

The differing intentions of our potential microaggressors also raises interesting points. If prejudicial motivation is required for someone to enact a microaggression, as suggested by sceptics who believe that 'aggression' requires intention to harm, then Dave's staring was microaggressive whereas Lexie's was not. However, since we have seen that Sue (see 2017) privileges the experiential reality of microaggressions, then understanding the scenario from the target's point of view returns us to the analysis above. It suggests that Lexie's staring, irrespective of her intentions, was in fact a microaggression given Rory's reaction to it. But this circles us back to the subjectivity problem, and the sceptics' concern that microaggressions are just a matter of interpretation. Therefore, the challenge presented for microaggression researchers is to offer an account of microaggressions that can address this problem and provide clarity over what counts as a microaggression in complex cases such as this.

Taking stock of this conceptual challenge, McClure and Rini (2020) offer a taxonomy of existing accounts of microaggressions, based on the features they take to be constitutive

of a microaggression. They understand the debate between Lilienfeld and Sue as one between '*motivational*' accounts which ground microaggressions in some feature of the microaggressor's 'mental state' (2020, p. 3), and '*experiential*' accounts which ground them in some feature of the target's 'phenomenological mental state' (2020, p. 4). As we have seen, Sue's experiential definition runs into the sceptics' subjectivity problem as it leaves things up to the target's interpretation. This can lead to cases, as with Rory and Archie, where someone experiences something as microaggressive whilst another person does not. For the sceptic, rather than leave what counts as a microaggression dependent upon subjective interpretation, they desire independent objective criteria against which we can determine the nature of the action.

This is where motivational accounts of microaggressions seem to help solve the subjectivity problem. Since Lilienfeld believes that aggression implies intention, he appears to implicitly endorse[12] the following account of microaggressions as:

> **Motivational Account** – Actions or events caused by the microaggressor's (unconscious) prejudiced motivation (Rini, 2020a, p. 43).

This account appears to remedy the subjectivity problem by pointing to some feature of the microaggressor's mental state to resolve differing perceptions. In the *Staring Strangers* example, Dave would have enacted a microaggression as his behaviour was motivated by prejudice, whereas Lexie would not as she was motivated by pride. The benefit of this account is that by separating out Lexie's and Dave's behaviour, we can appropriately hold Dave accountable but avoid punishing Lexie for her well-motivated behaviour. However, the issue with this account is that the seemingly objective criteria it offers are not accessible to anyone other than the microaggressor as we cannot know their true motivations. Furthermore, we have reason to be suspicious of a microaggressor's self-reports of their motivations. They may not be aware that their motivations were prejudiced, or in Dave's case, they may feign ignorance so that their bigotry can fly under the radar. The motivational account is therefore likely to result in

[12] Note that Lilienfeld never *explicitly* endorses any account of microaggressions. He merely points out that the definitions offered by Pierce and Sue, as well as existing consensus on the nature of 'aggression', suggests that microaggressions are caused by (unconscious) prejudice.

very few behaviours actually being considered microaggressions, allowing them to go unaddressed, and thus weakening the utility of the concept.

Given that both experiential and motivational accounts face similar issues, some philosophers have offered what are referred to as '*structural*' accounts of microaggressions. These accounts de-psychologise the concept by moving away from any features of the microaggressor's or target's mental states to determine if something is a microaggression. Instead, microaggressions are understood as:

> **Structural Account** – Actions or events that implement a function of subtle oppression within a social system (Rini, 2020b, p. 78).

For example, Friedlaender asserts that determining whether something is a microaggression depends upon us being able to 'establish a connection between the act and an existing form of structural oppression' (2018, p. 8). Elsewhere, McTernan argues that microaggressions are not merely symptoms of oppressive social orders but are in fact a *subtle social practice*[13] which 'structure[s] and perpetuate[s]' oppression (2018, p. 270). The benefit of understanding microaggressions as a subtly oppressive *social practice* is a recognition that they form a common pattern of behaviours carried out by many people within our society (2018, p. 279), regardless of whether they are aware of engaging in such a practice. Additionally, structural accounts emphasise the role that microaggressions play in perpetuating the oppression of marginalised people,[14] and so remind us of the wider context that microaggressions occur in.

[13] In her account, McTernan describes microaggressions as 'subtle' to capture how they are seemingly innocuous to many people, and also characterises them as being plausibly unintentional, taking the form of a 'putdown or degradation' (2018, pp. 264–265). This helps to distinguish microaggressions from overt forms of discrimination, though more may be needed to differentiate them from other phenomena such as 'dogwhistles' which could also fit this definition. As a brief response, we might suggest that dogwhistles, even when unintentional, are more specific instances of political speech that involve 'coded messages' intended for specific audiences, but avoid detection by general audiences (see Saul, 2018).

[14] Note that McTernan believes that microaggressions can 'occur only to members of subordinate groups' (2018, p. 265). However, this is contested by other accounts (see Freeman & Stewart, 2018; Perez Gomez, 2022).

In the context of the subjectivity problem, the main benefit of the structural account is that it can circumvent it entirely. This account points to patterns of subtly oppressive behaviours to determine whether something is microaggressive rather than to either party's mental states. So, returning to the *Staring Strangers* example, on this account we must consider the oppressive function of both Dave's and Lexie's staring independent of their intentions. The fact that Rory feels uncomfortable is largely because he picks up on the staring's function as a heteronormative force that discourages displays of homosexuality within public spaces. This reinforces the normative status of heterosexuality, whilst homosexuality is cast out as deviant. Like the experiential account then, both Dave's and Lexie's staring would be considered a microaggression despite the fact that Dave intentionally wields the heteronormative gaze whilst Lexie does not. Although they act in different ways on account of their differing motivations, they both engage in the same subtly oppressive behaviour which has the wider social meaning of reinforcing heteronormativity. Unlike the experiential account, however, the structural account concludes that Archie is still subject to a microaggression, even if he is unbothered[15] by the staring.

Although it avoids the subjectivity problem by de-psychologising the concept, this comes with some pushbacks from Rini who herself advocates for an experiential account. The first worry is that following a structural account might result in a *failure to appreciate the expertise of marginalised people* in some scenarios (2020b, p. 80). Let us imagine that the reason why Archie is unfazed by the staring is because he does not perceive it as hostile in the same way that Rory does. If a social function of staring at a gay couple in public is to subtly communicate that homosexuality is deviant, should we conclude that Archie is in fact wrong about the nature of what he is experiencing? To avoid suggesting that marginalised people who do not register experiences of microaggressions are denying, or are deceived about, the reality of their own oppression, Rini argues that the experiences of marginalised subjects should be constitutive of what microaggressions are (2020b, pp. 78–81). In other words, our account should acknowledge how the lived

[15] There are several reasons why Archie might be unbothered by the microaggression. He might not know that staring at gay couples in public subtly reinforces heteronormativity, or he might know this but fail to register this specific instance as subtly oppressive. Alternatively, he might register it as oppressive but is just not emotionally affected by it in this case.

experiences of marginalised people can make them better at identifying microaggressive behaviours.

The second worry she shares is that the structural account fails to properly offer us *certainty in detection* (see Rini, 2020b, pp. 67; 78–81). This requirement is put forth by sceptics, and endorsed by Rini, as a demand that any account should offer some objective criteria against which we can independently verify whether something is a microaggression. One reason for this is scientific – we want to be certain that the sort of phenomena being researched by psychologists are in fact microaggressions. The more important reason for Rini, however, is a *moral* one. An account which does not provide certainty in detection runs the risks of innocent people being unjustly accused of acting oppressively (Rini, 2020a, p. 52). Although the structural account points to social facts about the functional relation between microaggressions and oppression, Rini argues that this does not entail certainty in detection because it makes microaggressions a 'god's-eye-view' concept. This means that there might be objective facts about whether some particular instance of behaviour causally implements a function of oppression, but we currently lack a complete theory of oppression (2023, p. 365), and so it would require 'god-like knowledge' to be able to trace the causal role that it plays (2020a, p. 108). This leaves the detection of microaggressions dependent upon social facts which 'may be irresolvable and are certainly disputed' (2020b, p. 81). At best, a structural account limits us to generalising *types* of microaggressions rather than providing certainty in detecting any *token* instances (2023, p. 365), and is therefore insufficient for settling contentious moral and political debates.

Subsequently, to resolve the sceptics' subjectivity problem whilst recognising the expertise of marginalised people and ensuring that we have certainty in detection, Rini offers the following account which defines a microaggression as:

> **Ambiguous Experience Account** – An action or event that is perceived by a member of an oppressed group as *possibly but not certainly* instantiating oppression (2020b, p. 59, emphasis in original).

On this account, ambiguous experiences of oppression are constitutive of microaggressions. As such, in *Staring Strangers*, we would determine that Rory has

experienced a microaggression because he is left unsure about why people are staring at him and whether it is because of homophobia. However, because Archie lacks any *ambiguous* experience of oppression, he is unbothered by it and so does not experience a microaggression. This is where this account differs from other experiential accounts in order to solve the sceptics' subjectivity problem – it specifically draws out ambiguity as an objective feature of the target's subjective experience. We can therefore resolve disputes over whether something is a microaggression by pointing to whether the target has had an ambiguous experience or not. If correct, this could also offer the sort of certainty in detection needed to quell the moral and political concerns raised by the sceptics. Given that it is an experiential account, there is still the worry that bystanders and microaggressors (and researchers) have no direct epistemic access to the target's mental states and so are unable to truly know whether the target had an ambiguous experience without asking the recipient. But for Rini, this is secondary to her priority that the account centre marginalised people and their experiences.

This is an important priority given that the ambiguous nature of microaggressions is what places the psychological burden of navigating the catch-22 on recipients. A common issue in microaggressive exchanges is that if targets do choose to speak out about their experiences, they may experience gaslighting where they are shut down and told that they are overexaggerating or taking things the wrong way (Rini, 2020a, p. 114). Rini's main aim then is to highlight attributional ambiguity, the uncertainty surrounding the microaggressor's intended meaning, as a central feature of microaggressions which 'impose[s] emotional and cognitive costs' on their targets (Rini, 2020b, p. 64). By making ambiguous experiences constitutive of microaggressions, this can eliminate some of these costs, ensuring that marginalised people can be more secure in their interpretation that there was something off with the exchange. This carries out the ameliorative work of relieving some of the self-doubt that comes along with identifying microaggressions – though not all, since it is possible to still doubt whether an experience was ambiguous (Sue et al., 2007, p. 279).

Amongst these accounts, it appears that the structural account and the ambiguous experience account best address the sceptics' subjectivity problem. The former does so by de-psychologising the concept and pointing to social facts about the subtly oppressive

role played by microaggressions, whilst the latter picks out ambiguity as an objective feature of microaggressive experiences that allows us to defer to marginalised people when resolving disputes. We have seen that the structural account faces push back from Rini for failing to fully respect the first-personal experience of marginalised people and for not enabling us to be totally certain of detecting microaggressions because it turns microaggressions into a 'god's-eye-view' concept. But, as I will show, the ambiguous experience account also faces its own problems. This is to be expected given the complex nature of the concept, with Rini herself admitting that '*any* account of microaggression is going to have trouble with *some* cases' (2020b, p. 66, emphasis in original). In the debate between structure and experience, however, the question is which issues are we willing to bite the bullet on. For the purposes of my thesis, I am going to defend the structural account against Rini's concerns by highlighting the deficiencies in her own account and suggesting that the sceptics' demands which she seeks to address are ill-founded to begin with.

## 1.4 Defending a Structural Account

In response to Rini's account, I want to begin by arguing against her claim that the structural account does not sufficiently centre marginalised people and their experiences. For someone to *know* that a microaggression has occurred, they need to have some epistemic access to the relevant facts that determine this. In the case of the structural account, these are social facts about certain patterns of behaviour and how they enact and reinforce structures of oppression. Rini's issue is that if a marginalised person is faced with a microaggression but does not register it as one, like Archie does, then the structural account concludes that they are mistaken about the nature of their experience. The way that Rini sets up her argument suggests that, merely in virtue of being socially positioned as a marginalised person, one is an expert in oppression and so our account of microaggressions should not leave space for that person's interpretation of their experiences to be questioned. However, cases like Archie's are exactly why it is questionable whether group membership alone is sufficient for one to be deemed an expert in this way. We can imagine many examples involving some marginalised person

who does not recognise their oppressive experiences *as* oppression, living in blissful ignorance about the injustice they face. There are also marginalised people who excuse or even engage in the sort of oppressive behaviours that they themselves are subject to, such as 'scabs', 'handmaidens of the patriarchy', and those with 'internalised homophobia' (McTernan, 2023, p. 338).

In these examples, we have people whose epistemic access to the facts of their oppressed status is deficient in some way, whether restricted through ignorance, false consciousness, or internalised oppression. Whilst I think Rini is broadly correct to argue that the experience of oppression confers some expertise about its nature, being an expert does not make one infallible. Instead, it is useful to think of expertise in a *collective* rather than individualistic sense, especially given that our understanding of microaggressions is itself the product of marginalised communities sharing and critically reflecting on their experiences (see Fatima, 2020, p. 166). No one individual within a given marginalised group has knowledge of *all* forms of oppression that group faces, and to assume they did would 'leave very little room for ambiguity in one's experience' (McTernan, 2023, p. 339). Yet, in many cases, we can still accept that their lived experience as members of marginalised groups confers expertise over and above non-members. It is just that those suffering from ignorance, false consciousness, or internalised oppression must undertake the work of critically reflecting upon their oppression in order to arrive at an anti-oppressive standpoint.

That being said, we can imagine a marginalised person who has achieved such a critical standpoint yet still fails to recognise that something is a microaggression. In the *Staring Strangers* example, Archie might have epistemic access to facts about how heteronormativity operates and the sorts of behaviours through which it is enforced, yet still fail to 'know' that what he is experiencing is a microaggression. This might be because he simply fails to notice that microaggression, or because he does not perceive it as hostile, even if he more generally understands how heteronormativity functions. Perhaps he is having a good day, and his positive thinking overrides the formation of any beliefs that being stared at is a microaggression. Again, his expertise in recognising homophobia does not entail that he will necessarily recognise it in each objective instance he comes across. Therefore, I think the best way to understand this case is that Archie is simply

unaffected by the exchange, as opposed to being deceived about the nature of his experience.

One problem that Rini might have with this response is not necessarily that it permits marginalised people to be wrong when labelling something an instance of oppression, but that it opens the door for their expertise to be challenged. This runs counter to the ethos of the ambiguous experience account which aims to centre targets and their experiences. For example, Rini claims that as a white person she is in no position to tell a Black person that they are 'misperceiving [their] social relations' if they do not think that some behaviour is microaggressive, and to do so would be bad politics as it suggests that you 'understand [their] life better than [they do]' (2020b, p. 80). I think this worry is overblown. Instead, we might want to think that pointing out something as a microaggression shows an ally's attentiveness to patterns of subtly oppressive behaviour. If the target disagrees, then in practice we should respect their interpretation of the exchange, accepting that they do not recognise the behaviour as microaggressive without jumping in with a saviour complex that tries to prove them wrong. But respecting their assessment does not mean that we have to agree with it. If Rini takes issue with the practical applications of the structural account, then whilst the ambiguous experience account perhaps more readily encourages us to respect the individual target's experience, that does not mean that the structural account promotes the opposite.

This leads me to Rini's second pushback, that the structural account cannot properly offer certainty in detection of microaggressions. Her reasoning for this is that the structural account makes identifying microaggressions dependent upon facts about oppression that would require 'god-like knowledge' to discern given the causal complexities of oppression. Here, I feel that Rini places too much importance on having concrete knowledge of the relevant causal facts in order for the structural account to identify microaggressions. Perhaps this unattainable 'god-like knowledge' is necessary to be completely certain that some token instance is a microaggression, but we can still have a high degree of certainty that this behaviour is microaggressive by pointing towards general types of subtly oppressive behaviour which have been recognised by marginalised people. This might leave some room for error in identifying token cases, but I have already shown that I am happy to accept that people can be mistaken about

whether something constitutes a microaggression, even if they are generally reliable when it comes to identifying them.

Nevertheless, the sceptics might respond here by questioning the sort of knowledge of microaggression types that is being relied on by the structural account. If we refer to a cumulative experience of similar microaggressions from which an individual infers that their current experience is also a microaggression, then the sceptic could reiterate Lilienfeld's claim that not enough has been done to show that the concept has any external reality (2020, p. 31). In this case, the structural account once again faces the subjectivity problem. Alternatively, we could respond by pointing to the collective knowledge produced by marginalised people sharing their experiences of microaggressions, as has been captured by researchers in their taxonomies. However, Lilienfeld also argues that there is a lack of group consensus over whether the items in these taxonomies in fact count as microaggressions (2017, p. 143). The problem then is that the structural account offers no (epistemically accessible) independent criteria for us to decide whether something is in fact a subtly oppressive social practice beyond questionable levels of agreement amongst marginalised people (Rini, 2023, p. 366). This makes the account especially deficient at handling microaggressions which are novel or less well documented since we lack a collective understanding of those microaggressions. In these cases, the ambiguous experience account is more beneficial because it highlights the ambiguously oppressive experiences these microaggressions will likely produce as the reasons *why* they are microaggressions.

To respond to this, I want to first address the sceptics' claim that there is a supposed lack of consensus over what counts as a microaggression within research, because I think Rini is too quick to adopt this sceptical rhetoric which has been criticised for privileging the 'value of empiricism to determine truth' (Sue, 2017, p. 171). The notion that there is a lack of group consensus stems from the substantial use of qualitative, rather than quantitative, analysis in microaggression research. This qualitative research is not necessarily intended to be generalisable, but is used to develop a rich understanding of the respondents' lived experiences (Sue & Spanierman, 2020, p. 173). From this, quantitative analyses have been undertaken, and conveniently ignored by the sceptics, to generate 'microaggression scales' such as the widely used Racial and Ethnic

Microaggression Scale (Nadal, 2011). These scales are informed by qualitative research and aim to show that the categories of microaggressions which they generate are valid and reliable measures of microaggressions (Sue & Spanierman, 2020, pp. 183–189). This suggests that there is more consensus over what counts as a microaggression than claimed. Nevertheless, I am also suspicious about the need for any group consensus to begin with. As Mekawi and Todd highlight, it is not uncommon within psychology to accept that individuals can have differing responses to a given stimulus without bringing into question the nature of that stimulus (2021, p. 974). If someone does not recognise that a partner is being abusive when they are repeatedly putting them down and gaslighting them, and their friends also fail to notice that behaviour, this does not mean that their partner's behaviour ceases to be domestic abuse.

Returning to the point that the ambiguous experience account offers a particular strength when it comes to novel microaggressions, whilst this may be true, that benefit comes with the cost of leaving us less sure of how to label well-known microaggressions that marginalised people frequently experience. This is because those microaggressions are likely to appear *unambiguously* as instances of oppression, and so as Rini puts it, they will be 'too big' to count (2020a, p. 116). Interestingly, Rini suggests that this is actually a benefit of her account, as it can explain shifts in our understanding of oppression. Take the phrase 'that's so gay' for example. Nowadays, it is more readily seen as derogatory and frowned upon, while in the 1990's, its widespread usage was better understood as an example of a homophobic microaggression (2020b, p. 97). However, this leaves me wondering what category of behaviour this phrase now falls into on Rini's account. It does not seem to be explicitly derogatory enough to be a slur (Anderson & Barnes, 2023), nor is it a 'coded, concealed message' intended for some specific group like a dogwhistle (Saul, 2018, p. 362). If this sort of behaviour is to fall back into the amorphous category of general oppression, then this does a disservice to the utility of the microaggression concept in specifically picking out and labelling subtle instances of oppression. Calling the phrase 'that's so gay' a microaggression is useful because it implicitly, rather than explicitly, sends the message that being gay is something negative, even if that implication is no longer ambiguous to many people.

This is where I think that making the recipient's ambiguous experience constitutive of what microaggressions are leads to other messy practical applications which are somewhat ironed out by the structural account. In our earlier example, Rini's account results in Lexie's staring being both microaggressive and not-microaggressive depending on whether we take Rory or Archie's point of view. How then should we label her staring in practice? The structural account simplifies matters by concluding that Lexie has enacted a microaggression, regardless of her motivations, because it fits a pattern of subtly oppressive behaviour. The ambiguous experience account also raises a question mark over how bystanders[16] might respond if they cannot be sure if the target had an ambiguous experience. If they directly intervene, but have misjudged the interaction, then they risk escalating it or perhaps being seen as trying to be a 'saviour' to the marginalised person. Again, the structural account is beneficial here because it cuts through this confusion, pointing towards relatively stable patterns of subtle behaviour which, having done the critical work of unpacking how they reinforce structures of oppression, targets and bystanders alike can identify as microaggressions.

Now, some might find the conclusion that Lexie has enacted a microaggression too hasty as it seems to just drop any considerations of her motivations. This potentially becomes more concerning in cases where someone is staring at Rory and Archie for reasons completely separate from their sexuality. For example, imagine that a third person is staring at the couple because they are appreciating a particularly fashionable coat that Archie is wearing, or maybe they are 'spaced out' and blankly staring in the couple's direction. Should we count these cases as microaggressions? I am inclined to think that, if this staring would have the effect of making Rory and Archie feel uncomfortable about displaying their sexuality in public, then the structural account would label even these cases as microaggressions given their subtly oppressive function. Perhaps a strength of accepting this conclusion, regardless of the microaggressor's motivation, is that it

[16] Luke Brunning also raises the point that, because bystanders can influence how ambiguously a microaggression appears to the target, they have 'the power to make it the case, or make it not the case, that someone else is a victim of a microaggression' (2024, p. 6) on Rini's account. For example, if someone from the same marginalised group explains to the recipient why a comment directed at them was microaggressive, this could *dispel* the target's ambiguity as they become certain that their experience was oppressive or *introduce* ambiguity that was not there before as they begin to question the exchange.

encourages us to be more attentive when it comes to staring at people in public given how ambiguous and unsettling that can be. Therefore, whilst calling these other cases microaggressive might attract critique, I see this as part of the structural account challenging us to refocus our attention away from the microaggressor's intentions, and towards the oppressive impacts that microaggressions can have.

Even if you are unconvinced that the structural account can actually settle these cases, one of my major disagreements with Rini's analysis is that it overstates the importance of certainty when it comes to detecting microaggressions. The aim of this desideratum is to help resolve the moral and political issues raised by the sceptics in light of the subjectivity problem, notably the worry that innocent people may be accused of enacting a microaggression (2020b, p. 52). Yet, I struggle to think of examples in our moral practices where such a level of certainty is actually required. We might blame someone for some wrongdoing and later revise our judgement in light of excusing factors, but there is no expectation that we be *totally* certain before our initial assessment that the wrongdoer is blameworthy. We might also blame someone even if they are not blameworthy, for example due to moral ignorance, to raise awareness of why their action was wrongful and encourage them to re-evaluate their behaviour. In fact, Rini (2020b, pp. 146–148) herself suggests that we do this in cases of microaggressions given that they are often unintentional. If she is arguing that we blame those we cannot be certain are actually blameworthy, then we might question why certainty in detection is so important for the sake of ensuring we do not accuse the innocent.

Granted, there is a difference between blaming someone who has objectively enacted a microaggression but lacks blameworthiness and blaming someone who is innocent of even engaging in such behaviour. The diagnostic sceptic is concerned with the latter cases, and questions whether we should be holding people accountable for microaggressions given the lack of certainty over what counts. However, microaggressions are not unique in this respect, and there are other behaviours which we respond to critically whilst not being totally certain whether the specific instance fits that category of behaviour. Take insults for example, specifically the following backhanded comment: 'wow, I am actually *so* impressed that you passed your test'. Whilst this has the appearance of a compliment, the tone of voice might imply that this person

thinks quite poorly of my abilities. I feel insulted. Whilst I might not be totally sure whether or not their comment was actually an insult,[17] I may still feel compelled to criticise their behaviour because it caused offense. This might result in confronting someone who is objectively speaking innocent, but the consequences of this are at worst giving them the cold shoulder. I think worrying about the potential for greater consequences is why Rini desires an account of microaggressions to achieve certainty in detection. This is because the sceptics have accused those who take the concept seriously of promoting victimhood and threatening free speech. If we can be sure that a microaggression has occurred, then we have a defence against these concerns.

My problem with this is the assumption that these issues are actually being raised in good faith, as opposed to being politically motivated criticisms of a concept that empowers marginalised people to recognise and reject the subtle ways in which oppression manifests. It is notable how these sceptical arguments blur the line between sociopolitical and conceptual concerns, when in practice, whether taking microaggressions seriously promotes victimhood or threatens free speech is a matter of how we handle them. In the context of these sociopolitical concerns, I just worry that the demand for certainty in detection is a trap that shifts the focus onto making sure we rigorously define the concept, at the expense of attending to the oppression experienced by marginalised people. Besides, even if someone labels something a microaggression, on the ambiguous experience account this certainty is only accessible to the target themselves as it is dependent upon *their* ambiguous experience. Simply defining microaggressions this way leaves no guarantee that the target will avoid accusations of claiming victimhood and blocking free speech. The structural account at least allows us to point to independent social facts about the functional role similar patterns of behaviour play in reinforcing oppression.

If this demand for certainty in detection is a response to scientific concerns that the microaggression concept is too 'open' to 'afford rigorous scientific investigation' (Lilienfeld, 2017, p. 140), then I point towards various other ill-defined 'fuzzy concepts'

[17] I am being deliberately non-committal to any account of insults here in order to avoid a very similar debate, however, see Milić (2018) for an analysis of the various approaches to defining what 'insults' are.

used within psychology, such as intelligence, creativity, and schizophrenia (Zadeh, 1976). Lilienfeld himself admits that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with using open concepts within research provided that they are 'tethered to a reasonably clear-cut implicit or contextual… definition' (2017, p. 143). The structural account can function as one such contextual definition that is useful in our analyses of the relationship between microaggressions and oppression. In cases where we are more interested in investigating the ambiguous nature of microaggressions and their psychological effects on marginalised people, then perhaps the ambiguous experience account is the better contextual definition there. If there is nothing wrong with employing open concepts that are anchored by these 'reasonably clear-cut' definitions, then the sceptics need to more forcefully explain why the microaggression concept must be closed off, and relatedly, why we need to achieve certainty in detection. To pre-empt their response, however, I would question why the same demand is not made for other fuzzy psychological concepts.

Given that the purpose of this thesis is to address microaggressions and the role that they play in enacting and reinforcing structures of oppression, this project is well served by a structural account. It pays sufficient respect to the experiences of marginalised people in the context of our collective, rather than individual, understanding of microaggressions. Also, by de-psychologising the concept, the structural account 'depathologizes the individual' (Bettache, 2022, p. 745), avoiding sceptical arguments that targets are hypersensitive or uncharitably interpreting the situation. Instead, as fallible experts in oppression, marginalised people are simply more attuned to microaggressions as subtle instances of oppression. Even if the structural account arguably does not offer certainty in determining whether a token instance is microaggressive, the problems that Rini's ambiguous experience account runs into show us how difficult rigorously defining the concept may prove to be**.** Perhaps then, this suggests that the desire to constrict our understanding of microaggressions between necessary and sufficient conditions is misguided. In defending a structural account, I am instead content to embrace the concept's fuzzy boundaries and choose to spotlight the collective endeavour undertaken by marginalised people to understand microaggressions as a *subtly oppressive social practice*.

## Conclusion

This chapter has served as an introduction to the microaggression concept, offering a review of the psychological and philosophical literature on the topic. Despite the many reported harms correlated with experiencing microaggressions, I highlighted how microaggression sceptics have raised various methodological, conceptual, and sociopolitical concerns, criticising microaggression research and the wider application of the concept in everyday life. As I have shown, these worries are primarily underpinned by the criticism that the microaggressions concept is not rigorously defined and so leaves determining if something is microaggressive down to the target's interpretation. To solve this so-called 'subjectivity problem', I mainly focussed on two competing accounts of microaggressions in philosophy: McTernan's structural account and Rini's ambiguous experience account. The former solves the subjectivity problem by de-psychologising microaggressions, highlighting the functional role they play in perpetuating oppression, whilst the latter account solves it by making ambiguous experiences of oppression constitutive of microaggressions. Rini takes issue with the structural account for how it does not centre the recipients of microaggressions and their experiences and is unable to offer certainty in detection of token instances of microaggressions. To defend the structural account, I argue that it does in fact respect the collective expertise of marginalised people as generally reliable, but not infallible, identifiers of oppression. I also deny the sceptics' requirement that our account of microaggressions should offer certainty in detection. Ultimately, Rini's account ends up being too individualistic for the purposes of my thesis, and therefore I conclude that understanding microaggressions through the lens of the structural account more aptly sheds light on how they function as a *subtly oppressive social practice*.

CHAPTER 2

# Possibilities and Foreclosures

*The Existential Violence of Microaggressions*

## Introduction

Amongst the conceptual issues surveyed so far, we have seen that microaggression sceptics claim that the term 'microaggression' is inapt. This is because within social psychology, aggressive acts must be *intentional* (Lilienfeld, 2017), yet proponents of the microaggression concept argue that microaggressions are usually unintentional. In response, Monnica Williams (2020) points to other disciplines such as education, feminism, and sociology, to show how they operate with a broader understanding of what is considered 'aggressive'. Notably, they each acknowledge that racism and its constitutive behaviours can be understood as a form of *violence,* whether intended or not, on account of the severe negative physiological and psychological health outcomes they lead to. As such, Williams encourages us to understand microaggressions as acts of violence*,* because whether intentional or not, they benefit dominant groups by reinforcing power differentials between them and marginalised people (2020, pp. 8–10). Whilst I agree with this response, there is scope for further analysis of how microaggressions in particular operate as a form of oppressive violence.

To explore this, I begin by substantiating Williams' claim that microaggressions are a form of violence by discussing various categories of violence which philosophers have claimed that microaggressions contribute towards. To expand on this analysis, I build upon Freeman and Stewart's concept of 'existential harms' to introduce a further category of *existential* violence. Taking a distinctly phenomenological approach to understanding this concept, I characterise existential violence as contributing to the unjust foreclosing of possibilities for experiencing oneself in various meaningful and dynamic ways as a multiplicitous subject (see Lugones, 1987; Ortega, 2016). To support my account, I identify three particular ways in which microaggressions enact existential violence by *denying*, *homogenising*, and *inferiorising* marginalised people and their

experiences. After offering various examples of how microaggressions can achieve these effects, I further support my claim that these microaggressions are a form of existential violence by advancing a phenomenology of microaggressions. Through this, I show how the 'derivatization' of marginalised people (Cahill, 2010), and the experience of having an 'inhibited intentionality' (see I. M. Young, 1980; Freeman, 2017), are key phenomenological features of existential violence, and help us to better understand the ways in which microaggressions diminish the subjectivity of marginalised people.

## 2.1 The Violence of Microaggressions

Following the structural account, I understand microaggressions to be an oppressive 'social practice' that structures and perpetuates 'objectionable status hierarchies' (McTernan, 2018, p. 270). Analysing microaggressions as a social practice is important here as it helps to highlight their nature as a common pattern of behaviour which may be engaged in by very many people, even if unwittingly (2018, p. 279). This account also offers some insight into the oppressive nature of microaggressions by illuminating how they support pernicious social hierarchies. Given that microaggressions are subtle, ambiguous, and seemingly innocuous compared to more overt forms of discrimination, this suggests that microaggressions can be a highly effective tool for achieving oppressive ends. However, more could be done to unpack the ways in which microaggressions actually enact and reinforce oppression. This is where I think that exploring Monnica Williams' (2020) claim that microaggressions are a form of violence offers a fruitful avenue of analysis.

Ordinarily, when we think of violent acts, we tend to think of behaviours that physically harm their targets. But microaggressions do not involve immediate physical harm. Instead, understanding Williams' claim through a structural lens, I want to argue that what makes microaggressions 'violent' is that they constitute a lower-level form of oppression by policing the behaviours of marginalised people. This idea is supported by Iris Marion Young, who describes violence as one of the 'Five Faces of Oppression', and includes 'less severe incidents of harassment, intimidation, or ridicule simply for the

purpose of[18] degrading, humiliating, or stigmatizing group members' as forms of violence (1990/2011, p. 61). As an adaptive mechanism of oppression (see Friedlaender, 2021), microaggressions are particularly pernicious in how they subtly enact and reinforce oppression. Understanding microaggressions as a 'less overt' form of violence therefore helps to situate the phenomena within a framework of other oppressive behaviour. Moreover, it serves a rhetorical purpose in raising the stakes when we think about the sorts of harms that microaggressions can enact. As such, I shall proceed by showing some of the ways in which microaggressions have been analysed as a form of violence, before introducing a further category of violence that microaggressions subject marginalised people to, which I shall unpack over the course of the chapter.

To begin, Emma McClure (2020) claims that microaggressions can be situated within a spectrum of escalating *linguistic* violence. Through an analysis of hate speech in the lead up to the Rwanda genocide, McClure shows how the repetition of hate speech, even when taken for granted as 'harmless jokes', legitimised the path towards deadly forms of violence (2020, pp. 131–133). Linking this to microaggressions, McClure shows us that the more that we allow microaggressions to prosper within an environment by going unchecked, the more we legitimise the use of hate speech which can ultimately transform into serious forms of physical violence (2020, p. 141). Although an insightful analysis, one might argue that whilst the proliferation of microaggressions could legitimise other forms of violence, this does not imply that microaggressions are *themselves* violent. For example, someone who drinks too much alcohol might become violent, but we are unlikely to think of drinking alcohol as being a violent act.

In response, the reason why McClure thinks of microaggressions as a form of linguistic violence is because, whilst they 'don't explicitly threaten their targets', they nevertheless imply the assumptions and stereotypes that drive hate speech (2020, p. 141). So, when someone treats a person with learning difficulties as though they constantly need unsolicited help, this microaggression potentially implies some attitude that they are

[18] Note that microaggressions are usually not intentionally enacted 'for the purpose of' anything malicious on the microaggressor's part. However, understanding violence as systemic prompts us to acknowledge how microaggressions, as a social practice, serve an oppressive purpose above and beyond the intentions of individual microaggressors.

'stupid' or 'inept', which would otherwise be explicit in certain ableist slurs. Microaggressions are a form of violence here because they serve oppressive ends by threatening the dignity of marginalised people. But even if you are not willing to accept that microaggressions are violent based on McClure's description, at the very least it should be noted that they have the potential to license other forms of linguistic violence, as well as influence bystanders into reproducing similar 'oppressive patterns of thought and behaviour' (2020, p. 124).

Whilst McClure describes microaggressions as a form of linguistic violence because they carry oppressive implications that can support more explicit forms of hate speech, we can also think of microaggressions as being violent based on the sorts of harms they can cause. One popular area of analysis within philosophy has illuminated the various ways in which microaggressions can result in epistemic harms for marginalised people, suggesting that they are a form of *epistemic* violence. In the previous chapter, I noted how microaggressions can take the form of 'testimonial injustice' in which the microaggressor fails to give uptake to the target's claims due to identity-based prejudices they may not even be aware they have (Freeman & Stewart, 2021). Repeated exposure to microaggressions which involve testimonial injustice may also have the effect of cultivating self-doubt within targets (Fatima, 2020). This is only amplified by the fact that microaggressions are attributionally ambiguous, opening the door for the catch-22 of choosing to respond or not, for fear of meeting a defensive or hostile response (2007, pp. 277–279). Notably, downplaying or denying the reality of microaggressions has been labelled as a form of 'gaslighting'[19] (Johnson et al., 2021) which can cause marginalised people to further doubt their epistemic capacities in relation to identifying microaggressive behaviours.

The worry here is that if the ambiguity of microaggressions allows for them to be intentionally weaponised with plausible deniability, then it allows the oppressor to use microaggressions specifically as a tool to gaslight and foster widespread self-doubt amongst marginalised people. Problematising this further, Javiera Perez Gomez (2022)

[19] Whilst this is not caused by the microaggression itself, the subtle and ambiguous nature of microaggressions can open the door for gaslighting to occur.

argues that the self-doubt inculcated by microaggressions is unjust, not merely because it is misplaced, but rather because it is actually rational. To show this, she claims that the threat of not being taken seriously when responding to a microaggression constitutes an 'encroachment injustice'. That is to say that the costs of responding based on one's belief that something was a microaggression 'raises the level of evidential support required' for this belief to count as knowledge[20] (2022, p. 650). So, if a person of colour is asked 'where are you *really* from', then the potential hostility they face for questioning the intended meaning raises the stakes for whether their belief that this is a microaggression constitutes knowledge. By ensuring that threat of hostility remains a cost of questioning microaggressive behaviours, the evidential requirements to know whether a microaggression took place remains inflated. Self-doubt therefore becomes a deeply rooted feature of experiencing microaggressions for marginalised people.

Related to these epistemic harms, we might also think of microaggressions as being a form of *psychological* violence. We have previously seen that repeated experiences of microaggressions are correlated with a range of psychological harms, having detrimental effects on the psychological wellbeing and self-esteem of marginalised people (Wang et al., 2011; Nadal et al., 2014). The ambiguity of microaggressions contributes further psychological burdens as the catch-22 of responding to microaggressions means that recipients are forced to expend energy in deciding how to navigate the situation. If microaggressions can promote a sense of self-doubt amongst marginalised people, then it becomes less likely that microaggressions are confronted. This is especially pernicious given that many microaggressions portray marginalised people through negative stereotypes, potentially leading to recipients internalising a sense of inferiority and making it difficult for recipients to maintain a positive view of themselves. This is a key component of what Sandra Lee Bartky calls 'psychological oppression', which 'serves to make the work of domination easier by breaking the spirit of the dominated' (1990, p. 23). The cumulative effect, or 'death by a thousand cuts' (Nadal et al., 2011) of microaggressions wears down the psyche of marginalised people, making resistance all the more difficult.

[20] This concept is grounded in the view that 'knowledge depends at least in part on the practical features of a situation' (Perez Gomez, 2022, p. 648).

In an early analysis of microaggressions, Chester Pierce (1995) offers a particularly insightful picture into how microaggressions constitute a form of psychological violence. Pierce compares the stress caused by microaggressions with that produced by terrorism, torture, and natural disasters. He describes how the terrorist aims to inspire fear through actual or threatened violence, whilst the torturer aims to strengthen control over their target in order to get them to capitulate (1995, pp. 283–284). Additionally, the victim of a disaster is held captive to an unpleasant and extreme situation in which they are dislocated from their everyday behaviours and comforts (1995, pp. 290–292). Pierce's claim is that microaggressions achieve analogous results. For example, a Black child who is followed around a shop by a security guard is held captive within an unsettling situation in which he is dislodged from the everyday activity of shopping as he becomes aware of being perceived as a potential criminal. Yet, there is no scope for him to challenge the guard for fear of retaliation, of being confirmed to be 'aggressive' and 'confrontational'. In this analogy, the unsettling experience of being racially profiled represents a disaster where the security guard, as terrorist and torturer, both instils fear in and exerts control over the child through the threat of confirming their criminal status. As Pierce argues, if we are to take terrorism, torture, and disaster seriously as psychological stressors, then we ought to take the impacts of microaggressions seriously as a stress related public health illness (1995, p. 282).

Putting together the above analyses, we begin to see how the violence of microaggressions consists in their ability to wear down their recipients and have profound effects on their subjectivities. Through the cultivation of self-doubt, the epistemic violence of microaggressions truncates the subjectivity of its targets by undermining their capacity to make sense of the world as they experience it (Pohlhaus, 2013). Relatedly, the psychological violence of microaggressions curtails the target's subjectivity through an internalisation of inferiority that stems from the constant reminder of one's reduced status as 'Other'. Indeed, in an analysis of racist and sexist and microaggressions, Pierce himself describes their cumulative impact as resulting in a 'shattered self-image' (1995, p. 279). What seems to influence, and be influenced by, each of these categories of violence, then, is the idea that microaggressions can fundamentally disrupt their targets' ability to make sense of themselves and their experiences. Lauren Freeman and Heather Stewart capture this impact of microaggressions through their

concept of 'self-identity' or 'existential' harms, which 'impair one's ability to generate and maintain an autonomous sense of one's own identity' (2021, p. 1018). For example, when a trans or non-binary person is misgendered, this imposes an authoritative interpretation of their experience of gender such that their capacity for expressing their sense of self is diminished (2021, p. 1019; see Kapusta, 2016).

Building upon this category of harm, I want to suggest that this gestures towards another, *existential*, form of violence enacted by microaggressions. I characterise this type of violence as including:

> **Existential Violence** – Actions/behaviours which contribute to the unjust foreclosing of possibilities for a subject to experience themselves as a multiplicitous being, with various meaningful and dynamic identities.

What this definition intends to capture is the idea that microaggressions can impair and undermine the target's sense of self and so can impact how they experience themselves and the world on a deeply phenomenological level. With this in mind, I am choosing to understand the self in a particularly phenomenological way, as an embodied subject that is a context of open possibilities (see Freeman, 2017, p. 655). This involves an awareness of how our identities are dynamically shaped through the projects that we engage in, and how these possibilities can be enabled and constrained through our relations with others. For example, one's identity as a PhD student is constructed through their relations to their supervisors, thesis, university, and so on. But those relations can themselves change. If that student begins to struggle writing their thesis and finds that their supervisors and university are not supportive, then their experience of being a PhD student is likely to shift towards something negative. Through these networks of relations, each subject experiences themselves in various ways – as student, child, gendered, anxious, avid-reader, queer, runner, and so on. What existential violence represents is an unjust stripping away of the possibility to form such a fully fleshed out, meaningful sense of self.

My choice of language here is a deliberate departure from Freeman and Stewart's original construction of existential harms. In their description, they make reference to an 'autonomous sense of one's own identity' being impaired (2021, p. 1018). This seems to suggest that the harm is caused due to some infringement on the marginalised person's

autonomy. However, I question how successfully anyone can generate and maintain a sense of self that is truly autonomous if so many aspects of our identities are formed through our relations to others.[21] This is especially relevant in the context of microaggressions if we are to understand how one's sense of self as raced, gendered, and so on is linked in very complex ways to interlocking systems of oppression. My worry with Freeman and Stewart's wording is that it risks promoting a view of the self as atomistic, a 'modern subjectivity' which decolonial thinkers have shown is 'undeniably tied to individuality, domination, and mastery' (Ortega, 2016, pp. 115–116; Yancy, 2016b; Singh, 2017). In contrast with mainstream Western philosophy where a 'coherent unified self is taken to be the normative goal' (Alcoff, 2020, p. 208), I want to promote a view that recognises the self as intersubjective, dynamic, and multi-faceted. Therefore, I follow Marianna Ortega in viewing the self as '*multiplicitous*', capturing how the relational self is constructed through various identities and inhabits a multitude of social locations, specifically the 'particularities of our raced, gendered, and classed everyday existence' (2016, p. 6).

This helps to explain why the form of violence I will discuss is distinctly 'existential', since it involves unjustly diminishing, or perhaps destroying, a multiplicitous self that is '*existentially plural*' (2016, p. 89). Ortega uses this term to describe how the multitude of social locations which we inhabit are meaningful to us because they act as lenses through which we experience the world in a plurality of ways. In the context of oppression these experiences may be contradictory, such as when marginalised people develop a 'double consciousness', seeing themselves positively from their own point of view and also through the negative constructions and stereotypes of the oppressor[22] (DuBois, 1903/2004). But when someone is repeatedly subject to existential violence, the possibilities to see oneself positively undergo foreclosure as it becomes increasingly

[21] One move, which I think Freeman and Stewart would make here, is to adopt a relational view of autonomy that attends to the 'rich and complex social and historical contexts in which agents are embedded' (Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000, p. 21). However, for the reasons I give below, I find it more sensible to just avoid characterising existential violence in terms of autonomy.

[22] Double consciousness need not always be oppressive and can in fact play an important role in generating the requisite understanding for motivating social change. Linda Martín Alcoff (2015) explores this in the case of 'white double consciousness' in which changes in contemporary social spaces have exerted pressure on white people in how they understand their racial identity, alienating them from whiteness as the norm.

difficult to maintain such a self-perception. This can collapse the contradiction of double consciousness such that, in extreme cases, one begins to see themselves solely through the eyes of the oppressor.

Not only do I think that this is phenomenologically violent, as I shall explore later, but it is also characteristic of the logics through which oppression operates. As Val Plumwood argues, oppression often involves the construction of binaristic hierarchies that place social groups into a relationship of dominance and inferiority (1993, pp. 49–51). To maintain this relationship though, marginalised groups must 'appear suitably homogenous' to ensure that they 'conform to and confirm its "nature"' (1993, p. 54). Hence, marginalised groups become stereotyped in negative ways, through social practices such as microaggressions, in order to neatly organise the social hierarchy. Of course, not all cases are apt to be understood in terms of binaries in this way. For example, thinking of some oppressive hierarchies as being 'graded' can offer a richer analysis (see Hominh, 2024), such as considering people's proximity to whiteness in analyses of racism, as opposed to whether they fit into the categories of white or non-white. But oppression still functions by establishing the experiences and ways of understanding of dominant groups, in this case white people, as the norm (I. M. Young, 1990/2011, p. 59). Even if microaggressors are unaware of the impacts of their behaviours, and act without intention, they still contribute to oppression by solidifying those dominants aspects of their own multiplicitous self as the norm at the expense of marginalised people.

Before expanding upon how microaggressions achieve this as a form of existential violence, I want to explain why the foreclosing of possibilities involved in existential violence must be 'unjust' to qualify. My first reason for this is to ground the concept within theories of oppression, suggesting that existential violence occurs when one's subjectivity is unfairly diminished on account of their perceived social group membership. Of course, members of dominant groups can themselves experience the effects of existential violence, such as how patriarchal constructions of masculinity can limit how men experience and express their gender. But reinforcing these stereotypes about masculinity is not itself existential violence because the logics of oppression require that the dominant groups are also sufficiently homogenous as to be neatly separated from subordinate groups (see Plumwood, 1993, p. 49). Whilst patriarchal

constructions of masculinity can be harmful for men, they are ideologically necessary to reinforce social norms that promote male dominance over women and those who are gender non-conforming and thus benefit men in other ways. The other reason for grounding the concept in theories of oppression is to avoid cases that involve foreclosing one's possibility of maintaining harmful identities, such as being a murderer or white supremacist, from being considered a form of existential violence. On the contrary, these are rather apt candidates for ways of relating to the world that we would want to foreclose.

Whilst Freeman and Stewart usefully identify existential harms as a category of harm enacted by microaggressions, they only offer the example of misgendering as a way of exploring how these sorts of harms occur. Following my characterisation of existential violence then, I want to build on their work in three ways. First, by offering further examples of how microaggressions result in existential harm. To do this, I will identify three particular species of existential harm - *denial, homogenisation,* and *inferiorisation.*[23] Whilst these three species are unlikely to capture all forms of existential harm, nor be mutually exclusive, they are intended as an initial expansion upon Freeman and Stewart's work. This advances my second aim of offering a more concrete framework through which we can understand how existential violence operates. Following this, I present a phenomenology of microaggressions, highlighting the phenomenological features of the processes through which the denial, homogenisation, and inferiorisation of marginalised people and their identities occur. Ultimately, this serves to further substantiate the claim that microaggressions are an oppressive social practice.

## 2.2 Three Species of Existential Harm

As stated above, my characterisation of existential violence is inspired by Freeman and Stewart's (2021) concept of existential harms, where they present the example of

[23] Although I refer to these three effects as 'existential harms' in the sense that existential violence can result in marginalised people and their identities being denied, homogenised, and inferiorised, they can also describe what existentially violent behaviour does – it *denies*, *homogenises*, and *inferiorises*.

misgendering as characteristic of how microaggressions can undermine one's sense of self. Using this as a starting point, we can see how various microaggressions involve the *denial* of certain aspects of the target's identity and their experiences by questioning, failing to acknowledge, or refusing to give uptake to them. Not only does misgendering fail to give uptake to the gender identity of trans and non-binary people, but it can also involve an erasure of their lived experiences given the important role which gender plays in how we experience the world. So, when a non-binary person is routinely misgendered, their lived experience is distorted to conform to some gender category into which they do not fit. When a pervasive feature of their lived experience, misgendering can make it more difficult for non-binary people to maintain their gender identity. A similar effect is achieved by 'bi-erasure' microaggressions, such as when a bisexual person is told they should not enter a gay club when they are in a heterosexual presenting relationship, or is told that they 'just haven't found the right person yet' (Stewart, 2021). This bi-erasure reasserts a binary between heterosexuality and homosexuality that does not permit space for bisexual identity, distorting a bisexual person's ability to make sense of their sexuality.

These examples are useful for highlighting the tendency for oppression to function through the reinforcement of socially constructed, and hierarchical binaries.[24] For these binaries to be effective in their maintenance of oppression, they rely on the 'radical exclusion' of any middle-ground, and must ensure a complete separation of the two social groups without overlap (Plumwood, 1993, p. 49). Instead, non-binary, trans, and fluid gender identities destabilise the tidiness of a well-established sex/gender binary that has historically been used to oppressive ends. For example, the reinforcement of patriarchal ideology within capitalist societies has historically naturalised women as belonging in the home in order to exploit their domestic labour (Davis, 1981/1983). Yet, since the existence of trans and gender non-confirming people threatens the presumed sex/gender binary, the maintenance of these oppressive social orders becomes disrupted. As such, microaggressions which deny certain marginalised identities may be understood as subtly correcting these breakdowns to retain the tidiness of oppressive binaries.

[24] It is worth reiterating that not all forms of oppression operate through hierarchical *binaries*, even if they tend to try and collapse social organisation in this way to remain efficient.

Of course, I noted earlier that some oppressive hierarchies are better analysed as being 'graded' rather than binary, such as understanding race in terms of proximity to whiteness. But microaggressions which *deny* or otherwise bring into question someone's identity can cause issues for people who are positioned as insufficiently proximate to the norm. One way in which microaggressions can achieve this is by contributing towards 'identity denial', a term used within psychology to describe when 'individuals are denied ingroup status because they do not resemble a prototypical group member' (Huynh, 2013, p. 1). For example, the commonly cited microaggression 'where are you *really* from?' can be seen as a rejection of someone's national identity on account of being considered 'too ethnic'. Yet identity denial can also be experienced the other way around by mixed-race people who are considered 'too national' to be properly part of some ethnic minority group (Cárdenas et al., 2021). Related microaggressions faced by mixed-race people have been shown to produce feelings of isolation and alienation within family settings (Nadal et al., 2013). Therefore, in these cases, mixed-race people are reminded of their existence within a liminal space where they are constructed as both familiar and Other.

Taking stock of this, in denying aspects of marginalised people's identities, microaggressions help to reinforce oppressive hierarchies by enforcing membership criteria for ingroup status. Where these hierarchies operate through binaries, the denial of marginalised identities which fall outside of these binaries serves to protect the purity of this oppressive framework. Elsewhere, analysing oppressive hierarchies as graded can offer greater explanatory acuity, and so we might interpret microaggressions which involve invalidating one's 'being-in-between' (see Ortega, 2016) categories of race, gender, and sexuality, as a political tool for collapsing more complex hierarchies into more easily maintainable binaries. This is evidently a strategy ripe for defiance, primarily by embracing one's multiplicitous self which I shall discuss in more depth in Chapter 5. Yet, as a form of existential violence, these microaggressions make achieving this all the more difficult by reducing the intelligibility of experiences outside of a given oppressive framework, thus curtailing the multiplicitous self.

Since microaggressions enforce membership criteria for ingroup status, they appear to also operate through oppressive imaginaries that conceive of social groups as being

uniform. Given that many microaggressions involve stereotypes which reduce the target to some perceived aspect of their identity, microaggressions enact a second species of existential harm by *homogenising* their targets, thus undermining their ability to experience themselves as multiplicitous. We see this in various examples such as when someone responds to a 'masculine-presenting' gay man with shock, saying 'oh, you're *gay*… you don't look it!'. Comments like these communicate a stereotypical image, not just of what gay people 'look like', but importantly what they *ought to* 'look like' in order to intelligibly communicate their sexuality. This suggests that homogenising microaggressions can produce a normative pull that encourages marginalised people to return to ascribed boxes of intelligibility in order to be better understood. The repetition of these microaggressions and their corresponding stereotypes can therefore contribute to the foreclosing of possibilities for marginalised people to experience themselves in meaningful and dynamic ways by placing limits on intelligible self-expression.

By ensuring that social groups are concretely defined such that members appear 'suitably homogenous' (see Plumwood, 1993, p. 53), these homogenising microaggressions play a pivotal role in establishing and maintaining oppressive hierarchies. Any differences amongst members of the subordinate group are subject to correction. Noting that microaggressions are an adaptive mechanism of oppression (see Friedlaender, 2021), they subtly police the behaviours of marginalised groups and communicate expectations for how members of certain social groups should appear and behave. For example, this happens when someone says to their Asian classmate who is anxious about an upcoming maths test, 'don't worry, you'll smash it, you're Asian!'. Rather than take stock of their anxieties, they potentially place further undue stress on the student. This results in the student experiencing the emotional harm of having their anxieties minimised (see Freeman & Stewart, 2021, p. 1018), and being loaded with the psychological burden of having to affirm their Asian identity whilst dealing with their microaggressive classmate. Through this microaggression, it becomes more difficult for the student to understand themselves as an Asian person *who does not like maths*, communicated as if oxymoronic. Thus, the student experiences an existential harm as this microaggression renders the various aspects of their experience – being Asian, disliking maths, and feeling anxious – incoherent.

At their most extreme, pernicious stereotypes of marginalised groups can take the form of what Patricia Hill Collins (1990/2000) calls 'controlling images', which function to naturalise the expected roles of these groups. For example, the image of Black women as 'Mammies' is rooted in the history of US slavery, representing the Black mother figure in white homes as the 'faithful, obedient domestic servant' who loves and cares for her white family better than her own (1990/2000, p. 72). This is contrasted with the image of the 'Matriarch', the Black mother figure who spends too much time working away from her own home, and displays the unfeminine qualities of being overly aggressive and assertive (1990/2000, p. 75). Together, controlling images such as these are routinely employed in order to entrench the class, gender, and race-based oppression faced by working class Black women. They set expectations for Black women to be loyal and deferential to their white superiors, whilst penalising the 'angry Black woman'. Importantly, microaggressions play a role in enforcing these controlling images, such as when a Black woman calls out oppressive behaviours and policies within her workplace, only to be labelled a 'troublemaker'. By instantiating the stereotype[25] of the 'angry Black woman', which is something she should avoid conforming to, she is told to stop being a 'troublemaker' and instead content herself with the harmful nature of her workplace environment. In doing so, she properly displays the loyalty and deference to her white superiors expected of the modern-day Mammy. By enforcing such controlling images, these microaggressions place her in a double bind where she either quietly suffers or is punished for speaking out.

This dilemma is indicative of the catch-22 of responding to microaggressions, but the homogenising force of microaggressions can also place marginalised people into other sorts of double binds. We see this in Aleksi Soini's autoethnographic piece where he reflects on the sorts of microaggressions he has encountered within the workplace as a gay man:

[25] Collins does not explicitly state the difference between 'controlling images' and 'stereotypes', though one reading is that controlling images are 'repetitive stereotypes' which are 'socially, institutionally, and historically constructed to advance the interests of the dominant group and subordinate marginalized communities' (Deckard et al., 2020, p. 584).

> I had intentionally "toned down" my behavior, and as I rarely shared anything about my life outside of work, a heteronormative assumption was cast on me, which would then lead to awkward inquiries on what I did over a weekend and why I didn't date my female friend who was "so hot". Stating that I did not seem gay almost sounded like a compliment: was it an achievement? (2022, p. 7).

As Soini describes, displaying shock at someone's queerness communicates an assumption of heteronormativity which places the recipient in a space where they are expected to present themselves within a stereotypically 'gay' mode in order to properly affirm their sexuality. I noted above that this has the subtle effect of placing a normative expectation upon gay people to 'look gay' in order to avoid these heteronormative assumptions. At the same time, Soini's reading of the comment as potentially congratulatory for 'not looking gay' also suggests that stereotypically 'gay' modes of presentation have undesirable associations. This places him into a double bind whereby failing to confirm his sexuality through stereotypical behaviours and appearances seemingly weakens the legitimacy of his gay identity, but to affirm such stereotypes would entail negative connotations.

Here, we see how microaggressions can also *inferiorise* their targets by shaping their identities as deviant, disvalued, subordinate, and so on. These microaggressions contribute to existential violence by undermining the positive relationships one has with meaningful aspects of their multiplicitous self. In Soini's case, his sexuality forms an important part of who he is, but when he is routinely confronted with microaggressions which inferiorise that facet of his identity, it might become more difficult to sustain a positive relationship with his queerness. This strikes me as a driving force behind a lot of internalised homophobia and oppression in general, making these microaggressions an effective tool for coercing marginalised groups into maintaining their own oppression. Furthermore, by continuously putting down marginalised groups, microaggressions can perpetuate oppressive hierarchies by reinforcing the superiority of dominant groups. For example, various taxonomies have identified treating marginalised people as 'second class citizens' as a common microaggressive theme. These microaggressions include mistaking people of colour as service workers (Sue et al., 2007, p. 276), physically avoiding disabled people (Keller & Galgay, 2010, p. 250), and men being given

preferential treatment over women (Capodilupo et al., 2010, p. 192). Repeatedly experiencing these inferiorising microaggressions can therefore remind marginalised groups of their subordinate status and have crushing psychological and existential impacts.

A powerful example of how devastating repeatedly experiencing these microaggressions can be is exemplified through the experiences of Pecola Breedlove, the young Black protagonist of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970/2007). In a particularly apt example of a microaggression, when Pecola visits the local grocery store to buy some sweets, Morrison describes how the white immigrant storeowner Mr Yacobowski looks right through her with a 'total absence of human recognition' (1970/2007, p. 48), and 'hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand' (1970/2007, p. 49) when she gives him some coins. This is a straightforward example of how Pecola is marked out through her Blackness as Other, as disgusting, as something to be avoided (Yancy, 2016a, p. 175). Throughout the book, we see similar examples in which Pecola is treated as ugly and undesirable due to her Blackness. Seeking an antidote to her perceived ugliness, Pecola begins to desire blue eyes, which she sees as a symbol of beauty. Here, blue eyes stand as a metonym for whiteness, and thus Pecola's yearning for blue eyes represents an internalised detestation of her own Blackness. As the story progresses, through a series of harrowing experiences, Pecola's psyche becomes fundamentally twisted and distorted by this desire to be valued and loved, to be perceived as having *the bluest eyes*, to *be* white. Thus, Morrison's work serves as a powerful representation of how the continuous onslaught of inferiorising microaggressions, and other forms of racism, constitute existential violence against people of colour. As Blackness is divested of positive value, these microaggressions disrupt their targets' sense of self so profoundly as to make it virtually impossible for people like Pecola to conceive of themselves as beautiful or desirable.

We can also see how these existential harms occur through environmental microaggressions whereby the target's environment fosters a sense of inferiority. In Freeman and Stewart's (2022) work on microaggressions within clinical settings, they discuss the following experience of visiting a doctor as recounted by author Roxane Gay:

> There is the humiliation of simply being in the doctor's office, which is, all too often, ill-equipped for the obese body, despite all the public hysteria about obesity and health. Many scales cannot weigh people over 350 pounds. Blood pressure cuffs are always too small, as are the threadbare hospital gowns. It is also difficult to climb onto the exam table. It is difficult to lie back, to make myself vulnerable, to be splayed wide open (2017, pp. 273–274).

In Gay's experience, no single person enacts a microaggression to inferiorise her on account of her being fat.[26] Instead, it is an effect of the physical space of the clinical setting presenting itself as accommodating only to thin bodies. As such, when navigating spaces which are hostile towards fat bodies, it becomes more difficult to maintain a positive relationship to one's body. Furthermore, being made to feel humiliated in such a vulnerable setting is likely to make visits to healthcare institutions off-putting for fat people, with potentially serious impacts on their health in the future. More fundamentally, the routine experiences of larger bodies being uncatered for in a range of settings ultimately problematises fatness which, much like we see in the case of Pecola's obsession with whiteness, reflexively inscribes thinness as the desirable norm.

All in all, the denial, homogenisation, and inferiorisation of marginalised identities and experiences represent different species of existential harms enacted by microaggressions. Using these categories also helps to offer a framework for how microaggressions constitute a form of existential violence. As a social practice, these existential harms help to preserve the tidiness of, and perpetuate, oppressive hierarchies. By forcing marginalised groups into prescribed boxes which fit these oppressive imaginaries, the possibilities for marginalised people to experience themselves as dynamic and multiplicitous beings undergo unjust foreclosure. Here, I am framing foreclosure as a process, rather than a discrete end point, as I do not intend to suggest that existential violence makes experiencing oneself as multiplicitous entirely impossible. Rather, it shapes and restricts the ways of understanding available to marginalised people, with various costs imposed to be able to maintain certain positive and meaningful

[26] Though 'fat' is often used as an insult, it is the term used by Gay to describes herself in her memoir *Hunger* (see 2017). Munro (2017), who has written on fatphobic microaggressions, also prefers to use the term 'fat' to describe larger bodies, rather than pathologised terms such as 'obese' or 'overweight'.

self-conceptions. To better understand how this occurs, I will now shift my focus towards several phenomenological features which accompany the experience of microaggressions which deny, homogenise, and inferiorise. By advancing a phenomenology of microaggressions, I aim to further demonstrate why microaggressions are a form of violence and illuminate what makes this violence 'existential'.

## 2.3 A Phenomenology of Microaggressions

As I explained above, I understand existential violence to include:

> **Existential Violence** – Actions/behaviours which contribute to the unjust foreclosing of possibilities for a subject to experience themselves as a multiplicitous being, with various meaningful and dynamic identities.

Before offering a phenomenology of microaggressions, I want to preface my analysis by noting that the characterisation of this concept is already grounded in critical phenomenology. As such, it is worth reiterating that I begin from the view that subjects are embodied and multiplicitous (see Lugones, 1987; Ortega, 2016; Freeman, 2017; Alcoff, 2020), and are constructed through their experiences of navigating the world as raced, gendered, and sexualised in various intersecting ways (see Ahmed, 2006, p. 5). In other words, identities are not merely a product of personal introspection but are dynamically constituted through the projects we engage in, how we navigate the world, and how we are socially constructed within that world. Therefore, the key insight here is that identity is as much a matter of *doing* as it is *being*. For example, to make sense of someone's claim that they *are* a baker, we would expect that they are engaged in the project of *baking*. Similarly, Sara Ahmed explores how queer identity is shaped by the 'orientations' that bodies[27] take towards other objects, with these orientations involving

[27] I use the term 'bodies' throughout this section since recognising that subjects are *embodied* beings when analysing their lived experiences is an important principle of phenomenology.

our attractions and desires 'tending towards' bodies of the 'same sex'[28] (2006, pp. 69–70). Ultimately, our identities cohere around these repeated orientations (2006, p. 129), whether that involves gender (see de Beauvoir, 1949/1956; Butler, 1990/2006), race (see Ahmed, 2007; Freeman, 2015), or other forms of identity.

Given the scope of these critical phenomenologies, I want to caveat my analysis by stating that I do not expect the phenomenological features I highlight to perfectly explain all experiences of microaggressions. There may need to be a finer grain of analysis in specific cases. Moreover, I do not intend to enter debates regarding the meaning of contested phenomenological terms themselves. Instead, I will apply these concepts, as used by critical phenomenologists, to examples of microaggressions to further substantiate how microaggressions constitute a form of existential violence. To achieve this, I want to focus on how experiencing microaggressions can diminish the subjectivity of marginalised people as they come to experience themselves through the eyes of the microaggressor, and how this can make it difficult for them to navigate the world and engage in identity-forming and identity-fulfilling projects. I will suggest that these phenomenological features help to describe how the possibilities for marginalised subjects to experience themselves as multiplicitous beings undergo foreclosure, and therefore further explain why microaggressions are existentially violent.

To begin, I want to investigate how microaggressions can curtail the subjectivity of marginalised people as they experience the phenomenon of 'becoming an object to oneself' (see Freeman, 2017, p. 649). An important concept for understanding how this occurs is 'facticity', a term used within existential phenomenology to capture the concrete social, historical, and embodied features that make up who we are (see Yancy, 2016a, p. 151, 2016b, p. 254). This could include someone having a certain type of body, where they were born and grew up, and the relationships they have formed. These features, Heidegger[29] (1927/1962) claims, form part of our 'situatedness' as 'beings-in-the-world'.

[28] I place terms such as 'same sex' and 'opposite sex' in scare quotes since they are often used in descriptions of sexuality but nonetheless reinforce a sex-based gender binary.

[29] Given the aims of this thesis, and that I adopt Marianna Ortega's (2016) Heideggerian-inspired view of the self, it is worth acknowledging and condemning, as she does (2016, pp. 4; 222-224), Martin Heidegger's inexcusable associations with the Nazi Party.

Building on this, Sartre argues (1943/1984) that although we are limited by our facticity – those social, historical, and embodied details that constitute us – we are ultimately never completely determined by it. Instead, subjects are able to project themselves into the world through the decisions they make, making possibility an important mode of our subjectivity (see Yancy, 2016a, p. 255). When someone 'becomes an object to themselves', this can be understood as experiencing oneself primarily as 'facticity', as a product of historical and other social influences rather than a locus of possibility. Applying this within a critical context, I will show how this is a feature of experiencing various forms of oppression, such as microaggressions, contributing to how marginalised people are socialised and policed.

Previously, I have explained how microaggressions can lead to marginalised subjects developing a 'double consciousness' (see DuBois, 1903/2004) where they experience themselves through the eyes of the microaggressor, pressuring them to conform to certain controlling images and avoid the threat of sanctions. This is because microaggressions, particularly those which homogenise and inferiorise, often treat their target through demeaning stereotypes, as opposed to recognising the full extent of their subjectivity. When this is deep and enduring, the microaggressive gaze has the potential to seal the marginalised subject within a distorted image of themselves (see Freeman, 2017, p. 649). We see this in Soini's account above, where his work colleagues' surprised reaction to him coming out represents a heteronormative gaze that makes him hyperaware of how his physical appearance and behaviours confirm, or fail to confirm, his perceived sexuality. Whilst the double consciousness he develops can allow him to identify ways of resisting how others construct him, the inferiorising force of these microaggressions nonetheless makes it more difficult for him to experience himself in positive and meaningful ways.

Experiences such as this are particularly well-documented in phenomenological analyses of racism. For example, Frantz Fanon provides a powerful account of how he has been 'sealed into that crushing objecthood' (1952/2008, p. 82) through his experiences of racism:

> My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recoloured, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is Ugly (1952/2008, p. 86).

Fanon is returned to himself as a twisted and distorted object in the eyes of the white supremacist. Through this, he is sealed into the facticity of his Black body, and the potential for him to project himself into the world in any positive light undergoes foreclosure. Elsewhere, George Yancy (2016a, p. 57) recounts discussing his aspirations for the future with a white maths teacher, who he recalls telling him to be more 'realistic' about his dream to become a pilot. Describing this experience of being transfixed by his teacher's white gaze, Yancy states:

> [H]e returned me to myself as a fixed entity, a "n[****]rized" Black body whose epidermal logic had already foreclosed the possibility of being anything other than what befitted its lowly station (2016a, p. 58).

By fixing Yancy into his Black body, his ability to experience himself as a multiplicitous being is curtailed as it becomes more difficult for him to conceive of himself as both Black *and* a pilot. Thus, microaggressions are a subtle way in which oppression can constrain the subjectivity of marginalised people, prompting them to experience themselves as an object in the eyes of the oppressor, rather than as a locus of possibility.

Although this offers a useful foundation for exploring the phenomenological impacts of existential violence, I do want to raise a couple of potential limitations with the above framing of 'becoming an object' to oneself. First, its totalising language might suggest that existential violence results in the complete foreclosure of possibilities for self-understanding, therefore fully diminishing one's subjectivity. This contradicts Sartre's claim that one is always both facticity and possibility. The nuance here is that microaggressions which deny, homogenise, and inferiorise treat their targets primarily as a 'thing' which is given meaning through oppressive ideologies, as opposed to a multiplicitous subject that is itself a site of meaning-making. Even though this can diminish the marginalised subject's capacity for action, it need not be entirely foreclosed. This limitation also highlights my second concern that the framing is primary focussed on the phenomenological features of the target's experience. Whilst it does characterise

microaggressions as a sort of oppressive gaze, more could be done to unpack what the microaggressor is doing through this gaze and how it diminishes the target's subjectivity. As such, I want to explore the phenomenological features of the whole microaggressive exchange, to provide more texture to the idea that a microaggressor reduces their target to an 'object'.

To build on the idea that microaggressions diminish the subjectivity of marginalised people, I want to argue that they do this through the 'derivatization' of their targets. The concept of 'derivatization' was coined by Ann Cahill (2010) as a challenge to the widespread use of distinctly Kantian models of 'objectification' in feminist discourse on sexual objectification.[30] As she argues, these models are deficient because they separate out personhood from embodiment, and privilege non-bodily characteristics such as dignity and autonomy to such an extent that the experience of being treated as a body is understood as inherently degrading (2010, p. 25). Cahill takes issue with this for several reasons. First, these accounts take autonomy to be the 'hallmark of personhood', which risks viewing the self as stable and atomistic (2010, p. 26), as opposed to dynamic and relational as I have discussed. Furthermore, it places insufficient value on how subjects are embodied, and how our bodily modes of existence are a vital site for agency (2010, p. 25). Ultimately, these accounts put subject and object into a binary which fails to recognise how being held as an object in the Other's gaze is an important feature of our own subjectivity (2010, pp. 28–30). If we can recognise how microaggressions might diminish the subjectivity of marginalised people, then we should also consider how other forms of social interaction can support that subjectivity instead.

As opposed to 'objectification',[31] Cahill suggests that behaviours which appear to involve being treated as an 'object' are better captured through the lens of derivatisation where:

[30] Although Cahill does not necessarily characterise 'derivatization' as a phenomenological phenomenon, the concept is nonetheless grounded in a model of embodied intersubjectivity (see Cahill, 2010, pp. xi–xii) that makes it harmonious with the critical phenomenological context I am working in.

[31] Note that I do not intend to debate here whether 'objectification' or 'derivatization' is a more apt concept for describing cases of sexual harassment or other forms of discrimination and violence faced by marginalised groups.

> To derivatize is to portray, render, understand, or approach a being solely or primarily as the reflection, projection, or expression of another being's identity, desires, fears, etc… (2010, p. 32).

Although being held in the Other's gaze is a general feature of our experiences as subjects, when marginalised people are derivatised by being treated as a projection of another's expectations, their own subjectivity becomes 'derivative' to that of dominantly situated subjects. Take catcalling, for example, which has been interpreted as a type of microaggression itself (Capodilupo et al., 2010; McClure, 2019). Imagine that a woman is walking down a street when a man shouts, 'hey beautiful, give us a smile!'. In this case, the catcaller derivatises the woman by treating her as a projection of his own desires, be they sexual, to establish dominance, or to actively creep her out. Either way, her own subjectivity in that moment becomes determined by the catcaller's desires, twisting the act of walking down the street into one of exhibitionism for the male voyeur who strips her down through his words. In doing so, her subjectivity is no longer valued in and of itself, as seen in the hostile responses of catcallers who are ignored or dismissed. The woman who exhibits agency outside of the derivatising force of the catcaller's gaze is thus labelled 'dangerously rebellious' (Cahill, 2010, p. 32).

In cases such as these, Cahill claims that derivatisation is ethically problematic as it denies, or fails to recognise, the 'ontological distinctiveness' of its targets (2010, p. 144). By this, she means that derivatising acts ontologically 'subsume' their targets, refusing them any 'excess of identity beyond the derivatizer's' (2010, p. 50). Applying this to the case above, the woman is ontologically subsumed by the catcaller as she no longer stands apart from the male gaze in any way but is instead reducible to it. Of course, the woman already experiences an 'ontic injustice' in virtue of being socially constructed as a 'woman', a social group that is subject to various 'morally inappropriate constraints' (Jenkins, 2020, pp. 190–192). This suggests that derivatisation might be a process through which that injustice is maintained, by reinforcing the neat ontological separation of 'man' and 'woman', such that any excess of identity beyond the category of 'woman' is corrected. As such, the social category of 'woman' is itself constructed as derivative to that of 'men', helping to see why derivatisation is a form of *ontological* violence as Cahill claims (2010, p. 42). But since this ontological subsuming makes it more difficult for

marginalised people to experience themselves and the world beyond the derivatising force of the oppressor's gaze, as a multiplicitous being that is not reducible in this way, then derivatisation is also *existentially* violent.

It seems likely then that people who face ontic injustice will also experience existential violence given that oppressive constructions of marginalised subjectivities tend to leave no space for multiplicity. However, my interest is in those acts of existential violence which actively curtail the target's subjectivity, beyond the unjust constraints they face due to their being socially constructed as a member of some marginalised group(s). Considering the three species of existential harm I discussed earlier we can see how other examples of microaggressions achieve this. The denial of targets' identity and experiences derivatises them as they are treated as a projection of the microaggressor's fear or confusion towards counternormative modes of being. Furthermore, when microaggressions homogenise and inferiorise their targets, this treats them primarily as a projection of the microaggressor's expectations and the sorts of value they ascribe to marginalised groups, unconscious or otherwise. Through each of these, the target's subjectivity becomes truncated such that any attempt to express agency outside of the oppressor's gaze becomes less intelligible and risks punishment.

Although the concept of derivatisation is insightful for analysing how the microaggressor restricts their target's subjectivity, it is worth addressing some potential issues that one may have with how the concept is characterised. To start, there appear to be relatively benign cases of derivatisation which do not carry the same gravity as catcalling. For example, take the relationship between a student and a teacher. Within the classroom setting, the student might treat their teacher primarily as a projection of their expectations and needs for learning, and vice versa, calcifying them into their given role. Although it does not carry the same weight as catcalling, Cahill maintains that regardless of context, it is morally wrong to treat someone as a 'mere reflection of one's own needs or desires' (2010, p. 53). So, if students do not allow for an excess of identity beyond the teacher's job role,[32] this is still a case of derivatisation as all other aspects of the teacher's

[32] It is worth noting that this is becoming an increasingly prevalent attitude within a marketised higher education system which positions students as consumers (Tomlinson, 2017).

multiplicitous subjectivity are disregarded, and their identity becomes subsumed within the teacher-student relationship.

Another concern is that derivatisation does not always appear to involve the projection of one's *own* expectations and desires. Imagine instead that the catcaller is a closeted gay man trying to impress his male friends. In this case, he still derivatises the woman in the sense that he portrays her primarily as a projection of his desire to impress his friends, but a question might be raised over whether this has the same derivatising force as the misogynistic catcaller who actively wields the heterosexual male gaze. This question is important since, if microaggressions are usually understood to be unconscious and unintentional, it is unclear whether or not the target's subjectivity is actively being understood as a projection of the microaggressor's expectations. My response here is that, even if the catcaller is a closeted gay man and his desires are not necessarily sexual, he nonetheless treats the woman in sexualising and inferiorising ways, as is expected of him under the patriarchal regime that his male friends represent. Regardless of intention or conscious desires, his behaviour forms part of an oppressive social practice which subsumes the target's subjectivity and annexes her agency – she can either be grateful for the compliment, or be 'a bitch who ignores or misinterprets his good intentions' (McClure, 2019, p. 97).

The last point offers a perfect illustration of the double bind that microaggressions place their targets in and shows us why understanding the phenomenological experience of the target through the lens of derivatisation is particularly fruitful. The concept of derivatisation prompts us to acknowledge that whilst the subjectivity of marginalised people can be curtailed by experiencing microaggressions, they nonetheless remain *subjects*. They still retain the potential to understand themselves and their experiences beyond the derivatising force of the oppressor, but microaggressions make it more difficult to exercise that subjectivity as a multiplicitous being. For example, in another experience shared by Yancy, he describes the experience of walking down the street and hearing the 'deafening' sound of car doors locking shut (2016a, p. xxxiii). In some respects, this experience involves Yancy being returned to himself as an object of fear through the white gaze. Yet, analysing this through the lens of derivatisation draws attention to what the action of locking one's car door shut in the presence of a Black man

*does*. The projection of white fear distorts the simple act of walking down the street into something that is dangerous when done by a Black person. Regardless of whether locking the car door was intentional or not, Yancy is subsumed by the reductive stereotypes through which he is understood, annexing his agency as he is left with very few options for breaking free from the derivatising white gaze in order to transform the meaning of his very presence.

When a woman experiences catcalling or a Black man is stereotyped as dangerous, the diminishing of one's subjectivity can impact 'one's ability to navigate the world on one's own terms' (Freeman, 2017, p. 654). Freeman refers to this phenomenological experience as a kind of 'inhibited intentionality' (2017, p. 656), in which it becomes more difficult for the target to extend their body comfortably into certain spaces. In both of these examples, there is a discomfort involved in simply walking down the street. More generally, this can result in the projects[33] that marginalised people engage in being shaped or restricted in pernicious ways. For example, Freeman describes how stereotype threat can result in enduring psychological harms for marginalised people, such as low self-esteem, motivation, and self-doubt, which all place stress upon the body (2017, p. 656). When this is an ever-present threat, it can become more difficult to pursue certain projects, such as freely expressing one's personality for fear of coming across as 'too gay', and so the set of possibilities that were open to marginalised people begin to present themselves as 'preemptively foreclosed' (2017, p. 655). Therefore, when Yancy hears the chorus of car doors locking shut his experience of being derivatised by a fearful white gaze might restrict the sorts of behaviours that he engages in to avoid facing, and perhaps even escalating given the prospect that someone may call the police, similar encounters in the future.

Consequently, when these sorts of homogenising and inferiorising microaggressions play out across a range of settings, their cumulative and compounding effect can have severe impacts on the ability for marginalised people to navigate the world. Phenomenologically

[33] 'Projects' just describe the sorts of activities that subjects engage in, whether they be identity-forming such the example of baking I discussed at the start of this section, or much more banal like walking down the street. The reason I choose to use the term 'projects' is to capture the phenomenological idea that subjects can 'project' themselves into the world, as a locus of possibility, through their actions (see Yancy, 2016a, p. 255).

speaking, the subject becomes a context of diminished possibilities, an 'I cannot', as the world presents itself as 'a space that confines, confuses, degrades, and compromises one's existence' (Freeman, 2017, p. 657). Young explores this relationship between subjectivity and action in her descriptions of feminine motility, which she describes as an 'inhibited intentionality' through which women project themselves as an 'I cannot' (1980, p. 146). As children are socialised to exhibit what is considered to be 'proper' gendered behaviour, the young girl who loves to climb trees comes to experience this inhibited intentionality as she grows up:

> She is told that she must be careful not to get hurt, not to get dirty, not to tear her clothes, that the things she desires to do are dangerous for her. Thus, she develops a bodily timidity which increases with age. In assuming herself as a girl, she takes herself up as fragile (1980, p. 153).

In the case of gendered stereotypes, when internalised, Young shows us that they can have an impact on the sorts of projects one feels able to engage in. This does not require any conscious reflection either. For example, we see that this inhibited intentionality is reflected in how, compared to men, women often display a unconscious timidity in throwing their whole body into an action or task (1980, pp. 143–144).

From this, we begin to see the relation between how microaggressions can inhibit the intentionality of their targets, and how this contributes to the existential violence they face. I mentioned earlier that identities are dynamically shaped through the projects we engage in – we *do* identity. If the possibilities to pursue certain projects become inhibited, then this too shapes the potential for marginalised people to experience themselves as multiplicitous subjects. One way in which microaggressions contribute towards this is by constituting part of the political economy of 'being stopped'. Straightforwardly, this describes how some bodies are physically 'stopped' more than others, as seen through the disproportionate rate at which people of colour are targets of 'stop and search' procedures (Ahmed, 2007, p. 161). Microaggressions which deny their targets' identity and experiences can achieve this by negating the *doing* that constitutes the *being* of their identity. For example, when someone tells a bisexual person that they 'just haven't found the right person yet', this denial of bisexual identity tries to put a stop to the project of

desiring people of same and non-same genders[34]. We also see this effect with microaggressions which homogenise and inferiorise their targets. 'Bi-erasure' microaggressions are bolstered by negative stereotypes of bisexual people as 'greedy', and internalising these stereotypes may lead to a bodily manifestation of shame that inhibits their orientations towards people of various different genders. Similarly, in Soini's case of being told he does not 'look gay', this transforms the way in which Soini may experience his own identity, potentially leading him to question if he is 'gay enough' since queer desire no longer seems sufficient to confirm his queer identity.

When microaggressions phenomenologically 'stop' their targets, they halt marginalised people in their tracks, stealing their time whilst the microaggressor reconfigures what counts as legitimate and intelligible possibilities for self-identity. The idea that microaggressions steal time is important because it illuminates a phenomenological tariff placed on marginalised subjects for navigating the world which dominantly situated subjects need not pay. Ahmed also explores this idea in her analysis of how subjects who are able to approximate hegemonic identities, such as whiteness, are able to navigate the world without 'commanding attention' (2006, p. 130) as their race is rarely made salient in their encounters with others. On the contrary, for people of colour their daily lives are indexed with the routine experience of 'being stopped' since various institutions and environments are themselves oriented around whiteness. Rather than their racial identity sitting 'behind' and supporting their actions as it does for white people (see Alcoff, 1999, p. 20; Ahmed, 2006, p. 131), for people of colour, microaggressions actively draw attention to their racial difference. Thus, in no longer being able to simply trail behind their actions, race becomes an uncomfortable and highly salient feature of how racially marginalised people navigate the world, subsequently inhibiting their abilities to engage in meaningful projects.

As such, the cultivation of discomfort is an important way in which microaggressions inhibit the intentionality of their targets. A working-class Black woman who aspires to become an academic will likely experience various discomforts when trying to navigate

[34] I follow Stewart (2021) in using this more inclusive terminology to describe bisexuality. See her paper for a discussion of the criticism that the term 'bisexual' is trans-exclusive (2021, pp. 425-427).

an academic environment that are not encountered by her middle-class white male colleagues. A lack of representation and repeated exposure to microaggressions serve as a constant reminder that she does not quite belong, contributing to feelings of inferiority. By not commanding attention, other people may otherwise comfortably extend themselves into academic spaces on account of their race, class, and gender (Ahmed, 2006, p. 131). Meanwhile, for her the project of becoming an academic is in tension with her Blackness, and thus engaging in such a project becomes uncomfortable, if not untenable. Exploring a phenomenology of microaggressions therefore affords us rich language for understanding the experiences of marginalised people under oppression. It should also, I hope, counsel us against too rashly embracing a scepticism that brushes microaggressions off as 'exactly that: micro' (see Bloomberg, 2016). Far from being 'micro', I have shown that microaggressions are an insidious tool through which marginalised people are subject to existential violence, diminishing their subjectivities and foreclosing possibilities for self-understanding beyond the oppressor's eye.

## Conclusion

This chapter has substantiated the claim that microaggressions are oppressive because they constitute a form of violence experienced by marginalised people. More specifically, I have argued that they can contribute to an unjust foreclosing of possibilities for their targets to experience themselves as multiplicitous subjects, which I characterise as *existential* violence. To explore this, I identified three particular species of existential harm – *denial, homogenisation*, and *inferiorisation* – and how microaggressions achieve these effects through the use of examples. To support this analysis, I then offered a phenomenology of microaggressions to further demonstrate how microaggressions contribute to existential violence and capture the distinctly 'existential' nature of such violence. Analysing microaggressions through a phenomenological lens offered a powerful insight into the ways they diminish the subjectivities of marginalised people, be that through experiencing oneself as an 'object' or by undergoing 'derivatization'. The consequence of these phenomenological experiences is an 'inhibited intentionality' whereby marginalised subjects are less able to navigate the world without discomfort in

order to engage in identity-forming and identity-fulfilling projects. This analysis therefore positions microaggressions as a pernicious tool through which oppression subtly operates, having deleterious phenomenological impacts on marginalised subjects.

CHAPTER 3

# Master Thyself, Killjoy

*Anger and Resilience in Microaggression Discourse*

## Introduction

In the previous chapters we have seen how microaggressions form an oppressive social practice which enact various types of harm and violence upon marginalised people, giving us plenty of reasons to take microaggressions seriously. Following this, I want to begin to think about the different ways we might respond to microaggressions when they occur. According to Regina Rini (2018), there are two main views within the literature – either get angry, or grow 'thicker skin' – and this chapter will centre on the debate between these two positions before arguing for an alternative way of responding in the chapter that follows. Whilst the 'thicker skin' view is mainly espoused by microaggression sceptics, there appear to be few actual proponents of the view that we should respond to microaggressions with anger. This is primarily because anger is seen as either inappropriate, because microaggressors are not blameworthy, or as 'counterproductive' to achieving our anti-oppressive goals (Friedlaender, 2018; Rini, 2020b). My main interest in this chapter shall be the second of these claims, that anger can be 'counterproductive', which I aim to problematise by exposing how it uncritically buys into logics of oppression that we ought to resist.

To show this, I begin by surveying the two main positions, highlighting the arguments given for and against both. Folding this into my critique, I illuminate the ways in which the call for thicker skin operates as a tool of neoliberal governmentality that redirects responsibility onto marginalised people for how they respond emotionally. As part of this, I build on Julietta Singh's (2017) analysis of how logics of mastery operate in ways which may seem harmless, but are actually pernicious. To do this, I show how 'resilience' discourse disguises a call for 'self-mastery' which is existentially violent. Given that we want to resist these logics, I claim that Rini's (2020b) recommendation that we 'skilfully' tailor our emotions away from anger in order to achieve the best outcome is misguided.

This is because it reproduces a particular narrative of what can and cannot be 'productive' and reinforces emotional regulation as a tool of disciplinary control. If complaining, no matter how calmly, is sufficient for marginalised people to be labelled as 'killjoys' (Ahmed, 2023), then we have little reason to think that stifling our anger will actually achieve 'productive' ends. Thus, my analysis serves as a warning against buying into the counterproductivity critique of anger, revealing how it reinforces a double bind within which the marginalised subject must either 'master thyself', whilst seldom being afford the tools to do so, or continue to be mastered.

## 3.1 Grow Thicker Skin…

According to Regina Rini (2018) there are two 'monolithic' views surrounding the question 'how should we respond to microaggressions?' – either we should ignore the offense and grow '*thicker skin*', or get *righteously angry*. Throughout her paper, Rini correctly points out that both these views run into various challenges if we fail to consider the context of individual microaggressions or too forcefully prescribe either one as the only legitimate response. That said, it is notable how Rini swiftly dismisses the thicker skin prescription due to its failure to appreciate the systematic nature of microaggressions (2018, p. 336), yet is more cautious with her critique of anger for fear of implying that it is something that marginalised people should control (2018, p. 340). Therefore, I want to begin this chapter by addressing the claims made in support of both views, and the challenges that Rini raises against them, before showing how the arguments which Rini makes against the effectiveness of anger risk sliding into the same oppressive logics that underpin the thicker skin prescription.

Starting with the suggestion that marginalised people brush off the offense and grow thicker skin, Rini notes that this view is popular amongst so-called 'cultural conservatives' (2018, p. 333) who are sceptical about the seriousness of microaggressions and the increasingly widespread use of the term. I introduced some of the arguments shared by these microaggression sceptics in the first chapter, which I shall reiterate and expand upon in relation to their critique of anger. To begin, Rini notably

points to an article by psychologists Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt titled 'The Coddling of the American Mind', who in their discussion of microaggressions ask:

> What are we doing to our students if we encourage them to develop extra-thin skin in the years just before they leave the cocoon of adult protection and enter the workforce? Would they not be better prepared to flourish if we taught them to question their own emotional reactions, and to give people the benefit of the doubt? (2015).

Lukianoff and Haidt express concern over the widespread usage of the term 'microaggressions' on campus as it involves teaching students to see offense in 'small or accidental slights' (2015). By encouraging young people to grow 'thinner' rather than 'thicker' skin,[35] they are becoming ill-prepared for the stressors of life beyond university. As psychologists, their concern is that this encourages young people to engage in a maladaptive practice that might be psychologically detrimental. They stress that this contravenes the wisdom of sayings such as 'prepare the child for the road, not the road for the child' (2018, p. 23). Instead, taking microaggressions seriously on campus involves coddling students such that they do not develop the thicker skin required for healthy psychological functioning as one navigates various life challenges.

This claim is expanded upon by the two psychologists in a later book of the same name, within which they develop their criticisms of taking microaggressions seriously, arguing that the concept encourages us to allow our emotions to 'guide [our] interpretation of reality' (2018, p. 38). In the case of microaggressions, they see emotional reasoning as a 'cognitive distortion' that encourages people to perceive small slights as 'aggressions' against them (2018, p. 35). Lukianoff and Haidt claim that this presents two major problems. As I noted in Chapter 1, the first of these is that seeing these small slights as aggressions is misguided because 'aggression' is defined within the psychological literature as something done *intentionally*, yet Sue's popular characterisation of microaggressions recognises that they are usually unintentional (Lukianoff & Haidt,

[35] One potential argument here is that there is a rhetorical difference between Lukianoff and Haidt claiming that we should stop encouraging students to have 'thin' skin, and the sceptics prescribing 'thicker skin'. However, as I expand upon later, I do think their argument ultimately promotes the thicker skin view.

2018, p. 40; see Sue et al., 2007). The second issue is that by labelling these small slights as 'microaggressive', people are therefore encouraged to 'assume the worst about people' (2018, p. 41). Rather than opt for a charitable interpretation where we can acknowledge that someone did not intend to be offensive, microaggression discourse teaches people to 'see *more* aggression in ambiguous interactions, take *more* offense, [and] feel *more* negative emotions' (2018, p. 42, emphasis in original).

The problems that Lukianoff and Haidt find with taking microaggressions seriously therefore appear to be underpinned by a concern for the psychological wellbeing of students. However, this denouncement of emotional reasoning also serves other purposes which are less well telegraphed. For example, elsewhere Haidt (2016) supports the claim that the misapplication of the term 'aggression' is an example of 'concept creep'. Recall that this occurs when concepts relating to harm begin to adopt ever expansive meanings, thus diluting their original descriptive utility (see Haslam, 2016). Haidt suggests that this concept creep serves a 'liberal social agenda' which defines 'new kinds of experience as harmful and new classes of people as harmed' (2016, p. 40). Sidelining the fact that marginalised people have always been harmed by the various intersecting tools of oppression, this indicates a broader concern regarding a moral shift from 'intent' to 'impact' (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018, p. 42). Their worry is that it is now sufficient to simply claim offense for someone to be labelled an 'aggressor', rather than requiring any ill-intent on the so-called 'aggressor's' behalf.

As we can see then, their concerns about a perceived moral shift in how we handle offense moves beyond the initial worry that routinely seeing offense is detrimental to students' psychological wellbeing. It now becomes a broader socio-political critique of the microaggression concept. I previously noted how some sceptics have argued that taking microaggression seriously is a way of claiming 'victimhood'. More specifically, sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning (2014) argue that this increasing sensitivity to smaller slights, such as microaggressions, indicates a shift towards a moral culture of *victimhood*. To highlight this shift, they contrast this contemporary culture with two previous moral cultures of *honour* and *dignity*. In a culture of honour, it was considered a moral failing to not defend one's reputation through physical bravery such as duels (2014, p. 712). This was then supplanted by a culture of dignity, facilitated by a

growth in law and order, where it became commendable to have thick skin and to seek out third party resolutions to more 'intolerant conflicts', such as through the police and courts (2014, pp. 713–714). Their claim is that the increasing usage of the term 'microaggressions' represents an overreliance on third parties, not to resolve such conflicts, but to attract sympathy by painting oneself as a victim (2014, p. 707).

Here, the broader critique frames this sympathy and victimhood as a sort of political capital that only certain people may invest in. In an ironic twist on the hierarchical logics of oppression which homogenise and inferiorise social groups, this frames marginalised people as totalising themselves as 'victims' whilst the dominantly situated become oppositionally defined as 'perpetrators'. As such, the sceptics' critique tries to 'up the political stakes' for behaviours which notably fail to meet any *legal* threshold to be considered discriminatory. The argument that labelling things as 'microaggressive' is a way to claim victimhood suggests that well-meaning people are now encouraged to 'walk on eggshells' around marginalised people for fear of being labelled something so morally reprehensible. This culminates in the sceptics' concern regarding free speech, and how a 'chilling effect' may be produced within institutions where the microaggression concept is taken seriously as people police their own expression to avoid coming under seemingly undeserved scrutiny (Cantu & Jussim, 2022, p. 258; also see T. Young, 2021).

By expanding upon the sceptics' claims introduced earlier in the thesis, what I am trying to show here is that their original worry that being guided by one's emotions in response to small slights is a maladaptive response which can be detrimental to our psychological wellbeing is more intricately enmeshed within a broader socio-political critique. As Rini argues, the thicker skin prescription frames microaggressions as 'mere accidental insults' (2018, p. 337) that might cause offense but can be easily brushed off. She addresses two key problems with this view. First, she claims that it ignores the systematicity of microaggressions as an oppressive social practice that wears down marginalised people through repeated exposure (2018, p. 336). Instead of recognising the cumulative impact of microaggressions, it takes a myopic view of microaggressions as individual instances of well-meaning people's *faux pas*. This is notable as it indicates a worldview that fails to recognise how interpersonal acts can be linked to broader systemic issues (Syed, 2021). Of course, it might be pragmatic for someone to brush off microaggressions as a form of

psychological defence, but to argue that growing thicker skin is the appropriate response does nothing to challenge the oppressive status quo.

Although I broadly agree with Rini's claims here, there is a potential that it misses some of the nuance in the sceptical view. By this, I mean to suggest that the thicker skin prescription may not be a unified view but rather consist of two different positions. On the first, sceptics might accept that microaggressions do actually involve small harms but believe that it is better for our psychological wellbeing to grow thicker skin rather than make a big deal out of them. This position is susceptible to Rini's argument about ignoring the systematicity of microaggressions as it imagines the impact on the recipient's psychological wellbeing to be exacerbated by taking the individual microaggressions too seriously, as opposed to acknowledging how these small harms accumulate into much larger ones. On the second position, the sceptic might hold that the harms of microaggressions are in fact a product of their recipients having 'thin' skin. When someone experiences microaggressions then, the reason why they have negative psychological impacts is because the recipient is unable to deal with the small slight, rather than the microaggressions themselves being harmful. The difference in the two positions depends on whether one believes the harms of microaggressions stem from the interactions themselves, and their accumulation, or how one interprets them. On this second view, however, there seems to be no failure to appreciate the systematicity of microaggressions as it denies that microaggressions are themselves harmful to begin with.

It is not immediately clear what position is endorsed by the various microaggression sceptics. Although Lukianoff and Haidt stress the importance of developing thicker skin to avoid 'fostering feelings of victimization, anger, and hopelessness' (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018, p. 46), they also appear to slide into the second position when they emphasise how emotional reasoning might distort the recipients' perception and contribute to negative psychological wellbeing. This sentiment is echoed by Scott Lilienfeld when he claims that there is insufficient evidence to show that the reported negative outcomes of microaggressions are not influenced by the recipient's personality traits, such as a tendency to experience anxiety (2017, pp. 145; 153). The problem here is that these arguments do not allow us to conclude that microaggressions cause *no harm whatsoever*,

or that it is all a product of a marginalised person seeing offense where it does not exist. Even if the sceptics do not see microaggressions as harmful, the logic they employ still fails to appreciate the systematicity of microaggressions by suggesting that they are just 'all in the head'.[36] If marginalised people see offense in well-intended behaviours, it is usually because they are able to identify the stereotypes and biases being perpetuated, and how microaggressions operate within a context of oppression. Even if Lukianoff and Haidt hold the second position, that microaggressions are only harmful because of how they are interpreted, they still fail to appreciate the systematicity of microaggressions in the sense that they deny any objective reality to the phenomena. In other words, they would simply reject that microaggressions represent an oppressive social practice at all.

The second problem that Rini raises for the thicker skin prescription is that sceptics have overemphasised the importance of the microaggressor's motives in their interpretations of microaggressions (2018, p. 337). This is related to the point made previously that the worldview of these 'cultural conservatives' is myopic – it conceptualises prejudice and discrimination as failures of one's character which are instantiated through *intentional* actions. As Moin Syed states with regards to racial microaggressions, for these sceptics the problem is that 'the logic of microaggressions assumes a racist society' (2021, pp. 926–928), an assumption that tends to be well-accepted by proponents of microaggression research but is challenged by sceptics. From a critical perspective, microaggressions function as a social practice which enacts and reinforces white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism, and so on. This assertion becomes a bitter pill to swallow for those well-meaning individuals who may at times unwittingly engage in such a practice. If, on the sceptics' view, engaging in interpersonal oppression is necessarily intentional and therefore a sign of moral deficiency, then their concern is that the critical view *unfairly* confers negative labels to people who lack any discriminatory intentions.

By emphasising the importance of intent above impact, sceptics encourage an overly individualistic focus towards microaggressions that diverts attention away from the systemic nature of oppression and places responsibility onto marginalised people for

[36] Interestingly, this is something that Lilienfeld himself refutes (2020, p. 28), seemingly agreeing that they objectively occur within a context of oppression (Williams, 2020).

how they interpret and respond to microaggressions. This shifting of attention centres the microaggressor rather than marginalised people and the harms they endure, and makes questions such as 'was that *really* a microaggression?' or 'are microaggressions *really* that harmful?' more prominent than 'how should we respond to microaggressions?'. Ultimately, the thicker skin view fails to properly engage with this last question, operating as a proverbial 'keep quiet, and carry on'. As such, this view works to shut down any potentially remedial responses by favouring a stoic attitude that uncritically acquiesces to the oppressive nature of microaggressions.

## 3.2 Get Angry!

The other main view for how we should respond to microaggressions, according to Rini, is that we should get righteously angry. In the context of oppression, we have many reasons to be angry towards the unjust treatment of marginalised people, and various Black and feminist theorists have valorised anger as an important anti-oppressive emotion. For example, Alison Jaggar describes anger as an 'outlaw emotion' that, whilst considered unpalatable by the dominant norms and values of society, brings to light the 'gut-level' awareness of social injustice that marginalised people have in virtue of their lived experiences (1989, pp. 166–167). Similarly, Céline Leboeuf highlights this consciousness-raising power of anger, and argues that expressing anger enables marginalised groups to reaffirm their standing under oppressive conditions (2018, p. 24). As a communicative tool then, anger makes a claim to self-respect (Frye, 1983), it protests against mistreatment (Hirji, 2022), and can help others acknowledge previously overlooked injustices (Lepoutre, 2018). Thus, when considering how to respond to microaggressions, anger presents a powerful tool for bringing to light and protesting the content of those hidden messages that lurk behind microaggressive behaviours.

That being said, anger need not always be communicative to the microaggressor, nor make such demands for respect in order to be valuable. In certain oppressive contexts where moral ignorance is the norm, which may frequently be the case with microaggressions (see Friedlaender, 2018), it is likely that such claims will be

unintelligible to the wrongdoer. We see this when one's anger at a microaggression is met with defensiveness, rather than a willingness to engage with what the anger is trying to communicate. Provoking defensiveness can be a common worry when it comes to responding to microaggressions, and contributes to the catch-22 the recipient experiences when they must decide between speaking out and risking hostility from the microaggressor, or keeping quiet and bottling up their emotions (Sue et al., 2007, p. 279). In these cases, Maria Lugones argues that anger can still be useful as a way of raging against the 'world of sense' (2003, pp. 110–111) which makes understanding why microaggressions are harmful and offensive so incomprehensible for those who are dominantly situated. This sort of anger does not intend to be intelligible for the microaggressor but rather acts as a form of self-preservation by refusing to accept the world as it is.

Sukaina Hirji builds on Lugones' work by suggesting that 'outrage anger', a rage directed towards the 'state of affairs or the hermeneutical space that makes that offense unintelligible' (2022, p. 9), is also valuable in its ability to create solidarity amongst victims of abuse who recognise such offense and anger (2022, p. 13). In the case of microaggressions, this anger would not necessarily be directed at the microaggressor, but rather the fact that microaggressions place their recipients within a double bind. It therefore aims to generate solidarity amongst those who recognise the microaggression for what it is and appreciate the difficulties that such a bind brings. Audre Lorde similarly highlights how anger can help to build coalitions as it signals one's political commitments to others and can help clarify who one's allies are in the battle against systems of oppression (2017, p. 111). Like outrage anger, this type of anti-oppressive anger, which Myisha Cherry (2021) calls 'Lourdean rage', is not intended to act as a punishment in response to a person's previous wrongdoings. Instead, it is forward-looking, motivated by a desire to encourage them to change their behaviour in the future, as well as change the oppressive attitudes and policies which enable such behaviours (2021, p. 24). Thus, fuelled by outrage and a desire for change, these forms of anger may prove useful tools for responding to microaggressions in the sense that they decry the context that makes microaggressions so ambiguous and microaggressors so unaware that they are enacting them.

Nevertheless, despite the liberatory potential of these forms of anger, the view that we should respond to microaggressions with anger faces pushback in various directions. Most notably, it is argued that anger is not always appropriate or particularly effective in achieving its aims. The argument that anger can be an inappropriate response to microaggressions is put forward by both Rini (2020b) and Christina Friedlaender (2018), who analyse how on the classic account of moral responsibility the typical microaggressor would not be taken to be blameworthy. In short, both make arguments that generalise into two main problems for assigning blameworthiness to the microaggressor. The first of these is what I refer to as the *problem of moral ignorance*, which stems from the fact that microaggressors are often unaware that their behaviours are oppressive and therefore fail to meet any epistemic conditions for blameworthiness. For example, when someone asks a woman 'why don't you have any kids yet?', they may not realise that this reinforces patriarchal expectations about a woman's role in society, and the idea that to be a 'woman' means to be a 'mother'. Generally speaking, for a microaggressor to be morally ignorant, we are interested in whether they are aware that their action is wrongful[37] (i.e. subtly oppressive), and if not, whether they are in some way responsible for this ignorance (see Zimmerman, 1997; Rosen, 2003; Levy, 2009).

Whilst we can imagine that the microaggressor in this case is not aware why their question was harmful, we might still think they *should* be aware of how such questions can place unfair expectations on women and can be offensive to those who face challenges with fertility. This suggests that a microaggressor's ignorance can take on various forms which do not always fully excuse them from blameworthiness. For example, ignorance can be 'affected' when people choose 'not to be informed of what we can and should know' (Moody-Adams, 1994, p. 301), or it can be 'practical' (Code, 2007) and 'motivated' (Harman, 2011) when people remain ignorant of things that would otherwise make them feel uncomfortable. In such cases, microaggressors may deserve blame on account of their epistemic negligence. David Schraub explores an example of this involving an ESPN

[37] Note that this view is contested by some who argue that the relevant awareness required to satisfy the epistemic condition is awareness of the *wrong-making features* of one's behaviour (Harman, 2011; Talbert, 2013; Mason, 2015). Therefore, even if they do not recognise their behaviour as microaggressive, they might still recognise that a question like 'why don't you have any kids yet?' is wrong because it communicates an expectation that she *should* have children.

article where the headline writer describes an Asian American basketball player as a 'Chink in the Armor' after a particular poor performance in a match. Whilst this headline may not have been intended to cause offense, and may have been influenced by unconscious biases, given the journalist's responsibility to uphold certain standards we might reasonably think they should have known better, and that they are blameworthy for having acted thoughtlessly (2023, pp. 4–6). Even if microaggressions are unintentional, and the microaggressor seemingly unaware that their behaviour is wrongful, the genesis of their moral ignorance is still an important factor to attend to.

That being said, understanding why individuals are morally ignorant can be difficult to achieve in practice. To claim that someone is still blameworthy for enacting a microaggression because they acted negligently assumes that the microaggressor *should* have known better. But in many respects, a microaggressor's moral ignorance will be a product of their socialisation, resulting in cases where the microaggressor *could not* have known better. In this sense, we also need to think of how ignorance can be 'structural' (Alcoff, 2007, p. 39) when it is 'maintained by social and institutional structures and mechanisms' (Kassar, 2018, p. 302). When this sort of moral ignorance is the norm, microaggressors are likely to lack the motivation to inform themselves and reflect on their behaviour without any external influence to raise their awareness of wrongdoing. Of course, this ignorance is still kept in place because people are not informed about things they ought to be, but this ignorance is not necessarily wilful. As such, in contexts where moral ignorance is widespread, we need to be considerate of the sort of external influences we bring in to educate the wrongdoer. Responding with anger might just provoke defensiveness as, from the microaggressor's perspective, 'they are not being introduced to new moral knowledge; rather, they are being unjustifiably reprimanded for morally acceptable behaviour' (Friedlaender, 2018, p. 13).

Given the context of oppression that microaggressions occur in, the influence of these structural constraints can be taken to exculpate unwitting microaggressors from blame. Nevertheless, Rini (2020b, pp. 128; 146) and Friedlaender (2018, p. 13) still agree that letting microaggressions go unchecked risks condoning such behaviours and allowing ignorance to fester. Therefore, they both make separate arguments to the same effect, showing how the microaggressor's wrongdoing generates a 'forward-looking'

responsibility to reduce the likelihood that they will engage in similar behaviour in the future, through self-education, critical self-reflection, and the reduction of implicit biases (Friedlaender, 2018, p. 18; Rini, 2020b, p. 147). To communicate to microaggressors the various reasons they have for taking on this responsibility, they evoke Cheshire Calhoun's (1989) argument in favour of 'reproach' as a response to wrongdoing in cases where moral ignorance is the norm. In short, Calhoun claims that reproach is a vital tool for educating wrongdoers, motivating them to change their behaviours, and affirming the wronged's moral agency (1989, p. 405). Thus, whilst blame might not be fitting, it can nonetheless be morally justified for its corrective effect on the microaggressor.

Rini argues that we should therefore reproach microaggressors through what she calls 'proleptic blame', characterised as a 'carrot, not a stick' (2020b, p. 147). Rather than punishing the microaggressor, it encourages them to listen to the moral criticism and respond receptively to it in order to improve in our moral estimations. When considering what proleptic blame looks like, Rini claims that we should try to avoid anger because it risks 'collapsing into shaming and punishment' (2020b, p. 220). Instead, she believes that 'calling-in' microaggressors, by calmly taking them aside, is 'more likely to communicate the respect and moral help intended by proleptic blame' (2020b, p. 220). Although Rini's suggestions seem sensible, it strikes me that her characterisation of proleptic blame is congruent with the forms of non-punitive anger I surveyed earlier, such as Lourdean rage, which are intended to motivate the wrongdoer to change their behaviours. This exposes a tension between those positive accounts of anti-oppressive anger, and the belief that no matter how well motivated our anger is, it runs the risk of being registered as a 'stick' that punishes and makes a damning assessment of the wrongdoer's character. Rini's thought process is that if we want to educate the microaggressor and motivate them to improve their behaviour, then anger may be less effective since it places the microaggressors on the defensive[38] (2020b, p. 187).

[38] Whilst there is a risk of provoking defensiveness, we should also remind ourselves that this does not always transpire in reality, and there might be many cases where a microaggressor recognises their error and apologises.

Here, we begin to see how questions regarding the appropriateness of anger can begin to slide into questions about the effectiveness of anger in achieving its aims. This is exacerbated by the second problem raised for assigning blameworthiness to microaggressors, which I label the *problem of cumulative harm*. The harms correlated with microaggressions are understood to be the cumulative impact of repeated exposure to microaggressions rather than just their individual impacts. As such, it seems inappropriate to blame individual microaggressors because the harm experienced by the recipient does not 'counterfactually depen[d]' on any individual action in isolation (Rini, 2020b, p. 89). If a woman who does not have children is constantly worn down by questions about when she is going to have kids, we cannot identify any particular microaggressive instance that, in isolation, explains her overall psychological torment. Furthermore, microaggressions have a 'compounding' effect on their targets whereby repeated exposure can make the target reconsider previous encounters, and in light of this come to experience each instance as more harmful overall. This makes it difficult to assess the specific impact of any individual microaggression, and thus the appropriate amount of blame we should direct towards individual microaggressors (Friedlaender, 2018, pp. 14–15). Consequently, anger might be seen as a disproportionate response by individual microaggressors who do not see the cumulative impact (2018, p. 16), explaining why anger can provoke defensiveness, especially amongst unwitting microaggressors.

Nevertheless, whilst individual microaggressors are not responsible for the cumulative effects experienced by marginalised people, we might think that certain microaggressions can still be harmful in their individual instances. For example, Saba Fatima discusses how Black people who are admitted to world-leading universities are often told, 'it must have been easy for you to get in', implicitly referring to affirmative action quotas and policies. Here, they might experience an epistemic harm whereby the microaggression weakens the target's epistemic certainty about their own experiences and undoes knowledge claims such as 'I am the crème de la crème' by diminishing their achievements (2020, pp. 166–167). Furthermore, microaggressions which involve 'tone policing', such as those which pedal the stereotype of the 'angry Black woman', can directly cause emotional harms as they 'block the possible moral and practical effects of emotional expressions' (Freeman & Stewart, 2021, p. 1018). In these cases, undermining

someone's academic achievements or the legitimacy of how one feels seem fitting candidates for anger independent of how they fit into a broader pattern of oppressive behaviours.

One problem with this response, however, is that if microaggressors are often morally ignorant and do not intend to cause offense, then regardless of whether one's anger is fitting or justified, it is still likely to be perceived as the marginalised person making mountains out of molehills. Given stereotypes such as the 'angry Black woman', or other controlling images of women as 'shrill' and 'hysterical', Rini suggests that attempting to respond to microaggressions with anger may be a tactical mistake as it is likely to just reaffirm these stereotypes (2018, pp. 339–340). Moreover, if microaggressors are constantly responded to with anger that they see as unjustified and disproportionate, then this anger might have the adverse effect of contributing towards a 'polarization cycle' (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018, pp. 132–140). Angrily calling-out microaggressors may reinforce feelings of animosity towards marginalised groups, and the stereotyping of these groups as 'angry' and 'hysterical' may simply reciprocate such animosity.

There is also reason to think that routinely getting angry is not healthy for us. For example, empirical studies have shown that 'excessive' anger is correlated with negative health outcomes such as increased levels of psychological stress and a heightened risk of cardiovascular problems (T. W. Smith et al., 2004). If microaggressions are a routine occurrence in the lives of marginalised people, then it may be more beneficial to steer away from suggesting anger as a response, especially if other emotional responses can achieve similar results. This point is reiterated by Martha Nussbaum, who in believing that anger is a destructive emotion, points towards revolutionary figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi as examples of how social and political change can be achieved through peaceful and nonviolent means (2016, p. 212).

These arguments present various reasons for thinking that responding to microaggressions with anger can be '*counterproductive*' in its anti-oppressive aims,

prompting Rini to argue that whenever possible[39] we should 'calibrate' our response to 'ensure maximal efficacy' (2018, p. 340). The question of anger's value in response to this counterproductivity critique has been long debated and often features as a key consideration for pro-anger theorists. For example, Cherry encourages us to manage our Lourdean rage in ways that keep it 'appropriate, motivational, *productive*, and resistant' (2021, p. 139, my emphasis). The claim here is not that anger should be avoided on the charge of it being 'counterproductive',[40] but that our response should be carefully considered as to the impact it will have on the microaggressor, oneself, and any bystanders. Alternatively, Amia Srinivasan challenges the idea that the counterproductivity critique gives us reason not to get angry as the critics of anger have failed to show why these 'reasons of prudence trump reasons of aptness' (2018, p. 127). Anger can still be 'apt', even if considered 'counterproductive', when it 'responds to a genuine moral violation' and is 'motivated by the right kind of reason' (2018, p. 130). Since microaggressions are a subtly oppressive social practice, getting angry is often going to be apt regardless of whether the microaggressor is morally ignorant or not.

Though Rini is careful in how she formulates her criticisms of anger, I think she makes an error in latching onto the counterproductivity critique to underpin her claims. First of all, many of the arguments for anger being 'counterproductive' fail to appreciate the ways in which it can be valuable beyond just getting the microaggressor to recognise that they have caused harm. I mentioned previously that anger has value in its ability to reveal who one's allies are, so rather than seeing anger's ability to provoke defensiveness as 'counterproductive' to our anti-oppressive aims, we might instead see this as beneficial to highlighting who is more receptive to trying to understand why microaggressions are problematic and who will require more energy to educate. A defensive microaggressor is not someone we can readily work with. [41] My second issue with the counterproductivity

[39] It is worth noting that Rini is not necessarily arguing that we should always control anger, as sometimes this is not possible, but that the counterproductivity critique nonetheless gives us prudential reasons to avoid anger to best serve our anti-oppressive aims (2018, p. 340).

[40] I have chosen to place terms such as 'counterproductive', 'negative', 'deviant', and so on in scare quotes to indicate that these descriptions are contested.

[41] How someone responds to our anti-oppressive anger may even suggest that they are beyond attempts to educate them and instead need to be resolutely contested in their oppressive beliefs and actions.

critique is that Nussbaum's claim about anger being a 'false guide' for achieving social justice (2016, p. 212) paints an oversimplified and naïve picture of how social and political change is often secured. Even if they were able to transition to more peaceful forms of resistance, King Jr. and Gandhi were nonetheless fuelled by their anger towards the injustice they experienced (Cherry, 2021, p. 6). Moreover, peaceful acts of resistance are often only so effective because they are counterbalanced by the threat of the angry resistance of others, such as Malcolm X's declaration that Black Americans defend themselves against racism through any means necessary (Srinivasan, 2018, p. 127). If other ways of responding to injustice appear more 'productive' because they are more palatable, then we need to recognise how the threat of anger influences this perception.

To summarise the debate raised by Rini, I want to reiterate that I agree with her challenges to the thicker skin argument and can see sense in the tactical reasons she offers for reconsidering anger. However, I find the way she buys into the counterproductivity critique puzzling given the anti-oppressive aims she seeks to achieve. In response to this, my aim in the last part of this chapter is to problematise Rini's engagement with the discourse of the counterproductivity critique by exposing how it operates through similarly oppressive logics to the thicker skin view she otherwise disposes of. To show this, I will begin by building on Rini's analysis of the thicker skin view to show how it shifts responsibility away from the microaggressor, and onto marginalised people for how they manage their emotions, distorting the intelligibility of their emotional responses. The counterproductivity critique then bolsters these effects by supporting the claim that we should manage our emotions and avoid anger because it is destructive, rather than something with any 'productive' value. At the core of my analysis, I problematise this discourse by highlighting how it is underpinned by a logic of mastery and promotes a neoliberal sensibility which exerts disciplinary control over the oppressed.

## 3.3 A Masterful Trap

Returning to the thicker skin view, many of the arguments made by the microaggression sceptics concern how marginalised people are making uncharitable interpretations and

claiming victimhood. However, these arguments are presented with a veneer of concern for the psychological wellbeing of those who experience microaggressions. Namely, they promote 'resilience' as a key ability that marginalised people should foster in order to shield against the perceived harms of microaggressions. Whilst there is no consensus over an operational definition of resilience, it can be broadly understood as involving positive psychological adaptations in the face of adversity (Herrman et al., 2011; Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2014; Graber et al., 2015), and is considered an important mechanism for mitigating against maladaptive coping responses which can result in anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Wu et al., 2013). Therefore, the implicit worry shared by microaggression sceptics is that by taking microaggressions seriously, we begin to undermine important norms surrounding resilience, and instead 'promote pathological sensitivity and undermine the development of coping skills' (Schroer, 2023, pp. 341–342). Furthermore, sceptics seem to insinuate that even labelling something a 'microaggression' is evidence of a maladaptive response to the interaction. By failing to be resilient, the recipient displays a poor ability to cope with what appear to be minor insults, supporting a broader socio-political critique that marginalised people are finding offense in 'increasingly mild and subtle' behaviours (Haslam, 2016, p. 10).

One issue here is that this framing conveniently shifts the focus away from investigating what sort of 'adversity' marginalised people are responding to – that is, experiences of interpersonal and structural oppression – instead centring the individual and how they *adapt* to that adversity (oppression). Even more worrying is that by promoting resilience as the proper response to microaggressions, it can achieve this ideological shift under the guise of promoting a seemingly positive psychological trait. It labels the behaviours of those who improperly cope in such situations as maladaptive, without addressing how the situation itself might 'improperly' scaffold, or even actively work against, that person's ability to flourish in their environment. This individualising force of resilience discourse is not accidental, but rather a product of the contemporary neoliberal society within which it is valued.[42] Thus, it is important to illuminate how the thicker skin view is driven by a neoliberal sensibility and related discourses.

[42] Note that I do think resilience can be important in certain contexts, as it *can* help with positive psychological wellbeing. However, as I will unpack, I disagree with the heavy-handed promotion of

Various theorists have analysed the way in which resilience discourse functions as a tool of 'neoliberal governmentality', a form of self-governance in line with neoliberal values that shifts responsibility onto *individuals* for how they deal with adversity (Joseph, 2013; Schwarz, 2018; Fisher & Jones, 2023). Whilst neoliberalism is commonly understood as an 'economic rationality' (Ehrstein et al., 2020, p. 197), the concept of 'governmentality' (see Foucault, 2007) helps to explain how its influence also extends to the social realm where its guiding principles of competition, individualism, and self-reliance become rules by which we are expected to govern ourselves. In other words, the neoliberal subject, at least as an ideal type,[43] is a 'free and autonomous "atom" of self-interest' who bears total responsibility for their own success (Hamann, 2009, p. 38). For example, we see this neoliberal sensibility promoted through self-help books that market the importance of 'self-esteem', 'self-efficacy', and 'positive thinking' as tools for success which all involve working on improving oneself (Neocleous, 2013, p. 5; also see Herrman et al., 2011; Schwarz, 2018). One issue with this, however, is that for those whose self-esteem has been eroded by the relentless onslaught of oppression, the logics of neoliberalism moralise this as a failure for those individuals to be resilient. If one were simply more 'thick skinned' in the face of oppression, they would be less impacted by it. This not only occludes the structural injustices which degrade marginalised subjects and constrain their agency, but actively silences any structural critiques (Chowdhury, 2022, p. 208).

Shifting the analysis towards the *affective* governmentality of neoliberalism, Sara Ahmed refers to the increase in popularity of self-help discourse as the 'happiness turn', whereby 'happiness' has become a form of capital we ought to accumulate (Ahmed, 2010, p. 3). In this context, resilience and happiness are complementary 'goods' – *happy* subjects are *resilient* subjects and vice versa. It is no surprise then that both concepts are used as metrics against which to measure the progress and performance of nation states (Ahmed, 2010, p. 3; Neocleous, 2013). If happiness is a key indicator of performance, then 'negative' affects such as anger serve as evidence of poor performance. If neoliberal

resilience as an antidote to adversity in general, given the sorts of psychological torment faced by marginalised subjects under conditions of oppression.

[43] The caveat I am drawing here is that whilst people might lean into the mentality of being 'self-made' and 'self-sufficient', they likely do not hold such a strong view of the neoliberal subject as framed.

subjects must take personal responsibility for developing the right dispositions towards happiness, then this is why anger in the face of adversity is considered a maladaptive response. Given this, neoliberal governmentality has been described as generating 'feeling rules' which shape 'what and how people are enabled to *feel*' and 'how their emotional states should be displayed' (Ehrstein et al., 2020, pp. 199–200, emphasis in original). If 'good lives, within neoliberalism, are defined as *happy* lives' (Chowdhury, 2022, p. 207, my emphasis), then getting angry at a microaggression transgresses the golden feeling rule of positive thinking that all good neoliberal subjects must live by.

Neoliberal rationality casts out these 'negative' emotions as displays of weakness which contravene the main goal of optimising personal value (Vassallo, 2020, pp. 5–7). This renders anger antithetical, or '*counterproductive*', to the neoliberal project. Following this, I think we need to be critical of how the positive façade of resilience, and how it is implicitly celebrated in the thicker skin view, actively works to quell various forms of resistance. It does this by reducing the intelligibility of anger as a legitimate critique of or protest against an oppressive social practice, distorting it so that it serves as evidence of a deficiency in one's character. Whilst it is clearly not Rini's aim to criticise anger from this standpoint, her critiques nonetheless exist against a neoliberal backdrop that needs to be considered. If Rini is to reject how the sceptics promote resilience as a response to microaggressions because it entrenches an oppressive status quo, then I think it is prudent to avoid uncritically placing value in the 'productivity' of our emotional responses, especially without unpacking the metric through which 'productivity' is determined. Ultimately, I take issue with how Rini's analysis of anger is underpinned by similar logics to those she means to reject.

Rather than argue that anger can be 'productive' in other ways, as might be suggested through the claims that anger can protest mistreatment and build coalitions, I instead want to show that what makes this excessive focus on anger's 'productivity' inappropriate is that is undergirded by an oppressive logic of *mastery*. Such a logic is explored by Julietta Singh in her book, *Unthinking Mastery*, where she argues that:

> [T]here is an intimate link between the mastery enacted through colonization and other forms of mastery that we often believe today to be harmless, worthwhile, even virtuous (2017, p. 9).

To explain this, Singh characterises mastery as a violent process which involves the *splitting, subordination*, and *essentialisation* of the object being mastered. To master something or someone is to carve a boundary between oneself and the object of mastery, and place oneself in a hierarchical relation to it, which over time comes to be recognised as an essential relation (2017, pp. 12–14). The colonial practice of slavery is well explained on this picture. It involves an ontological splitting of master from slave, the subordination of the colonised person, and an attempt to essentialise this relation through sociopolitical means. In this way, mastery also involves a 'rupturing of the object to be mastered', such that the mastered object becomes 'estranged' from its 'previous state of being' (2017, p. 10). We can see this in cases where a researcher exhibits masterful tendencies when engaging with texts, attempting to amass information rather than engaging with an openness to interpretation and to being transformed by the works they encounter. Instead, they extract knowledge from a text, applying it within alternative contexts without sufficient appreciation of how, why, and from where such knowledge was produced.

Whilst Singh's book primarily discusses examples of how the logics of mastery operate within a (de)colonial context, she also notes the Foucauldian insight of how the practice of mastery has shifted 'from overcoming an opponent or adversary toward skilful management of the self' (2017, p. 11). In the context of the counterproductivity critique of anger then, I want to build upon this to show how the promotion of 'resilience' under neoliberal governmentality represents a pernicious form of 'self-mastery' that we ought to resist. With this, it is important to note that although Singh problematises various masterful tendencies, her claim is not simply reducible to 'avoid all mastery'. Instead, we can read Singh as encouraging us to engage in a constant process of attentiveness to the violence enacted through masterful practices, and our investment in them. It is this attentiveness that I want to bring to Rini's analysis of anger. At a glance, we are told that we should try to avoid anger for fear that it may be 'counterproductive', and 'skilfully' manage our emotional response for some 'productive' ends. In being prompted to engage

in this emotional regulation within the context of resisting oppression, I am exposing how this is driven by a call for self-mastery, in this case over our emotions, as a core neoliberal virtue. Even if Rini does not intend to, this shifts responsibility onto marginalised people for how they navigate the scenario, just as the sceptics do.

Crucially, this is achieved whilst also imagining marginalised subjects as atomised individuals, with mastery over their own self-understanding, rather than multiplicitous beings who are often homogenised through the eyes of the oppressor. With this in mind, we can begin to meld together Singh's analysis of the logics of mastery with my own analysis of existential violence from the previous chapter. Principally, one reason why mastery is a violent process is that it necessarily involves *foreclosing the possibilities* for experiencing oneself as a multiplicitous subject. We see this masterful process in George Yancy's phenomenological analyses of the White gaze, where he shows how it results in an 'existential fracture' (2016a, p. 79) for Black people who become estranged from their bodies when forced to see themselves through the eyes of White people. This estrangement is neatly captured by Du Bois, Fanon, and King Jr., who all ask variations of the same question – 'who am I?' (2016a, pp. 79–80). What Yancy shows us is that this question has already been answered, the possibility for deliberation has been foreclosed, and the enquirer comes to realise the answer – 'I am a problem' (2016a, p. 80). Given this, the logic of mastery arguably underpins the sorts of existential harms I have discussed, forming a bedrock for the various oppressive ideologies built into the fabric of society. To take microaggressions seriously is thus to recognise how such ideologies can operate unconsciously, but nonetheless masterfully, through the actions of even the well-intentioned.

If microaggressions are a tool of mastery, my warning against buying into the counterproductivity critique or any suggestion that marginalised subjects develop resilience is that it risks reaffirming those very same logics that we should be resisting. To get a better sense of how the logics of mastery operate through these critiques, it will be helpful to unpack exactly how they promote self-mastery through a call for emotional

regulation[44]. Put simply, the valorisation of resilience as an antidote to 'counterproductive' experiences and expressions of anger seems to require that we 'master' our emotions. We can read this requirement as making two different demands. On the one hand, several psychologists promote resilience as a means of regulating one's emotions so that they are appropriate in size and form based on the stimuli being responded to (Herrman et al., 2011; Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2014; Graber et al., 2015). On the other, Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) are wholly suspicious of the role that 'emotional reasoning' plays in the interpretation of microaggressions, suggesting that mastering one's emotions should involve making oneself immune to their influence altogether. Though Rini repudiates Lukianoff and Haidt's argument, I think she nonetheless aligns with the first of these demands. Her aim is to promote responding to microaggressions in the most effective way possible to achieve anti-oppressive outcomes, and since anger may be received as disproportionate or unwarranted, managing that anger seems prudent to achieving such aims.

The problem here is that Rini's call for us to be 'skilful practitioner[s] of proleptic blame' (2020b, p. 219) is a perfect example of Singh's point that the logics of mastery reveal themselves through the neoliberal virtue of 'skilful management of the self' (2017, p. 11). What looks like an innocuous call for emotional regulation in fact advocates for the severance of something that is deeply embodied and phenomenologically valuable. Ahmed shows us how emotions play an important role in how we *orient* ourselves in the world, as we tend towards or away from objects depending on how they make us feel (2010, pp. 29–32). When I am angry at someone, it is usually about something they have done which negatively affects me or others that I care about, and as part of my negative evaluation of that person I might avoid interacting with them in the future. Linking this to Singh's analysis, when we try to master our emotions, we reduce their effectiveness at orienting us in the world. I no longer trust my anger or perhaps stop becoming angry at things I used to, and so my capacity to be moved by such anger is also diminished. Yet, anger is particularly effective at orienting us towards (or away from) injustice. Srinivasan

[44] It is worth noting that although I put forward this critique, it does not mean that I believe we should *always* avoid emotional regulation, but that we should be sceptical of calls to regulate our emotions within the context of oppression.

argues that one of the reasons why anger is apt, even if counterproductive, is because it allows us to 'appreciate' injustice in ways that goes beyond merely 'knowing' that something is unjust (2018, p. 132). Being aware that something is unjust without feeling anything about it does not involve the same motivational push towards fighting injustice that anger has. As a masterful process then, this fracturing of anger is a process of 'self-maiming' (Singh, 2017, p. 10), disarming ourselves of an emotion that can powerfully orient us towards our anti-oppressive goals.

Now you might argue here that anger is simply one way of orienting us towards fighting injustice, but not necessary for it. Whilst I am willing to lend some credence to this argument, I do not think that it is the substantial claim being made by Rini. Instead, she highlights the various costs that neoliberal 'feeling rules' impose against anger – defensiveness, stereotypes, ignorance, estrangement, violence – as reasons for managing our emotions. My issue with this is that whilst Rini buys into the counterproductivity critique, she offers no critical analysis of these 'feeling rules' to begin with. There is an overwhelming sense of pragmatism in Rini's analysis which leads us into what I am calling a 'counterproductivity trap', whereby uncritically echoing the counterproductivity critique of anger simply offers a more circuitous route to upholding 'resilience' as a 'self-masterful' value in the way the sceptics promote. Exposing this logic of mastery is critical for unpacking how this discourse embellishes the catch-22 that marginalised people face when experiencing microaggressions or resisting oppression more generally. It presents us with two options: 'master thyself' or continue to be mastered. As we have seen, both options are laced with violence, but *self*-mastery disguises itself as a route to freedom that places control into the hands of the oppressed.

The irony here, of course, is that this freedom is an illusion. Marginalised people are seldom afforded the legal, social, or political tools to fully achieve it. Where is 'self-mastery' for trans people who lack the legal right to self-identify their gender without a medical diagnosis in the UK? Where is 'self-mastery' for all those people across the world who lack access to safe and legal abortion, diminishing their bodily and reproductive autonomy? Where is 'self-mastery' under the white gaze, where Black people are denied the ability to affirm their own value when constantly reminded otherwise? In each case, marginalised people lack the social power to actually achieve self-mastery against the

backdrop of oppressive ideologies which deny, homogenise, and inferiorise their experiences and identities. Now, given that I have shown why the logic of mastery is violent and should be unpicked, I want to clarify that I am not arguing that we should resist self-masterful discourse *only* because self-mastery remains out of reach for marginalised groups. Nor am I claiming that we cannot debate the positive or negative effects of anger as a response to wrongdoing more generally. Rather, I am making a more precise critique of arguments which place an excessive focus on whether anger is appropriate, with respect to the aggressor's mental states, or helpful in terms of its outcomes, specifically within the context of resisting oppression. Put differently, I think that there is something insidious about masterfully telling marginalised people who face microaggressions that they need to regulate their emotions in a particular way in response to their own oppression.

Considering how Rini might defend herself here, I think she could reiterate that although she recommends other responses to anger, she never demands that marginalised people *actually* regulate their emotions (2018, p. 340). In other words, she simply believes that anger is understandable, but often unhelpful. If microaggressors are going to find ways to delegitimise our anger, then responding in other ways whenever possible might communicate our critique more effectively to the microaggressor. One way in which angry criticism is delegitimised is through the framing of those who criticise injustice as what Ahmed (2023) calls 'killjoys'. Put plainly, a killjoy is someone who 'kills' the joy of others by complaining or refusing to play along with unjust behaviour (2023, p. 5). This might involve souring the atmosphere when you point out that something is racist, fail to laugh at a sexist joke, or are not grateful when given a compliment that has homophobic undertones. The killjoy is presented as someone who overplays their own victimhood to kill the joy of others, often turning molehills into mountains (2023, pp. 7; 11). And this sort of language notably echoes exactly the sort of sentiments we see from the microaggression sceptics. The labelling of marginalised people as killjoys is not merely a frustrated reaction to people failing to play along with oppression. It is a pernicious political strategy which seeks to silence anti-oppressive critique whilst masquerading under the promotion of 'resilience' and 'reasonableness' as positive traits. As such, whilst Rini is correct to note that anger can be delegitimised as a response to microaggressions, I take this as reason to pause and consider *why* this occurs.

This is especially important when we consider how the examples above, of drawing attention to how behaviours are oppressive, need not involve anger at all. Rini is quick to brush off anger as potentially being 'counterproductive', but it still remains that no matter how measured and reasonable one's critique is, simply complaining about oppression is often sufficient to be branded a killjoy. This contributes to the 'counterproductivity trap' that I mentioned previously. When we buy into narratives that anger is unreasonable, provokes defensiveness, reaffirms pernicious stereotypes, and so on, we accept to some degree that managing our anger is beneficial to achieving our aims without questioning how and why this narrative is sustained. Moreover, Ahmed's concept of the killjoy highlights how managing our anger does not even guarantee 'productive' outcomes. What it does achieve, however, is the promotion of masterful tendencies expected of resilient and skilful neoliberal subjects. The pursuit of liberation through self-masterful means therefore reifies the violent logics of oppression. By exposing the logic of mastery at the heart of this discourse, this analysis serves as a warning against giving too much buy-in to the 'counterproductivity' critique in the pursuit of achieving our anti-oppressive goals.

That being said, I anticipate a potential worry that the claims I have made seem too sweeping. Some level of resilience is clearly important to prevent people developing mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression or help them survive when they do. For example, if someone exhibits fear in every interaction they have, then this seems maladaptive in the sense that it is not going to be fitting for all scenarios and is going to be detrimental to that person's long-term psychological wellbeing. We might therefore think that even though emotions can *orient* us as we navigate the world, these orientations can sometimes take us in harmful directions which we would want to remedy. In these cases, I agree that emotional regulation and the development of resilience appear to be appropriate, yet my claims that resilience involves a problematic logic of mastery seems to run counter to this. Therefore, the question is how do we reconcile the idea that emotional regulation is sometimes appropriate with the critique of mastery I have put forward?

One of the main reasons why Singh draws attention to the logic of mastery is because it involves 'self-mutilation' through 'the denial of the master's own dependency on other bodies' (2017, p. 10). For example, I outlined in the previous chapter how our sense of

self is shaped through our interactions with others. As such, we need to understand what sort of dependency is being denied when the object of mastery is not some other 'body', but our own emotional states. Returning to Ahmed, if emotions orient people as they navigate the world, then we can think of emotional regulation as a 'straightening device' that corrects 'deviant' orientations (see 2006, p. 66). Since neoliberal governmentality disciplines its subjects to regulate their emotions to ensure that they remain reasonable and positive, the straightening devices in operation are those neoliberal feeling rules that encourage us to 'correct' our anger. In the context of oppression then, emotional regulation is subject to critique because it emerges as a *masterful* disposition that seeks to quash certain 'aberrant' emotions which deviate from the hegemony of happiness, where being happy involves showing no discontent with the oppressive status quo.

The issue is that in doing so, we deny the various ways in which our emotions can orient us. To avoid this, the practice of emotional regulation should remain 'vulnerable' (see Butler, 2004; Singh, 2017, pp. 21; 136–139) to the ways in which the emotions being regulated can orient us. It would involve allowing oneself to be affected and oriented by these 'negative' emotions, recognising the possibilities they bring without the masterful desire to foreclose them. If someone experiences a widespread fear in all situations, then that still tells us something important about how they are related to others and their environment. This highlights the importance of understanding psychological processes within the context of one's cultural and sociohistorical context (see Adams et al., 2019), something which is obscured by the neoliberal project that recontextualises 'negative' emotions as deficiencies in an individual's psychological character.

In resisting this neoliberal affective governmentality, I am emphasising how there is also value in feeling, attending to, and making space for our 'negative' emotions rather than avoiding or supressing them, especially in oppressive contexts. This does not mean we have to remain angry forever, as we might find that anger dissipates when we are given space to express it, or it may be transformed into other emotions in dialogue with others. It also does not guarantee that our anger will be understood by others. But whether or not the neoliberal world of sense can recognise this anger without delegitimising it, to worry that this anger may be 'counterproductive' goes against the spirit of what should fuel our anti-oppressive outlook. That world of sense is not one that we should ever

expect, or perhaps even have any desire to be intelligible within, because as I have shown, it is a world steeped in masterful existential violence. If pragmatism involves assimilation into oppressive and oppressed modes of being, then we should remain cautious. Alternatively, in the spirit of Lugones (2003), we might revel in the sort of anger that is resistant, raging, and decries the very world of sense that renders it unintelligible. It is from the seeds of this anger and its destructiveness which sprout new worlds of sense, founded on solidarity, vulnerability, and possibility.

## Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has warned against uncritically accepting the counterproductivity critique of anger, revealing how this critique is underpinned by existentially violent logics of mastery, and reinforces the disciplinary control of neoliberal governmentality. I began by outlining two main claims for how we should respond to microaggressions – get angry or grow 'thicker skin'. I then proceeded to show how the latter view relies on promoting 'resilience' as a positive psychological trait which shifts responsibility onto marginalised people for how they respond to oppression. Within this context, emotions such as anger are deemed 'negative' as they transgress neoliberal 'feeling rules' that valorise positivity. Linking this to the counterproductivity critique of anger, I showed how it also relies on similar logics by introducing Singh's analysis of mastery and the masterful tendencies that underpin calls for marginalised people to 'skilfully' manage their emotions in order to achieve 'productive' anti-oppressive outcomes. As I argued, these logics of mastery somewhat underpin the existential violence of microaggressions, and so when they are also used to promote 'self-mastery' in the form of emotional regulation, marginalised subjects are placed into a pernicious double bind – 'master thyself' or continue to be mastered. Yet both involve, in different ways, acquiescing to the oppressor. Therefore, since we are likely to be constructed as 'killjoys' for simply complaining about microaggressions, I see little reason for buying into the counterproductivity critique at the expense of making space for our anti-oppressive anger.

CHAPTER 4

# Yikes!

## *Responding to Microaggressions with Cringe*

## Introduction

Although the question of how we should respond to microaggressions is dominated by the debate between getting angry or growing thicker skin, there is scope to explore the potential for, and of, other responses. Beyond anger, or a calm response that seeks to educate the microaggressor like proleptic blame (Rini, 2020b), psychologist Kevin Nadal (2014) identifies a third group of 'passive aggressive' responses to microaggressions. These might involve making a joke, being sarcastic about the microaggressor's behaviour, or simply rolling one's eyes at a comment made to signal that you are upset or annoyed (Nadal, 2014, p. 74). In one of the only substantial philosophical analyses of such responses, Sergio Armando Gallegos-Ordorica and Javiera Perez Gomez (2023) investigate the potential of *irony* as a response to microaggressions. They suggest that as a form of humour, it can highlight that a norm has been violated, playfully disarm the microaggression, educate others, and even affirm one's subjectivity in the face of oppression (2023, pp. 7–8). Although irony comes with its own limitations, as it takes skill to gain proper uptake and is not always accessible given the power dynamics at play (2023, pp. 11–12), Gallegos-Ordorica and Perez Gomez's work opens up space for exploring other tools that marginalised people may use to disarm microaggressions. Taking inspiration from their analysis, my aim in this chapter is to argue that *cringe* also offers a fruitful addition to this category of responses.

To argue this, I begin by analysing cringe in order to put forward my own account of 'cringeworthiness', which I suggest describes behaviours that expose something about a person without them realising, where they come across differently to how they think they are portraying themselves. With this account in hand, I then explain why typical cases of microaggressions, which involve a well-intended microaggressor causing offense, can be understood as cringeworthy. I also suggest that certain cases will be better candidates

for responding with cringe, such as when we know the microaggressor's character. Having set up my analysis, I then move on to addressing the benefits and potential limitations of cringing at microaggressions. I suggest that cringe appears to be a proportionate response to microaggressions that can promote self-reflection and signal a commitment to contesting oppressive social practices, all whilst incurring minimal psychological costs. Furthermore, I claim that responding with cringe can contribute to a project of 'reclaiming' cringe from how it has been weaponised as a tool for inferiorising marginalised people. To finish, I address some potential limitations to cringe's ability to gain uptake, because it is too subtle, weak, harsh, or even demanding for the person responding. All in all, this analysis aims to further open up space for us to consider the ways in which we might resist oppression.

## 4.1 Cringe and Cringeworthiness

On a rough gloss, the term 'cringe' is used in two ways. In one sense, it is an *action*, involving an 'intense visceral reaction' (Dahl, 2018, p. 8) to an awkward or embarrassing situation. The experience of cringing can be characterised as a sort of recoiling, a 'curling in on oneself' (Plakias, 2024, p. 46) or a 'flinching "into" one's bodily midsection' (Spiegel, 2023, p. 3). Outwardly, cringing might involve grimacing, wincing, looking away, covering one's face, or saying things such as 'yikes' or 'that's so cringe'. What these two verbal indications of cringing show is that the term 'cringe' can also be used as a *description* of behaviour. In other words, we can use the term 'cringe' as a shortened form of the term 'cringeworthy', and it is this descriptive use of the term that I wish to explore in this chapter. Given the dearth of philosophical analyses of cringe, I will begin by exploring what sort of features make actions cringeworthy and offer a stipulative account of cringeworthiness. Whilst my account might not track the ordinary usage of the term, it aims to offer a helpful characterisation of cringeworthiness that can be used to unpack why microaggressions are cringeworthy. It will also develop our conceptual understanding of cringe by distinguishing three different ways in which we cringe-*with*, cringe-*for,* and cringe-*at* people.

To proceed, let us consider the following examples of people cringing:

> **Boastful Friend –** Cleo and Owen want to read more, so challenge each other to see who can read the most books in a year. At the end of the year, Owen comes across as smug when he tells Cleo that he read seventeen books. However, Cleo was able to read twenty-two and is unimpressed by Owen's boasting which she cringes at.
>
> **Voice Recording –** Levi is a climate activist who is being interviewed about his work on a popular radio station. Excited to listen back to the recording to make sure he communicated his points clearly and in an articulate manner, he is instead distracted by the sound of his own voice which makes him cringe.
>
> **Graduation –** Ace is nervous about having to get on stage at their graduation ceremony. When they are called up to collect their degree certificate, they notice how big the crowd is and awkwardly shake the official's hand. Afterwards, Ace's parents tell them how proud they are, but Ace just cringes whenever they think about being on the stage.

Analysing these examples, we can begin to see some of the important features that make behaviours cringeworthy. Starting with the *Boastful Friend*, it appears that Cleo cringes at Owen because she feels his smug attitude is misplaced given that she managed to read more books than him. As such, one reason why Owen's behaviour is cringeworthy is because he is portraying himself in a way that does not hold up in reality. He displays an excessive, yet erroneous, confidence in the belief that he has read enough to win the reading challenge. Yet, it might be the case that Owen was genuinely just proud of his own achievements, and did not realise he was coming across as smug to Cleo. If true, then perhaps another reason why Owen's behaviour is cringeworthy is because the way he thought he was coming across does not land with Cleo – it misfires in some way, making her register his pride as excessive.

A similar thing happens in the *Voice Recording* example too. Levi cringes when he hears his own voice being played back, perhaps because he was trying to portray himself in an articulate manner in the interview, but when he hears the recording feels that his accent,

intonation, or general way of speaking betrays that. This case is slightly different as it involves someone cringing at themselves, yet it is still in response to something that Levi has done in the past which he comes to feel is embarrassing. In both scenarios, an important feature of cringeworthiness is that there is a disconnect between how someone thinks they are portraying themselves, and how they come across. This feature is captured in Melissa Dahl's analysis of cringe, where she characterises it as 'an unpleasant kind of self-recognition where you suddenly see yourself through someone else's eyes' (2018, p. 8). Dahl therefore takes cringe to be a response to being made aware of the 'disappointing fact that you aren't measuring up to your own self-concept' (2018, p. 9). In Owen's case, Cleo's cringe communicates that although he might think he is celebrating his achievements, it actually comes across as boasting. In Levi's case, he cringes because he is made aware of how others hear his voice, and how this does not match up with the idea in his head of how he sounds. On this picture, behaviours are cringeworthy when they unwittingly expose cracks in our personas, and we find this embarrassing.

Nevertheless, this picture does not help to explain why Ace cringes in the *Graduation* example. Throughout the ceremony, Ace feels nervous and awkward about having to go up on stage, and the memories they have of shaking the official's hand cause them to cringe whenever they think about it. Yet, Ace never tries to present themselves in a particular way that is misregistered by others. Their cringing seems more squarely related to memories of being in an awkward situation,[45] which they continue to feel embarrassed about. Throughout this example, Ace is distinctly aware of the awkwardness present in the situation. But this does not necessarily counter the understanding of cringeworthiness that Dahl and I draw. On the contrary, I want to suggest that Ace's behaviour in the *Graduation* example is not actually cringeworthy at all, despite Ace cringing whenever they think about the ceremony. Although we cringe in various awkward and embarrassing scenarios, I characterise 'cringeworthiness' as a more

[45] Alexandra Plakias claims that awkwardness arises in social situations where one 'finds themselves lacking the guidance of a script' (2024, p. 22), expanding on Adam Kotsko's (2010) view that we feel awkward when we are left without the guidance of social norms that we usually rely on. Note that even though a graduation ceremony is a ritual occasion that has plenty of social scripts, Ace might still feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable with those scripts.

specific description of behaviours that are embarrassing *because* someone unknowingly fails to come across how they intend to.

With this in mind, I want to offer a particular characterisation of *cringeworthiness* as involving the following features:

a) **Perceived Intention –** An action which is plausibly perceived as trying to achieve something (e.g. politeness, humour, seduction, etc…) or portray the person in a particular way.
b) **Misfiring –** This action fails to achieve this intended effect with its audience.
c) **Unawareness –** The actor does not seem to be aware that their behaviour is not landing in this intended way.
d) **Discomfort –** The embarrassing nature of this exchange produces the discomfort we feel when we cringe.

On this account, cringeworthiness is understood as a particular species of embarrassing behaviour which *exposes* something about a person *without them realising.* The features I have identified are not intended as necessary and sufficient conditions but offer a description of what makes this behaviour *cringeworthy* as opposed to just embarrassing. As such, the actor's lack of awareness can be seen as an aggravating factor which makes their behaviour distinctly *cringeworthy* on the account I want to draw, though as I will show, we might still cringe in examples of embarrassment which do not necessarily share all of these features.

Applying this to the previous examples, Cleo seems to find Owen's behaviour cringeworthy because he came across as excessively proud of his achievements, exposing himself as being boastful to an unimpressed Cleo. In Levi's case, he finds the voice recording cringeworthy because he realises that it exposes him as less articulate than he thought he was. My use of the term 'exposure' here captures the idea that cringeworthy behaviours unintentionally reveal something about a person because they fail to portray themself in the way that they think they are. It also links my account of cringeworthiness to various theories that describe embarrassment as feeling that arises when something

important about our character has been exposed.[46] This might be because our behaviour reveals a flaw in our character (Sabini & Silver, 1997, p. 11), because we feel as though the social image we wish to maintain is being threatened (Miller & Tangney, 1994, p. 274), or due to a 'flustering caused by the perception of a fumbled or botched performance' (Silver et al., 1987, p. 48). As sociologist Erving Goffman puts it,[47] we experience embarrassment when our personas are exposed, and we find ourselves 'torn apart, however gently' (1959, p. 270). My account builds upon these theories of embarrassment by suggesting that what makes some behaviour distinctly cringeworthy, as opposed to simply embarrassing, is that we are *unaware* of how it exposes us.

Now, this characterisation of cringeworthiness might overlap with our everyday understanding of embarrassing behaviours or even find itself at odds with how the term is used in certain cases, such as in the *Graduation* example above. But this does not make responding with cringe to cases that are not cringeworthy on this account unfitting. To see why, let us begin by addressing a popular understanding of cringe as being synonymous with 'second-hand' or 'vicarious' embarrassment (Wöhrle, 2021). We experience these forms of embarrassment when witnessing someone do something that we find embarrassing, such as seeing someone trip up the stairs in public.[48] For the most part, second-hand embarrassment is driven by empathy for the person doing something embarrassing (Dahl, 2018, p. 148), and in many cases, that person will be acutely aware of the embarrassing thing that they have done. Even though we might cringe when seeing someone trip up the stairs, on my account, the fact that they are aware of how

[46] Alternative accounts of embarrassment more strongly relate the concept to norm-violations. For example, some analyse embarrassment as involving 'faux pas' (Silver et al., 1987, p. 46; Plakias, 2024, p. 53), or other errors such as bungling one's words, being absentminded, or even being ignorant (Szabados, 1990, p. 345). Others have argued that embarrassment occurs when we are not at ease with norm-following. For example, when we are faced with situations to which we are 'averse' (Purshouse, 2001, p. 532), or when 'we are not well equipped to deal with the situation' (Benziman, 2020, p. 84). Given that my aim is not to settle on any view of embarrassment, but offer a characterisation of cringeworthiness, I find it helpful to discuss embarrassment in terms of 'exposure' here instead.

[47] These views of embarrassment are inspired by Goffman's 'dramaturgical theory' (1959), which introduced to sociology the idea that our social interactions can be compared to a theatrical performance.

[48] If the idea that tripping up the stairs is 'embarrassing' is based on norm-violation, then it potentially subscribes to an ableist value system that presents mobility differences as demeaning. Instead, understanding embarrassment in terms of 'exposure' suggests that one feels embarrassed when tripping up the stairs because they attract the attention of others.

embarrassing that is means that is not distinctly cringeworthy. As such, we can begin to pull apart these links between cringe, cringeworthiness, and second-hand embarrassment.

One reason for this is that there is a slight difference in *how* we cringe in cases where someone is aware that they have done something embarrassing, compared to those which involve a lack of awareness. In the case of someone tripping up the stairs, we seem to cringe-*with* the person who recognises that they have done something embarrassing. However, in the *Boastful Friend* example, Cleo seems to be cringing-*for* Owen because he fails to recognise that he is not portraying himself in the way that he thinks he is. Both of these forms of cringe are useful communicative tools. In the case of cringing-*with* someone, we express empathy with another person as we recognise the discomfort they are experiencing and share in their feeling of embarrassment. But when a person lacks awareness of how they are actually portraying themselves or perhaps is aware but is not unsettled by it, we might cringe-*for* them in their place. This could be motivated by a desire to get that person to recognise that their behaviour was embarrassing, or to prompt them to feel embarrassed by it. Whilst responding with cringe might look similar in each of these cases, I am claiming that it can take different forms based on what it responds to and how it is motivated.

In addition to these two forms, there are also various cases where we cringe-*at* ourselves and others out of horror or disgust (see Spiegel, 2023, p. 6). For example, Levi might be cringing-*at* the sound of his own voice because he is disturbed by it, much like Cleo might cringe-*at* Owen if she finds his boasting detestable. Dahl provides an illuminating example of this in her discussion of a show called *Tinder Live*, during which a comedian loads up the dating app Tinder and projects it onto a screen for the whole audience to laugh and cringe at men's profiles. As she states, by cringing the audience tries to assert a level of social or moral superiority over the men being cringed at as they communicate an unspoken message: '*we are safe, and we are superior—it's these guys who are the loser weirdos, amirite*?' (2018, p. 145, italics in original). Whereas we tend to 'compassionately' cringe out of second-hand embarrassment when someone trips up some stairs, because we empathise with the embarrassment they feel, this 'contemptuous' cringe instead involves an emotional distancing from that person (see 2018, pp. 148–150).

On this picture then, we can cringe-*with* or cringe-*at* people who have knowingly done something embarrassing, and this depends on whether our cringe is compassionate or contemptuous. However, when it comes to cringeworthy behaviours, we either cringe-*for* or cringe-*at* the person who has done the thing that we find cringeworthy. There is a shift here from '*with*' to '*for*' which signals that the difference between something being 'cringeworthy' and simply 'embarrassing' is whether or not they have awareness of their behaviour being embarrassing. This mapping also suggests that cringing-*for* someone can be intended as a more compassionate response to cringeworthy behaviours than cringing-*at* them when it is motivated by a desire[49] for that person to recognise that they are not coming across in the way that they might think they are, even if that person is a version of yourself in the past. This more nuanced view helps to show how we cringe at things which are not necessarily, on my account, cringeworthy. In part, this might be because feelings of embarrassment are closely related to cringe, involving a shrinking away feeling in the body, heightened self-awareness, and a desire to want to escape from an uncomfortable situation (Plakias, 2024, p. 51). Thus, rather than worry about examples of cringing in response to things that are not cringeworthy on my account, we can point to the common phenomenology shared by cringe and embarrassment instead.

Nevertheless, someone might challenge my account of cringeworthiness by arguing that it places too much emphasis on how someone's behaviours are perceived by others, leading to contestable outcomes. For example, imagine you are at a conference where an academic is very confidently presenting some work which, unbeknownst to them, is of rather poor quality. On my account, the presenter's confidence could be taken to be cringeworthy because there is disconnect between their confidence and the quality of their work, and the fact they are unaware of this makes us feel embarrassed-*for* them. Yet, it is also plausible that this presenter is aware that their work is of low quality but had been too busy to put together a strong presentation. Therefore, they try to portray themselves as confident to hide the fact that they are nervous about presenting their

[49] Cringing-*for* someone can be motivated by other desires that are not necessarily compassionate or contemptuous. For example, we might cringe-*for* someone in order to control their behaviour because we want them to follow particular norms we agree with. For the purpose of this thesis, I will stick to discussions of compassionate and contemptuous cringe, but this highlights that there is scope to consider forms of cringing that are motivated by other reasons.

work. It seems less appropriate to label their behaviour cringeworthy with this new information. However, if the presenter is effective at hiding their nervousness, then it will also be difficult for the audience to know that the intended effect of their confident persona is to hide their nerves as opposed to trying to show off. As such, they might continue to find presenter's confidence cringeworthy without any further understanding from the presenter's point of view.

Because of this, the idea that cringeworthiness involves the misfiring of 'perceived' intention highlights how we can expect what people find cringeworthy to be subjective. We can only infer how someone intended to portray themselves from the contextual clues we have at our disposal – our relationship with that person, the tone of their voice, their body language, and so on – and we will each be sensitive to those features in different ways. Furthermore, if cringeworthiness involves failing to come across as you think you are, then the audience's perception of how you are portraying yourself is in fact a vital component of why your behaviour is found to be cringeworthy. Whilst this implies that people can, and will, disagree about whether something is cringeworthy, it is worth noting that I take this to be an unproblematic feature of social interaction more generally.[50]

To summarise my analysis then, I have offered an account of cringeworthiness as a particular species of embarrassing behaviour which involves someone *exposing* something about themselves *without realising.* Following this, I have shown that we respond to cringeworthy behaviours by cringing-*for* the person who has unknowingly done something embarrassing, or by contemptuously cringing-*at* them. Here, cringing-*for* someone can be a more compassionate form of cringe which aligns more closely with how we cringe-*with* people who knowingly do something that is embarrassing, but not necessarily cringeworthy. Having expanded on this relationship between cringe, cringeworthiness, and embarrassment, I will now move on to explaining why I think cringe offers a particularly effective response to microaggressions. By applying my account to examples of microaggressions, I first motivate the claim that many

[50] This echoes the criticism I gave in the first chapter regarding the microaggression sceptics' claim that we need to be certain when we label something a microaggression.

microaggressions can be considered cringeworthy. Following this, I show what responding with cringe might look like in practice, before presenting various arguments in support of responding to microaggression with cringe.

## 4.2 Responding to Microaggressions with Cringe

To start off, ask yourself whether you think the examples of microaggressions that you are familiar with are cringeworthy. Do you cringe when you hear somebody use the phrase 'that's so gay' to describe something bad, ask a woman why she does not have kids, or tell a wheelchair user that they are inspiring? Depending on your own positionality, you might find these comments more offensive than cringeworthy and perhaps feel angry rather than embarrassed for the microaggressor. You might be desensitised to such 'low-level' offense that you are able to brush it off in the way that microaggression sceptics ask us to. Alternatively, you might land somewhere in the middle, languishing in the stale discomfort of repeatedly hearing these comments. When the debate around how to respond only takes anger and thicker skin as its monolithic views, we become encouraged to either transform our feelings into something 'productive' or just somehow do away with feeling offended. What I aim to show is that cringe presents another way of responding to microaggressions which can mediate between some of the purported benefits and drawbacks of other responses. However, to achieve this, we first need to shift how we look at microaggressions in order to see how they are cringeworthy on my account.

To show this, we need to assess whether they involve some perceived intention which unknowingly misfires, producing an embarrassing discomfort. In typical examples of microaggressions,[51] the microaggressor tends to be unaware of how their behaviour is subtly oppressive and does not intend to cause offense. When someone asks a woman why they do not have kids, this might be intended as a genuine question, rather than to suggest that motherhood is an essential part of what it means to be a 'woman'. The

[51] As mentioned earlier in the thesis, there can be cases where microaggressions are done *intentionally* to harass marginalised people (see Friedlaender & Ivy, 2020; Friedlaender, 2021).

recipient of a microaggression like this could plausibly perceive that the microaggressor intended to be inquisitive. This is part of the attributional ambiguity marginalised people experience when they have difficulties discerning the actual intentions of the microaggressor (Sue et al., 2007, p. 279). Since the recipient also registers another implicit meaning of the microaggression, any plausible intention to show interest in that person's life therefore seems to somewhat misfire. As such, this example fits the picture of someone who is unknowingly failing to portray themselves in the way that they think they are.

However, we also need to ask whether the discomfort that microaggressions produce is related to embarrassment in any way. I have previously shown how the ambiguity in the microaggressor's perceived intentions produces discomfort for recipients because they are left unsure of how to respond (see Sue et al., 2007, pp. 277–279). But this discomfort is different to feelings of embarrassment for the microaggressor. Instead, we need to shift our attention to how a microaggressor, who in typical cases may consider themselves to be a good person with progressive attitudes (Friedlaender, 2018, p. 7), *exposes* something about themselves that does not live up to this self-image when they engage in microaggressions. Here, I am trying to motivate the idea that we might actually find it embarrassing when a person thinks they are doing something good by, for example, praising a wheelchair user for their tenacity, when they are actually coming across as offensive by engaging in a subtly oppressive social practice. Their lack of awareness ultimately exacerbates the cringeworthiness of their microaggressive behaviour by exposing deficiencies in their positive self-image.

Whilst this picture might be appropriate for typical cases of microaggressions, you might argue that it struggles to explain why less obvious cases are cringeworthy. To use a personal example, when I was a students' union officer advocating for differentiated pricing for university accommodation so that there were affordable options for poorer students, the main counterargument I received was that it would risk 'ghettoising' the university as poorer students would all choose the cheaper accommodation. A plausible interpretation of why the term 'ghettoisation' was used is because the university did not want poorer and richer students to be segregated. However, this term also seemed to imply a belief that having more students from lower socio-economic backgrounds could

tarnish the university's prestigious image. It was also a gross misapplication of a term that has been used to describe the forced segregation of various marginalised communities throughout history (see Wirth, 1928/2019). For the most part, these university executives appeared to be (and perhaps were) serious about trying to make the university more accessible for poorer students, yet using the term 'ghettoisation' exposed an air of performativity around their efforts that felt embarrassing to watch. As such, this example seems to bear all the hallmarks of something that is cringeworthy, yet it strikes me that most people either brushed over the phrase[52] or, as I did, found it outright offensive.

We can also see problems arise for my account when considering microaggressions which are non-verbal or intentional. To explore these, let us consider the following example where George Yancy describes his experience of entering a lift with a white woman whose body language shifts in a way that he interprets as showing suspicion and discomfort (2016, p. 20). It seems less sensible to think that the shift in the woman's body language involves her trying to portray herself in any particular way. It is more likely that her reaction to a Black man entering the lift was an unconscious bodily display of internalised racial scripts which equate him with danger and criminality. Consequently, there is no 'misfiring' of 'perceived intentions' at play for her bodily reaction to be considered cringeworthy. Given this, I am happy to concede that some microaggressions are just not going to be considered cringeworthy by most people, and if the microaggressor is not even aware of their body language, then cringing at them is probably only going to cause confusion. The main case where someone might find the woman's behaviour cringeworthy would be if they personally know her to be someone who *generally intends* to act in progressive ways and not cause undue offense to marginalised people.[53] A close friend might pick up on how her unconsciously racist body language exposes a disconnect between her progressive values and how she is actually

[52] One reason for this might be because of the power relations present in the meetings. As a student representative, it was my role to challenge the members of the university executive, whereas other members of staff may not have felt able to contest their use of language.

[53] This assumption will not be true in all cases, but I take this to be expected of the 'well-intended' microaggressor who considers themselves to be 'progressive', and who 'slips-up' when they engage in microaggressions.

portraying herself. Nevertheless, I accept that some might think it unlikely that a friend would consider her behaviour cringeworthy as opposed to being confused about why she looks uncomfortable or responding in some other way.

When dealing with intentional microaggressions, however, I am more inclined to think that these could be considered cringeworthy, albeit in a different manner to the typical unintentional cases. Whilst the well-intended microaggressor does something cringeworthy because they are not coming across in the way that they think they are, weaponising microaggressions to fly one's bigotry under the radar is cringeworthy because, when we recognise that the microaggressor is doing this, their behaviour seems somewhat pitiful. Of course, their comments and behaviours may still be hurtful, but this pain might be dulled by a recognition of how low the microaggressor has stooped to try to cause offense. We might cringe because we have perceived them as trying to cause offense in a way that goes undetected, but it has ultimately misfired since we are not (or not only) offended and caught them in their attempt to stay under the radar.[54] On the other hand, finding intentional microaggressions cringeworthy will require us to plausibly perceive the microaggressor as intending to cause offense, or to remain undetected in their bigotry. Yet, I have repeatedly noted the difficulties that recipients face in interpreting the microaggressor's intentions. It would also require us to shift how we perceive these microaggressions, from offensive to embarrassing, and this might be difficult to achieve if we know that the microaggressor is acting intentionally. Therefore, whilst intentional microaggressions *could* fit my account of cringeworthiness, it is unclear whether most people *would* consider them cringeworthy in practice.

This last point provokes an important consideration to make for this project as a whole. Sometimes, people might not be inclined to respond to microaggressions with cringe because the discomfort they experience is born out of offense towards their oppressive content and the effects this has on them, rather than a feeling of embarrassment for the microaggressor. The examples of novel, non-verbal, and intentional microaggressions analysed above are therefore not concrete counterexamples to my claim that

[54] Note that I do not refer to whether or not the intentional microaggressor is aware that their intention to offend has misfired. This is because we can contemptuously cringe-*at* them in either case.

microaggressions can be considered cringeworthy but show how that view might be more difficult to motivate in some cases. Even when microaggressions are well-known, suggesting that we respond with cringe might seem outlandish given that they are insulting to marginalised people. However, I think the fact that it is easier to register these microaggressions, what they seem to be trying to achieve, and how they unknowingly misfire, makes describing them as cringeworthy particularly fitting. What remains then, is to give a little more consideration to *when* cringe is likely to be an effective response to these sorts of microaggressions.

First of all, I think that cringe is going to be most effective when you actually experience it. I started this section by asking whether you found any of the examples of microaggressions above cringeworthy. If not, then it is unlikely that you are going to cringe when hearing them and forcing yourself to cringe would probably just come across as artificial. A similar thing can be said about anger, or perhaps any emotional response. Think of someone who tries to get angry whenever they see injustice but does not actually feel it. This sort of anger is not going to be imbued with the anti-oppressive rage required to make effective change (see Cherry, 2021). Relatedly, if we cannot see past the offense caused by the microaggression, then our feeling of being offended might override any judgement that the microaggressor has done something embarrassing. If those other feelings stand in the way, then cringing is not always going to communicate that the microaggressor's behaviour is *embarrassing* because it is misfiring in a way that is offensive. Instead, it might join anger in being perceived as contemptuous (Dahl, 2018, pp. 145–148), and so face the same counterarguments that it is 'inappropriate' or 'counterproductive'.[55]

Given this, to ensure that cringing in response to microaggressions appears genuine, we need to shift our perception of microaggressions to recognise how they are embarrassing for the well-intended microaggressor. In other words, we can *cultivate* a propensity to cringe. To some extent, this will require an element of having thicker skin in order to move past immediately being offended by the microaggression, but this does not mean

[55] As shown in Chapter 3, I disagree with how these counterarguments are framed and will address the concern that reacting to microaggressions with cringe can slide into contempt later on.

brushing off the offense as argued by the microaggression sceptics. We still acknowledge that the microaggression is offensive when we find the microaggressor's behaviour to be cringeworthy, but responding with cringe brings to light how this exposes the microaggressor. In practice, cultivating a view of microaggressions as cringeworthy might be quite difficult to do for marginalised people who are repeatedly insulted by microaggressions to the point that they simply feel anger. But by this very logic, we might then think that cringe is a particularly effective tool for *bystanders* who are not members of the marginalised group being offended. This is because those who have done the critical work of unpacking the hidden meanings behind microaggressions are well placed to recognise the cringeworthy disconnect at play without feelings of offense taking up the space of cringe.

Offering cringe as a tool for bystanders to respond to microaggressions is particularly apt given that it seems inappropriate for a bystander who is not a member of the group being targeted by the microaggression to themselves feel *offended.*[56] As Emily McTernan claims, taking offense involves perceiving something as an affront to one's standing that generates a feeling of, and action tendency towards, estrangement (2021, p. 205). On this account, for the bystander to feel offended on the recipient's behalf would therefore be misplaced. Unless the bystander is themselves implicated by the microaggression, it does not constitute an affront to *their* standing (2021, p. 201). For example, if an able-bodied person hears someone tell a wheelchair user that they are 'inspiring', they might recognise this as a microaggression and judge it to be offensive, but it would seem suspect if they themselves felt offended by the question. On the other hand, if they were themselves a wheelchair user, it would be appropriate for them to feel offended, even if not the direct recipient of the microaggression, as it implicates them as a disabled person. The upshot here is that bystanders who are not members of the relevant social group being targeted are well placed to cringe because they can recognise the offense without *feelings* of offense 'getting in the way' of them being embarrassed for the microaggressor.

[56] To be clear, even though I couch this analysis in terms of 'taking offense', we must appreciate that this offense arises due to the oppressive nature and content of microaggressions. Since the bystander does not suffer under the oppression in question, this is a further reason for why it would be inappropriate for them to take offense.

The final case where I think cringe will be particularly effective is when it is used to respond to people who you are close to, or who have respect for you, such as your friends or family members that you get along with. One reason for this is because knowing the values and characters of those who are close to us makes us more sensitive to spotting when they are portraying themselves in ways that run counter to the person that we know them to (want to) be. By this, I mean that the perceived intention behind some stranger's microaggression is likely to be more ambiguous, whereas it might be easier to spot when someone close to you has 'slipped up'.[57] Furthermore, cringing at someone close to you might be more likely to make them stop and think about why they are being reacted to in such a way compared to a stranger cringing at them. This could be because, since you know them better than some stranger, they would have less reason to think that you have just misinterpreted what they have done. This seems underpinned by the idea that a close friend is likely to respect your opinions and how you react to them more than they would a stranger. Having a stranger cringe at you might wound your ego a little, but it does not carry the extra disappointment of letting down the people you respect.[58]

As I have shown, finding microaggressions cringeworthy requires us to be able to transform the offense of a microaggression into feelings of embarrassment for the microaggressor, albeit without simply ignoring the offense as the thicker skin prescription would have us. Instead, the hidden message of the microaggression is still registered, but it is not internalised or given uptake in any way other than to project it back onto the microaggressor so that they can become aware of how they are embarrassing themselves. In this way, we might think of cringe as a tool which 'enforces the limits of socially acceptable behaviour by wounding the ego' (Wynn, 2020). Just like someone getting angry at us might encourage us to see our moral failings and feel

[57] Obviously, this depends on you and your close one being sufficiently concerned about subtle manifestations of oppression. If your friend is sceptical about how serious microaggressions are, then they might not have the right sort of attitude for there to be a significant disconnect between their self-image and how they are portraying themselves.

[58] This point might suggest that respect for the person responding to us is more important than 'closeness' for explaining why cringe can be effective. For example, a student is not necessarily 'close' to their teachers, but they might take a teacher they respect telling them off more seriously than a teacher they have little respect for.

shame,[59] being cringed at can do the same in motivating us to see how embarrassing our behaviour is. Whilst growing thicker skin requires letting the offense ricochet off you, anger absorbs that offense and cannibalises it into fuel for fighting injustice. Cringe lies somewhere in-between. It involves turning down the heat of anger's fury to produce a grimace that coldly stares the microaggressor in the eyes, and simply asks, '*really*?'. With this in mind, I will now offer some of the reasons why I think we should cringe at microaggressions, particularly in service of trying to 'reclaim' cringe from its oppressive misuses, before addressing some of the limitations that cringing might face.

## 4.3 Reclaiming Cringe, and Other Benefits

In assessing how we might respond to microaggressions, I have been clear that I think that anger is a legitimate response, and that we should resist the oppressive logics underpinning the idea that our emotional responses to oppression should be 'productive'. Nevertheless, in navigating these discussions, it is going to be difficult to motivate why we should cringe at microaggressions without making *some* comparisons to anger, at least in how it is stereotypically portrayed. However, in doing so, we need to acknowledge that emotions can come in degrees of 'strength', even if they are understood in unidimensional ways to license criticism. Note how the 'counterproductivity' critique of anger relies on a homogenised view of anger as explosive and destructive that does not account for its milder forms. In a similar vein, cringe can also come in various degrees which may lead to varying outcomes. My aim here is therefore not to suggest that cringe is strictly better than anger, but to take account of how the perceived 'strength' of our emotions can also influence their impact. That is not to suggest that we aim to masterfully manage our emotions to ensure that they are maximally effective, but to explore the role that cringe might play *in addition* to other emotional responses. With this in mind, I am

[59] Shame and embarrassment are commonly understood as related emotions, though shame is more relevant when someone's behaviour has moral implications (Buss, 1980, p. 161; Miller & Tangney, 1994; Tangney et al., 1996).

going to focus on four reasons why cringing at[60] microaggressions can be particularly effective: (1) it appears to be a proportionate response that; (2) promotes self-reflection; (3) incurs less costs for the person responding; and (4) signals a commitment to contesting oppressive social practices. Following this, I will also make a more substantial claim that cringing at microaggressions can contribute to a project of 'reclaiming' cringe from its otherwise oppressive uses. Through these analyses, I hope to show why cringe should be taken seriously as an anti-oppressive tool.

My first claim is that cringe has the appearance of being a proportionate response to microaggressions. Whilst anger can come across as inappropriately explosive given the seemingly innocuous nature of microaggressions (Friedlaender, 2018, p. 16), cringe is characteristically quite subtle in its delivery. Just as the subtlety of microaggressions can make marginalised people question the microaggressor's intentions, cringing can therefore make the microaggressor question why people are responding to them in that way. For this reason, I consider cringe to be *more easily* seen as proportionate – a sort of '*micro*-response' to *micro*-aggressions.[61] Because the response appears to be proportionate, cringe also seems less likely to provoke defensiveness from the microaggressor, which is a key argument against the effectiveness of anger (Rini, 2018). The benefit of this is that cringe, at least in certain cases, may be particularly effective in encouraging the microaggressor to critically reflect on their behaviours. For example, if your friend makes a sexist joke, calling them out might lead them to respond by saying 'calm down, I was just joking', whilst silently cringing gives them an opportunity to sit with the feeling of their behaviour not quite landing.

The idea that cringe can promote self-reflection seems particularly plausible given my account of cringeworthiness as involving some embarrassing disconnect between self-image and self-portrayal. If someone making a sexist joke generally believes in gender equality, then cringe can bring attention to how their joke exposes them for having engaged in misogynistic behaviour which does not live up to their own self-concept. This

[60] Note that I use the phrase 'cringing at' differently to 'cringing-*at*' since the former just describes responding to something with cringe, whilst the latter describes that cringe as *contemptuous*.

[61] Note that the prefix 'micro' is being used here to denote the apparent 'size' of the aggression, rather than its constitutive role as part of a larger systems of oppression (see Rini, 2020a, p. 102).

might encourage them to reflect on how they are portraying themselves, and potentially even begin that critical process of unpacking how our actions can unknowingly enact and reinforce oppression. Yet, if cringe is subtle enough to be seen as proportionate to a microaggression, then we might question how effective it will actually be in promoting this self-reflection. This is especially true if the microaggressor gets stuck at simply questioning why they are being cringed at without sufficient motivation to shift that inquiry into its more critical form. Instead, the person telling the sexist joke might just conclude that their audience are being 'boring' or 'too serious'.[62]

However, this worry strikes me as similar to the claim that anger can provoke defensiveness, therefore blocking critical self-reflection. Both construct a narrative that our emotional response should be effective in encouraging the microaggressor to think about their behaviour yet completely ignore the role that microaggressor must themselves play in achieving this. When we feel as though our self-concept is being challenged, this is disorienting, and our immediate response might be to go on the defensive or ignore the challenge itself. Yet, it is only by sitting with this discomfort of realising that our actions have reinforced oppressive ideologies, which we would never knowingly support, that we can reach that space of possibility for growth that Dahl terms 'your growing edge' (2018, pp. 73–77). I will say more about this in the final chapter, but the upshot of this claim is that whether or not cringe will actually be given uptake also depends on how the microaggressor responds to it. This highlights the importance of also asking how microaggressors should react when marginalised people respond to their microaggressions (see Rini, 2018, p. 349).

The reason I mention this last point is because the burden is often placed solely upon marginalised people to do the labour of anti-oppressive work. This can incur epistemic costs when having to repeatedly educate dominantly situated people about the nature of one's own oppression (Berenstain, 2016), and emotional costs when one is expected to regulate their emotions to educate those people effectively (Archer & Mills, 2019). Moreover, I mentioned in the previous chapter how getting routinely angry in response

[62] These labels are evocative of Sara Ahmed's argument that not playing along with oppression is sufficient to be seen as a 'killjoy' (see 2023).

to oppression might incur psychological and physiological costs, given the correlation between 'excessive' anger and increased levels of stress and risk of cardiovascular disease (Smith et al., 2004). As such, recommending cringe as a response could help to mitigate against these potential costs by offering a more detached way of responding. Rather than directly spelling out why the microaggressor's behaviour was wrong, cringing at the microaggressor challenges them to unpack this for themselves, albeit in a way that encourages them to feel embarrassed for unknowingly engaging in oppression.

I also previously argued that cringing is likely to be particularly effective for bystanders, given that it would be inappropriate for them to feel offended on behalf of the recipient of some microaggression. This offers those dominantly situated bystanders a way to share in some of the burdens placed on marginalised people when tackling oppression. Furthermore, by cringing at microaggressions, bystanders can communicate to marginalised people that they recognise the offensive messages which are implied by the microaggression and signal a commitment to contesting these subtly oppressive behaviours. Just as Audre Lorde argues that anger can build coalitions by showing who one's allies are (see 2017, p. 111), cringe can offer a similar effect. There is also reason to think that a microaggressor could be more receptive to cringe that is communicated by a bystander who shares a relevant social location with them. For example, if a man tells a sexist joke and other men in the room cringe at him, though it should not be the case, he might be more inclined to reflect on why his joke did not land than if it were a woman reacting to him. This may be due to unconscious biases that result in people respecting the opinions of people who share closer social locations to them, or perhaps even people of higher social status.[63] But even if this does not hold up in practice, the communicative power of cringe still makes it a useful tool for bystanders.

The last benefit of responding to microaggressions with cringe that I want to discuss, and one that will need to be expanded on a little more than the previous benefits, is the idea that it can help to 'reclaim' cringe from its otherwise oppressive uses. In her video essay *Cringe* (2020), Natalie Wynn (also known as ContraPoints) discusses how cringe is used

[63] See Alcoff (1999) for a discussion of the relevance of social identity in judgments of their epistemic credibility.

to mark certain people out as 'deviant', specifically pointing to how it is weaponised by 'trolls' on the internet to ridicule various groups, such as feminists, and those who are non-binary, queer, autistic, and so on. I use the word 'weaponised' here because the groups that are considered 'cringe' according to these online trolls are not actually doing anything cringeworthy in the way that my account outlines. In fact, it is a characteristic of my account that calling individuals or groups 'cringe' is misplaced, as cringeworthiness is a feature of *actions* that unwittingly misfire, not people. At best, calling an individual or group 'cringe' amounts to saying 'they have a tendency to do cringeworthy things.' Given this, it appears that these online trolls are contemptuously cringing-*at* marginalised people, perhaps out of disgust or abject horror (see Spiegel, 2023), as a way to assert their own superiority over a 'deviant' Other.

This practice of cringing-*at* people as a way of punching down has given cringe a bad reputation, leading it to become increasingly understood as synonymous with disgust and contempt (see Wynn, 2020; Harvey, 2021; Tiffany, 2022). However, in cases where people do routinely enact microaggressions, we might think that cringing-*at* them as a way of signalling disgust is entirely appropriate. In addition, cringe need not always be contemptuous, since we can still more compassionately cringe-*for* the microaggressor because they are unknowingly doing something embarrassing. Given this, I want to suggest that responding to microaggressors with cringe opens up space for us to 'reclaim' cringe from its oppressive usages, repurposing it as an anti-oppressive tool. To unpack this, I follow Robin Brontsema's (2004) work on linguistic reclamation, which highlights three particular goals of reclaiming terms: value reversal, neutralisation, and stigma exploitation. Using the term 'queer' to guide her discussion, Brontsema suggests that the reclamation of slurs can involve separating the 'epithet from its pejoration', either by transforming the negative meaning of the term into something positive, or by nullifying its impact (2004, p. 8). Alternatively, we might exploit the slur's pejorative use in order to contest the legitimacy of hegemonic views. As she states: '[t]o declare oneself queer is to question the social construction and regulation of sexual normalcy' (2004, p. 10).

Applying this to the use of 'cringe' or 'cringeworthy' as a pejorative directed towards certain marginalised groups, the first two goals suggest that we could 'reclaim' cringe by

stripping it of its negative connotations or wearing it as a badge of honour. These moves align with Dahl's own recommendations that we become more 'self-indifferent' or 'own it!' (2018, pp. 170; 253) when we experience embarrassment and cringe. However, I think the project of reclaiming cringe in this anti-oppressive context will be particularly well served by attempts to exploit the effects of cringe.[64] I want to suggest that this could be achieved in two ways, which roughly map onto the distinction between cringing-*at* and cringing-*for*. If cringing can involve contempt, then cringing-*at* microaggressors as a way of communicating disgust towards someone for having engaged in a subtly oppressive social practice provides an opportunity for marginalised people to 'reclaim' cringe by exploiting the features that give cringe its bad reputation. Alternatively, by cringing-*for* the person who has done something embarrassing by unwittingly engaging in an oppressive practice, we can reclaim cringe by exploiting its use as an 'emotional punishment' (Wynn, 2020) which can encourage microaggressors to see their behaviour as embarrassing and critically reflect upon it. Whilst the former option leans into exploiting cringe as an expression of disgust and contempt, the latter exploits its ability to encourage someone to reflect on that disconnect between self-image and self-portrayal.

At face value, there are a few reasons to think that cringing-*for* microaggressors who are unknowingly engaging in an oppressive social practice is going to be the better way of reclaiming cringe. To start with, it is a more compassionate form of cringe that the microaggressor might see as an olive branch to encourage them to reflect on their behaviours. If that microaggressor thinks that you are looking at them with contempt and disgust, then they may very well become defensive. Beatrice Harvey (2021) offers a broader critique of contemptuous cringe, claiming that it contributes to a shift from a 'cancel culture', which describe contexts where people are angrily and publicly shunned for their wrongful behaviour, to a 'cringe culture'. Both cultures involve a 'spectacle of public humiliation', but cringe is the 'vulgar twin' which allows us to experience that feeling of superiority whilst avoiding any self-reflection in return. Compassionately

[64] This sense of reclamation is therefore broader than just 'stigma' exploitation since it also exploits the *positive* effects that cringe can have in unsettling the microaggressor's worldview and encouraging them to see things from a different point of view.

cringing-*for* the microaggressor may therefore avoid such a critique by being less detached in its delivery,[65] and being less intent on humiliating the microaggressor, even if they do feel embarrassed upon realising what they have done.

To some extent, I agree with these arguments and think that cringing-*for* microaggressors might better serve some of our aims when choosing to respond to microaggressions. However, if our aims are partly to also 'reclaim' cringe by exploiting it in its negative sense, then to avoid cringing-*at* microaggressors would also be to avoid exploiting cringe to its fullest extent. If the oppressor weaponises cringe as a way of communicating disgust and contempt towards marginalised people for merely existing, then why should we not use cringe in the same way when responding to actual acts of oppression? My main concern here is that the arguments against contemptuous cringe above look suspiciously like those given in the discourse around how 'productive' a response anger is in contexts of oppression, and this goes against the spirit of what 'reclaiming' cringe aims to achieve. Just like the reclamation of 'queer' can 'question the social construction and regulation of sexual normalcy' (Brontsema, 2004, p. 10), so too can cringing-*at* microaggressions question the everyday policing of marginalised people through this subtly oppressive social practice.

Keeping both modes open as ways of reclaiming cringe is especially vital given that microaggressions *are* offensive, and so sometimes it is going to be very difficult to transform that feeling of offense into one of embarrassment for the microaggressor. If offense is an emotion of estrangement whose action tendency is to enact withdrawal from the offending party (McTernan, 2021, p. 205), then cringing-*for* a microaggressor is going to require us to be able to overcome that estrangement somewhat. We need to meet them in their place of ignorance and reveal how their behaviours have not quite landed in the way we think they expected. But there might be cases where we want our cringe to be contemptuous, to signal a 'less surmountable form of estrangement' that is 'corrosive of close relationships' (McTernan, 2021, p. 194). This might be because the microaggressor is someone who has been repeatedly informed about their microaggressive behaviours

[65] Small changes in our facial expression and body language can signal whether our cringe is more compassionate or contemptuous. However, we still rely on the recipient picking up on these cues for it to land in the intended way.

before. Perhaps our previous attempts to cringe-*for* them has failed to effect any change, and now we have less reason to think that there is any disconnect between someone who is well-meaning and how they are portraying themselves through the microaggression. Alternatively, we might cringe-*at* the microaggressor because we have reason to believe that they are using microaggressions intentionally as a way to cause offense whilst retaining plausible deniability. Whilst contemptuous cringe might not lead to any seemingly 'productive' ends, it is nonetheless valuable for communicating our estrangement from those who engage in oppression without remorse.

This speaks to the value that contempt has in shaping the moral landscape. Although there might be concerns that cringing-*at* microaggressors contributes to some 'cringe culture', this is not coherent with the criticism given. If we are considering cases where marginalised people are being contemptuously cringed-*at*, these are inapt examples of contempt because those people are unreasonably held to ideals, which they are not at serious fault in failing to meet, and are left without recourse for escaping the assessment of their character that follows (Bell, 2013, pp. 148–150). For example, fat people are held in contempt merely in virtue of being fat, which is considered a moral failing. Of course, cringing-*at* the one-time well-meaning microaggressor might be considered more inappropriate on account of their moral ignorance. But for the repeat aggressor who has been made aware of the problematic nature of their behaviour, and especially the intentional microaggressor, cringing-*at* them seems well placed. Whilst anger responds to perceived '*wrongdoing*', contempt is a response to perceived '*badbeing*' (Bell, 2013, p. 39), and therefore contemptuous cringe seems a highly appropriate response to those who continually fail to abide by our reasonable anti-oppressive principles.[66]

Contemptuously cringing-*at* microaggressors can also confer other benefits. Macalester Bell argues that contempt can play an important role in protesting unfair treatment by expressing one's commitment to the values and ideals we hold the contemnor to (2013,

[66] There is a potential worry that the language of 'badbeing' may elicit feelings of despair which make it more difficult to motivate the microaggressor to do better if they feel as though they are being inescapably portrayed as a 'bad' person. In the context of my discussion, however, I am suggesting that contemptuous cringe is an appropriate response to intentional microaggressors or those who repeatedly engage in microaggressions despite being made aware of their behaviour. In these cases, any insinuation that the microaggressor is a 'bad' person is entirely escapable.

p. 153). Through disengaging from the microaggressor, we can maintain our self-esteem by demonstrating how their 'badbeing' fails to deliver the respect we deserve (Mason, 2003, p. 270), all whilst offering a way of protesting the microaggression which is less psychologically demanding than other reactive attitudes such as anger (see Bell, 2013, p. 154). Relevant to our discussion of cringe, Bell also highlights how contemptuous protest is often more 'jocular' than resentful or angry protest, instead presenting the contemnor as the 'object of amusement' (2013, p. 154). As such, even contemptuous cringe carries benefit in being an alternative tool for marginalised people to affirm their standing and disarm microaggressions. Therefore, whilst cringing-*for* microaggressors might be preferable in many situations, contemptuous cringe nevertheless holds space as a self-affirming response to those microaggressors who are belligerent and unmotivated by our attempts to engage them through other means.

As we have seen, there are various benefits to responding to microaggressions with cringe, and I have explored how this might contribute to a project of reclaiming cringe from its otherwise oppressive uses. Nevertheless, as with any response, cringe also comes with its own limitations. These might involve difficulties that microaggressors face in determining whether or not someone's cringe is compassionate or contemptuous, or suggestions that contemptuous cringe may be less effective than its compassionate counterpart. In particular, I want to explore the potential reasons why cringe, of any sort, might not be given the sort of uptake we need for the microaggressor to engage in critical self-reflection. Although I do not take these limitations to be reasons against responding to microaggressions with cringe, it is nonetheless prudential to consider them.

## 4.4 Limitations of Cringe

The first limitation I want to address is that cringe might be *too subtle* a response to be given any uptake at all. As I previously argued, a benefit of cringe is that it appears to be a proportionate response to microaggressions, having similar subtle characteristics that make the recipient question why they are being cringed at. Although reacting with cringe can be verbal, such as saying 'cringe', since its prototypical display is the grimace then for

our cringe to be given any uptake, we rely on the microaggressor actually taking stock of our facial expressions or shift in bodily comportment. Just as it can be more difficult to spot and unpack the meaning of non-verbal microaggressions, cringe therefore seems to be in a similar predicament. This is why anger can be so powerful in its overt expression, as it leaves much less room for confusion over what it is trying to communicate. Yet, rather than think we need to always verbally say 'cringe' or exaggerate our reaction to signal that we are cringing, there is still something impactful about a silent, cold grimace which indicates disapproval without verbalising anything at all. Think about the example of someone telling a sexist joke that is met with people pulling uncomfortable faces. Even if this response seems more muted than anger, it nonetheless signals an overt refusal to engage with the joke. Of course, there will be times where the microaggressor just does not notice your cringe response. But this supports the need for a range of tools to respond to microaggressions with, and the subtlety of cringe can therefore complement the overtness of anger.

Nonetheless, related to this concern is that, in being a more subtle response, cringe might also be *too weak* to be given the uptake we desire in encouraging a microaggressor to critically self-reflect. The fact that cringe seems less 'forceful' than anger potentially means it is less likely to promote defensiveness, but we need to ask whether it produces enough discomfort to make the microaggressor stop and think about their behaviour. It seems easier to just plainly ignore someone cringing at you as opposed to ignoring their anger. Part of this is because anger, at least in its stereotypical form, is more 'in your face', but also perhaps because anger can signal moral failure. In this sense, anger points out someone's moral flaws as a precursor to them feeling shame, and this has been shown to involve a much stronger negative self-assessment than embarrassment (Tangney et al., 1996, p. 1266). This suggests that cringing at microaggressors to encourage them to see their behaviour as embarrassing might not provide proper motivation for them to critically reflect on why that behaviour is also wrongful. Anger seems better placed for this as it directly implicates the microaggressor in a morally problematic social practice that sustains systems of oppression, even if arguments can be made against individual microaggressions being blameworthy (see Friedlaender, 2018; Rini, 2020b). Conversely, cringe seems much more focussed on just pointing out a disconnect between self-image and self-portrayal.

In this way, I am willing to concede that responding with anger is likely to more readily bring the moral implications of the microaggressor's behaviour to the foreground. However, cringe still implicates the microaggressor in an oppressive social practice, even if it makes a more distant moral judgement. Although cringe appears less 'forceful' a response, this does not mean that its impact will be 'too weak' to be effective. We can imagine that, for the typical microaggressor who considers themselves to be progressive, coming face to face with the realisation that they have engaged in an oppressive social practice is likely going to be mortifying, regardless of whether this is prompted by anger or cringe. In fact, cringe is particularly useful as a tool that can disorient[67] those who care about how they are portraying themselves. It might not be so effective for the sceptic who does not believe that microaggressions are that serious, but then very few responses other than growing thicker skin are likely to be acceptable for them. However, for well-intended microaggressors who usually take care to avoid offending people where possible, I think that cringe is far from too weak to begin a critical conversation when they unwittingly slip up.

That being said, cringe runs into another related problem in that sometimes people are simply *too ambivalent* to care about how they are coming across. This might be because they have conditioned themselves to feel less embarrassment, or to own those moments where they do things that are considered embarrassing. In these cases, cringe would therefore be too weak to penetrate that shield of 'self-indifference' which Dahl (2018, p. 170) recommends as an antidote to feeling awkward and embarrassed. Indeed, embracing those moments of awkwardness and embarrassment can be important for showing self-compassion and self-acceptance (2018, p. 164), and not spending an unhealthy amount of time dwelling on past hiccups we can no longer change. However, we need to be wary about letting this give us reason to be ambivalent every time we do something embarrassing.

Dahl herself admits that the discomfort of well-meaning white people embarrassing themselves as they 'stumble around when trying to talk about racism' is a necessary

[67] One question that remains is what the microaggressor does with these feelings of disorientation, something I unpack further in the next chapter.

catalyst for personal growth (2018, p. 77), for better understanding how marginalised people suffer under overlapping matrices of oppression. This sort of discomfort does not seem to be something we want to shy away from in the name of self-compassion. Whilst some people may indeed be less afflicted by cringe and embarrassment, it is reasonable to say that being ambivalent about coming across as racist, sexist, homophobic, and so on, would be taking self-indifference a step too far. For those who do reach that level, we might just accept that cringe has probably reached its limit of effectiveness, and that anger is better suited to conveying the moral failure at hand.

However, another reason why a microaggressor could be less affected by cringe may be down to cultural differences in how, and how frequently, they experience embarrassment. For example, studies have shown that people from 'collectivist' cultures are more likely to experience longer and more intense feelings of embarrassment compared to those from 'individualist' cultures (Edelmann et al., 1989), owing to the different social norms that operate in these cultures (Argyle et al., 1986), and differences in how they construe the self as either interconnected or independent from others (Singelis & Sharkey, 1995). Given this, some microaggressors may be more susceptible to feeling embarrassed if we respond to them with cringe compared to others. In some cases, cringe might not be given the uptake we desire because it simply puzzles the microaggressor, and not in the sort of way that provokes critical self-reflection. This might occur if there are cultural differences in how cringe is displayed, or the sorts of things that people find cringeworthy,[68] making your cringe response appear out of place. As such, it is worth keeping in mind that this analysis is somewhat limited by the context from which I am writing, just as it is by the Anglo-American context from which I am understanding microaggressions (see Bettache, 2022).

Whilst the concerns above all relate to the idea of cringe being, in various ways, insufficient for motivating the microaggressor to self-reflect, we might also think that in some situations cringe might be *too harsh* a response. By this, I mean that sometimes cringe might engender feelings of shame, rather than embarrassment, especially for

[68] There is a lack of empirical research into cringe compared to embarrassment, so any cultural differences here might just collapse into differences in how embarrassment is experienced and displayed.

people who are prone to dwelling on embarrassing things they have done in the past, allowing this to inform negative self-appraisals about their character. They might feel stupid, flawed, or even disgusting, all characteristics of feeling ashamed (Sabini & Silver, 1997, p. 3). I think this is partly why Dahl recommends we cultivate a level of self-indifference that stops us from sliding into feeling ashamed of our past behaviour. But achieving this is not going to be easy for everyone. In particular, I am thinking about neurodivergent people and those with mental health conditions who might find it more difficult to process and regulate their emotions. For example, those who experience rejection sensitive dysphoria, which has been correlated with ADHD, feel intense emotions in response to perceived rejection and criticism which can lead to them retreating from social situations (Ginapp et al., 2023, p. 10). Therefore, some people may be much more sensitive to people cringing at them in the sense that it could provoke an intense embarrassment that transforms into humiliation, shame, and withdrawal, rather than a specific realisation that someone is not coming across how they think they are.

Of course, if one benefit of cringe is that it is less intense than anger, then the latter is even more likely to be too harsh in these circumstances. After all, as a moral emotion anger can have much the same effect in prompting the wrongdoer to feel shame for their behaviour. But anger is not the only response to microaggressions that we can compare cringe to. For example, Regina Rini (2018, 2020b) considers 'calling-in' microaggressors as a favourable response that can take the form of a calm educative conversation. As opposed to placing the person being criticised in the limelight, call-ins tend to occur in private, and so might feel less humiliating[69] for those who are sensitive to rejection as it 'foregrounds the continuation of a personal relationship with the target' (2020b, p. 220). But whilst it might be prudent to avoid cringing when we know it is likely to be received too harshly by the microaggressor, sometimes they will just be strangers. Rather than think that calling-in the microaggressor is therefore the safest option, we need to recognise that call-ins still require marginalised people to somewhat regulate their emotions when responding to microaggressions. Furthermore, one reason for cringing is that it intends to communicate to the microaggressor how their behaviour is embarrassing, something which does not seem to be captured as well by other responses. There is a point at which

[69] On the other hand, call-ins can also come across as passive-aggressive and patronising.

we might have to just accept that potentially provoking defensiveness or humiliation are simply features of the perilous landscape we navigate when responding to microaggressions.

With this in mind, there are clearly a raft of considerations to make when weighing up our options for how to respond to microaggressions. As such, the final limitation I want to address is that responding with cringe against the backdrop of all these considerations may be *too demanding* to properly secure uptake. For those who are concerned about ensuring that cringe is an effective response, it appears to require various skills such as quick decision-making, tact, and perhaps even empathy if we want our cringe to be compassionate towards microaggressors. Trying to temper the strength of cringe such that it lands within that goldilocks zone of being neither too weak nor too harsh also relies on factors that are mostly peripheral to cringe in and of itself – the scenario, the audience, one's delivery, and so on. Since I have already rejected the idea that we should masterfully manage our emotions in this way, my immediate response to claims upon the 'demandingness' of emotions is to reject the idea that we *need* our response to properly secure uptake to be of value. On the contrary, I recognise that emotions are often not under our direct control. Cringe is an apt example of this given that it is often an *involuntary* reaction that we have to embarrassing and awkward situations, and so it is unclear whether it is actually possible to take those considerations into account before cringing. If we find microaggressions cringeworthy in the moment, we are likely just going to cringe without thinking.

Nevertheless, indulging the critique that cringe might be too demanding, I actually think the fact that cringe is often involuntary is exactly what makes it *un*demanding, even if you believe that it needs to be done skilfully in order to secure uptake. All we really need to do is cultivate a tendency to seeing microaggressions as cringeworthy[70] so that we may involuntarily cringe as opposed to force it in a way that looks artificial. No considerations are *necessary* to make as to when or how we respond we cringe, even if they might help improve cringe's 'effectiveness'. Granted, that might mean that cringe sometimes does

[70] Note that this is different to the claim that we should cultivate *cringe* as an emotional response and so stands apart from my critique of masterful emotional control.

comes across as too weak or too harsh, but that is something we should be willing to accept if we do not want to exacerbate the catch-22 that marginalised people are placed in when they are made to consider how best to respond, if at all (see Sue et al., 2007), by adding more considerations to take into account. How we respond should feel natural, hence why I think that we are best placed to cringe when we experience its intense discomfort.

That said, you might still think that the need to cultivate cringe edges this account uncomfortably close to the recommendation that marginalised people grow thicker skin to be less offended at microaggressions. If we feel offended, it is a lot more difficult to cringe and feel embarrassment for someone, and so responding with cringe effectively does in fact require an element of emotional regulation. But this is a point I have already accepted, and I do not think that cringe requires us to fully ignore the offense caused. In fact, we still need to acknowledge the offensive content of the microaggressions in order to reflect it back to the microaggressor when we bring attention, through cringe, to the ways in which they are unknowingly engaging in oppressive behaviour. The fact that they are being offensive without realising is a core feature of why their behaviour is cringeworthy. Therefore, rather than just let the offense ricochet off in some imprecise direction, cringe ensures the offense is registered, transformed, and redirected.

In addressing some of these potential limitations of responding to microaggressions with cringe when it comes to prompting the microaggressor to critically self-reflect, I am further highlighting how there can be no single monolithic view for how we ought to respond. Sometimes, our response will be a knee-jerk reaction to the death by a thousand cuts of oppression's subtle manifestations. Other times, we might be able to give more consideration to how we want to reach the microaggressor. But context is always going to be key, and so we should be wary of framing this discussion in terms of how we *ought* to respond, as opposed to exploring ways in which we *could* respond. By analysing cringe as a response to microaggression, we are afforded a further tool in our repertoire for contesting oppression. Moreover, by cringing in response to these subtle acts of oppression, we take little steps towards reclaiming something which has otherwise been misappropriated to cast out marginalised people, with contempt and disgust, merely for existing.

## Conclusion

This chapter has argued in favour of cringe as an additional tool for responding to microaggressions. I started by outlining my account of 'cringeworthiness' as involving behaviours which expose something about a person without them realising. If the more interesting cases of microaggressions involve people who do not intend to offend, but nonetheless come across as offensive, then we should consider these cases as prime examples of cringeworthy behaviour. I suggested that we cultivate a tendency to find these microaggressions cringeworthy by shifting our perspective so that we can see how they are not just offensive, but also embarrassing for the microaggressor. Responding to cringe in this way can confer various benefits as a response to microaggressions since it appears as a proportionate response which signals a commitment to contesting oppressive social practices yet promotes self-reflection on the microaggressor's part without incurring particularly harsh psychological costs for the person responding. Furthermore, I showed how it contributes to a project of 'reclaiming' cringe from its otherwise oppressive uses as a way of holding marginalised people in contempt. To wrap up the chapter, I considered some potential limitations to cringe as a response to microaggressions. Although cringe places some demands upon us to transform our feeling of offense and temper the strength of our response depending on the interpersonal context, I consider these limitations no more problematic for cringe than they are for other forms of response. Therefore, just as microaggressions represent an adaptation in how oppression enacts violence and control over marginalised people, cringe offers an innovative way to contest these oppressive social practices.

CHAPTER 5

# Towards a Politics of Disorientation

*Disrupting Microaggressions as a Habit of Oppression*

## Introduction

In the last two chapters, I focussed on the ways in which we might respond to microaggressions in order to hold others responsible for their behaviours and encourage them to change their behaviours. The final question that I wish to address, however, is how people might confront the potential microaggressor within and reduce their likelihood of engaging in microaggressive behaviours. Although there have been doubts regarding the blameworthiness of morally ignorant microaggressors, most philosophers writing on this topic agree that these microaggressors nonetheless 'ought to take preventative measures to reduce the likelihood that they will engage in such acts' (Friedlaender, 2018, p. 18; also see, O'Dowd, 2018; Rini, 2020; Gosselin, 2022). In this chapter, I will begin by investigating two such preventative measures – attending to one's unconscious biases and becoming aware of one's social privilege. Unconscious bias is an important factor to attend to because microaggressions are understood to arise out of 'biases, assumptions, and stereotypes' about marginalised groups which have been 'strongly culturally inculcated into our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours' (Sue & Spanierman, 2020, p. 66). Furthermore, since the structural account understands microaggressions as an oppressive social practice, there is reason to think that microaggressions are enacted by those with privilege, and function to maintain it (Friedlaender, 2018, p. 9).

Surveying some of the criticisms of both bias and privilege rhetoric, I show how it can often take on an individualistic framing that serves a 'politics of self-transformation' (Kruks, 2005). As an alternative, I pursue a phenomenological understanding of privilege which examines the embodied and spatial dimensions of comfort that privilege provides, and prompts us to question how moments of discomfort, or *disorientation*, can disrupt the habitual activities that privilege allows us to comfortably perform. To expand upon

this, I introduce Sara Ahmed's (2006) *Queer Phenomenology,* and her description of how bodies take on 'orientations' which can produce *queer*[71] effects when they command attention, resulting in moments of disorientation. As Ahmed notes, this prompts us to consider the value of those *queer* orientations, and the potential for what she calls a 'politics of disorientation', suggesting that it involves allowing oneself to be transformed by moments of disorientation and encounters with the *queer.* I support Ahmed's analysis by showing how such a politics can help to disrupt habits of oppression such as microaggressions and place her work in conversation with Lugones' (1987) concept of 'world-travelling' to explore how we might put a politics of disorientation into practice. I show that world-travelling can be understood as both an *epistemic* practice which challenges one's worldview, and an *existential* practice which reveals the multiplicitous self as a being-in-worlds. Overall, this chapter takes on a broader scope, exploring what a politics of disorientation might involve through a synthesis of the rich phenomenological apparatus offered by Ahmed and Lugones. Through this, I aim to show how embracing such a politics has the potential to disrupt habits of oppression like microaggressions, by encouraging us to recognise the self as multiplicitous and appreciate *queer* modes of being.

## 5.1 Rhetorics of Bias and Privilege

In recent years, various institutions have taken more seriously the suggestion that people attend to their unconscious biases. Notably, The Guardian reported in 2019 that out of 131 UK universities, 83.5% provided some form of unconscious bias training to staff (Batty, 2019), with Universities UK later reporting in 2023 that 40% of universities offered such training to students (Cooper, 2023, p. 28). Furthermore, statistics provided in 2016 by the UK Government show that over a quarter of the civil service had received unconscious bias training (Heywood, 2016), with a 2017 review recommending that the

[71] To pre-empt Ahmed's use of '*queer',* I place the term in italics to refer to a phenomenological discomfort, or strangeness, which is a product of counternormative ways of being (see 2006, p. 66). This distinguishes it from queer gender and sexuality identities, though subjects who identify in these ways do also live *queer* lives.

UK Government provides freely available unconscious bias training for all (McGregor-Smith, 2017). Such training often involves Implicit Association Tests where people are shown a series of words or images and are asked to make rapid judgements about them to evaluate the associations they make (Noon, 2018, pp. 199–200). For example, in its crudest form, this might involve being presented with a quickfire list of professions and asked to respond with the gender you associate with those jobs. This is intended to raise awareness of the biases and stereotypes that unconsciously guide our interactions and decision making, with training sessions also providing a space for the contemplation of strategies for reducing such biases.

Becoming more aware of how our unconscious biases can influence our behaviour may be beneficial in reducing the likelihood that people become defensive when someone points out that their behaviour is microaggressive. This could then entail a generative conversation that allows the microaggressor to better understand what microaggressions are and avoid engaging in such behaviours in the future. An increased understanding of unconscious stereotypes could also help avoid situations where microaggressors, upon being made aware that their behaviour is microaggressive, resort to stereotyping the target as 'hysterical' or 'angry' (see Rini, 2018, pp. 339–340; Freeman & Stewart, 2021, p. 1018) and thus blocking any positive effect that raising awareness of their microaggressive behaviour may have had (Schroer, 2023, p. 348). Nevertheless, research has shed doubts on the long-term effectiveness of such training in influencing behaviour (see Bezrukova et al., 2016). For example, a systematic review of 492 studies investigating the effectiveness of implicit bias training found that changes to implicit bias measures were not correlated with changes in behaviour (Forscher et al., 2019), influencing the UK Government's decision in 2020 to renege on its previous commitments and phase out unconscious bias training for civil servants (Lopez, 2020). Given these limitations, the Universities UK report on tackling racial harassment recommended that beyond unconscious bias training, universities should also improve staff and students' understanding of microaggressions and white privilege from an anti-racist perspective (2020, p. 49).

The call for such training to take an anti-racist perspective is important as it ensures we also attend to the structural and institutional ways in which oppression operates. One

criticism of focussing too much on unconscious bias is that it is highly individualistic and does not necessarily investigate how our biases are formed and reinforced through our relationships and the environments we navigate. A reason for this is that it immediately psychologises the problem of bias, rendering it a defect of individual minds, and thus losing sight of systemic critiques of oppression (Kempf, 2022, p. 59). Furthermore, by locating the problem in the bias of individuals, discussions of moral responsibility for microaggressions become stunted. Whilst Friedlaender concludes that microaggressors are not blameworthy but nonetheless have a forward-looking responsibility to change their behaviours, it could be argued that this represents an 'optimistic narrative that assumes changes in individual behaviour will eliminate discriminatory treatment' (Noon, 2018, p. 209). Therefore, whilst attending to one's biases will play an important role in reducing the likelihood of enacting microaggressions, it should not be seen as a quick-fix solution.

This is where another of the recommendations made by Universities UK, that we develop a deeper understanding of privilege, appears promising as it could help to broaden our analysis of microaggressions out to something more social and structural rather than psychological and individual. The concept of 'social privilege' can be understood as a set of *unearned*, and often unacknowledged, *advantages* which are systematically conferred upon individuals depending on their social locations (Bailey, 1998, p. 107). Peggy McIntosh (1989) describes these unearned advantages as an 'invisible knapsack' of provisions which better equip those with relative social privilege to navigate a range of social environments. For example, a white man who is privileged with respect to his gender and race may have greater confidence in sharing his thoughts at a business meeting compared to a Black woman. To say that these advantages are conferred systematically[72] is therefore to recognise how the white man's confidence has been scaffolded by things such as his socialisation, associated gender and race stereotypes, and how he is likely to be perceived by others.

[72] That is not to say that advantages such as confidence are not *earned*, for example through evidence of competence or familiarity with one's audience, but the concept of 'social privilege' highlights how *unearned* advantages are also at play.

As with unconscious bias, privilege is an important concept for understanding microaggressions given that most microaggressors tend to hold relative social privilege over their target. Considering the wider context within which microaggressions operate, Sue and his colleagues (2008) have suggested that microaggressions are a way for those with privilege to impose their own reality by entrenching stereotypes and putting down marginalised people. Other researchers have suggested that microaggressions, being subtle and ambiguous, are therefore an increasingly prevalent way for those with privilege to intentionally or unintentionally do this whilst escaping responsibility for engaging in oppression (Gómez, 2015, p. 132; Friedlaender, 2021). As such, Friedlaender argues that people who occupy positions of privilege are the ones who 'ultimately benefit from the harms of microaggressions because microaggressions reinforce their position of privilege' (2018, p. 9). In other words, one function of microaggressions as an oppressive social practice is to maintain social privilege. Therefore, the concept of privilege can draw attention to how microaggressions are linked to broader systems of power and potentially encourage microaggressors to understand the wider structural consequences of their behaviours, as opposed to suggesting that the problem lies within the individual's psychology.

Nevertheless, the rhetoric of privilege and its associated pedagogies have been criticised for failing to appropriately capture this relationship between individuals, and the broader systemic mechanisms that influence their behaviours. One limitation is that privilege is often addressed from the 'viewpoint of the individual' (Applebaum, 2008, p. 295) and thus 'emphasises the individual as sole locus for analyses' as opposed to sufficiently elaborating on the socio-historical factors which shape relations of power and privilege (Levine-Rasky, 2000, p. 274). But given that we each hold a variety of social identities, not to mention the histories and relations that shape us, an individual's experiences will often be much more complex than a seemingly reductive analysis of 'you are privileged'.[73] Whilst a confident white man may have an unearned advantage over a Black woman in the context of systemic racism, he might nonetheless feel that such confidence has been

[73] This makes intersectionality an important consideration to make in these discussions.

*earned* through hard work.[74] These attitudes can result in people becoming angry and hostile when they are challenged to acknowledge the *unearned* advantages bestowed upon them through their privilege (Logue, 2005, p. 373). This helps to keep privilege invisible, and so rather than framing privilege in terms of something passively held by individuals, it is important to recognise how the maintenance of privilege 'requires complex and subtle, yet always active, participation on the part of the privileged' (Monahan, 2014, p. 80).

Since the rhetoric of privilege often takes on a similar individualistic framing as unconscious bias, I imagine that making microaggressors aware of their privilege is also likely to result in defensiveness. This is because recognising our biases and privilege also means acknowledging our own complicity in perpetuating systems of oppression and forces us to reckon with the question of how we ought to confront that complicity (Sue & Spanierman, 2020, pp. 159–163) But whilst this is uncomfortable, discomfort is one medium through which self-reflection and behavioural changes can occur. For example, Barbara Applebaum claims that 'discomfort is a necessarily catalyst for growth and learning' (2017, p. 863) and that sitting with discomfort can provide the means through which allyship and solidarity can be forged (2008, p. 298). By refraining from becoming defensive (without good reason)[75] when told that you have enacted a microaggression, you allow yourself the possibility to be moved by the discomfort this produces, and this can result in a greater awareness of how your behaviours can be subtly and ambiguously oppressive. In other words, feelings of discomfort provide crucial moments where we can see things differently, and if we are willing to sit with these feelings, perhaps counter pernicious ignorances which had previously obscured our view (Hemmings, 2012; Chadwick, 2021).

[74] There is a parallel here between the concepts of 'earned advantage' and 'merit'. However, since trying to unpack the relationship between the two in the context of privilege would likely not move us beyond the current discourse I am critiquing, I will sidestep this discussion in favour of enriching our understanding of the spatial and embodied dimensions of privilege.

[75] Since I accept that marginalised people are not infallible when it comes to detecting microaggressions, you might actually have good reason to offer an exculpatory account for why you have not enacted a microaggression. However, this can still be done tactfully rather than as an attempt to shut down any potential critique.

Nevertheless, there is a worry here that even if responding to microaggressions can produce a discomfort that cuts through ignorance and encourages behavioural change, it risks being co-opted into what Sonia Kruks (2005) terms a 'politics of self-transformation'. Such a politics is one which would centre the microaggressor and their 'feelings, attitudes, and actions' (2005, p. 183), where they display guilt for their behaviours, and focus on transforming themselves into a 'good person' through the recognition of bias and privilege. This raises a couple of issues. First, there is a difference between critical self-reflection and actually enacting social change (James, 2014, p. 221). Centring the oppressor's guilt is simply another way of placing the focus back on the individual such that structural and institutional oppressions go unaddressed. Second, to the extent that recognising one's biases and privileges may be uncomfortable, the self-transformative work that this can engender might simply give rise to microaggressors '[patting themselves] on the back for being so self-aware and morally sensitive' (Monahan, 2014, p. 81). Far from sitting with discomfort, this represents a shift away from that initial discomfort and back towards a familiar comfort, albeit this time not born out of ignorance but rather an overcoming of guilt. Through this, the 'reformed' microaggressor bypasses actually taking any responsibility for their complicity in oppression because they see themselves as a 'good' person who has already done the work of acknowledging their biases and privilege (see Applebaum, 2014, p. 27).

This critique highlights the 'affective economy' (see Ahmed, 2004) of comfort at operation here, within which dominantly situated people have the capital, in this case privilege, to invest in and reap the rewards. At the cost of a little discomfort when reflecting on one's biases and privilege, dominantly situated subjects are able to shore up their long-term comfort by feeling good about their efforts and being seen as a 'good' person by others who take awareness to be the pinnacle of responsibility. I use the concept of 'affective economies' here as it highlights how emotions are not merely psychological dispositions, but also 'mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective' (Ahmed, 2004, p. 119). In other words, comfort is not a feeling that resides *within* individuals, but takes on a geography of its own as it is produced and reproduced through our relations to others and our social environments (Eaves et al., 2023, p. 522). Comfort and privilege therefore have an intimate connection, and just as Sara Ahmed discourages us from seeing feelings as

property, we should move our framing of privilege beyond McIntosh's analogy of the 'invisible knapsack' as a set of unearned assets carried around by dominantly situated individuals. Privilege also takes on embodied and spatial dimensions, smoothing out people's ability to navigate the world without friction.

To better understand this, I turn to an insightful example offered by Shannon Sullivan involving a boutique store where customers must press a buzzer to be let in by an employee as a way of reducing the likelihood of robbery. In this example a Black woman pushes the buzzer only to see the white employee at the counter mouthing 'we're closed' at her despite there clearly being several white customers perusing the store (2006, p. 144). Whereas the white customers are able to freely engage in their shopping, the Black woman's bodily movements are 'curtailed by the racial demarcation of space' (2006, p. 146) as she becomes unable to extend herself into the boutique store, a space that becomes shut off from her through the racial bias[76] of the white employee. Comfort, as Ahmed notes, involves being 'so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins' (2007, p. 158). For the Black woman, the locked door of the store phenomenologically severs her body from a world which she can no longer freely navigate. For the white customers, however, there is likely to be little recognition of how being able to go shopping unbothered by such blockages is evidence (and constitutive) of their privilege. This illuminates exactly why privilege is often invisible to those who benefit from it. To them, going shopping is a familiar, relatively benign, and *habitual* activity.

Sullivan shows how the concept of *habits* is useful to explain the invisibility of privilege in the sense that our habits are 'the things we do and say ''without thinking"' (2006, p. 4). The confident white man might contribute to a business meeting without considering his tone whilst a Black woman pays greater attention to how she is conducting herself to avoid being stereotyped. For him, speaking up in meetings is somewhat habitual, just as travelling via public transport is a habitual activity for most able-bodied people who do

[76] Of course, there may be other plausible explanations for why the employee kept the doors locked. For example, it may be nearly closing time, and they want to reduce footfall to ensure staff are not forced to work overtime. Nevertheless, this does not detract from the point that the Black woman has likely picked up on a pattern of similar behaviour which gives her reason to think that it is racially motivated.

not have to consider the accessibility of the transport they are travelling by. We can therefore think of habits as involving the 'ability to move in and respond to one's surroundings with *ease, familiarity, and confidence*' (Loveless, 2022, p. 132, emphasis in original). Understanding privilege through the concept of habits helps to capture privilege in its active, embodied, and spatial sense, as opposed to just something held by individuals. As I shall argue later, thinking about habits in this way can improve our understanding of why otherwise well-intentioned people slip into microaggressive behaviours, as a habit of oppression, beyond just thinking about unconscious bias.

Taking stock of the discussion so far, I have shown that popular rhetorics of bias and privilege are limited in their overly individualistic framings, encouraging microaggressors to 'turn inwards' and seek self-transformation to remedy their oppressive actions. Instead, thinking about how these concepts are intimately related to feelings of comfort and the phenomenology of habit offers fruitful avenues for ensuring that our understanding of bias and privilege captures the embodied and spatial dimensions of how these phenomena operate. Taking stock of Kruks' warning against slipping into a politics of self-transformation, I want to put forward an alternative politics that foregrounds an openness to being transformed through our encounters with the unfamiliar, one which disrupts our habits of oppression. Such a politics is hinted at by Ahmed in her *Queer Phenomenology* where she offers a rich phenomenological description of the discomfort, or 'disorientation', we experience when our actions become inhibited in certain ways. Given the complexity of her work, it is worth taking the time to explore how systems of oppression shape the 'orientations' that bodies take within the world, and the unsettling experiences of 'disorientation' that can accompany non-normative modes of being. I will then explore what a politics of disorientation might consist in, its relation to disrupting habits of oppression, and how it may be put into practice.

## 5.2 (Dis)orientations

The way in which Ahmed uses the term 'orientations' in her *Queer Phenomenology* can be straightforwardly thought of as describing how bodies are *directed* towards certain objects. For example, if my favourite food is pizza and I go to a buffet where pizza is being served, my body might be oriented towards the pizza as the food I desire to eat. We can also think of the way in which bodies are oriented towards tables as objects around which we eat our food, and the choices we make about who to sit with as further evidence of who we direct our attention towards. But orientations are not merely phenomenological descriptions of where we direct our attention, they also involve instructions – they *direct* us to 'follow a line that is drawn in advance' (2006, p. 16). For example, understanding the table as an object around which people of certain cultures communally eat food involves recognising how orientations are socially and historically organised. Choosing instead to eat your food on the floor whilst everyone else gathers around the table might be seen as deviant behaviour in some contexts. Orientations can therefore contribute to how space itself is organised, such that some objects appear more or less 'proximate' than others (2006, pp. 3; 16; 56). In cultures where people sit on the floor to eat, you may not find tables present at a buffet. Or, if none of your friends or family like pizza, then we might find that at the buffet pizza is not being served. These objects are less proximate, out of reach.

The proximity of objects is important, as whether or not something is readily within reach can affect our capacity for action and our ability to feel at home in various spaces. If I attend a buffet where the social expectation is that we eat on the floor, but I am used to eating at tables, I might initially feel uncomfortable and out of place. Ahmed's description of 'orientations' therefore takes inspiration from Heidegger's (1927/1962) use of the term as a description of our *familiarity* with the world we find ourselves thrown into. To show this, Ahmed offers the example of trying to navigate a room whilst blindfolded. If this is a room that we are familiar with, we can feel around for objects we recognise to spatially orient ourselves. Despite a lack of visual perception, we might not feel completely *dis*oriented (2006, p. 7). As we navigate the social world, our familiarity with various norms, traditions, customs, and other social practices can act as a guide to make that navigation more comfortable. But familiarity does not guarantee comfort. I can be

familiar with certain norms, such as the expectation that I eat pasta in the presence of my pizza-hating friends and family but still feel uncomfortable not being able to enjoy my favourite pizza in their company. I might avoid some of the discomfort of deviation, but the discomfort of conformity here seems to stem from the fact that I am not oriented around the sort of objects (pizza) that properly support my actions (enjoying a meal).

To explore the idea that orientations involve instructions that take us in certain directions, Ahmed begins by analysing heteronormativity and how orientations are involved in the production and reproduction of 'straightness' and 'queerness', both as sexual orientations and phenomenological effects. As she states, '[t]o follow a line might be a way of *becoming straight*, by not deviating at any point' (2006, p. 16 my emphasis). Within a heteronormative society, subjects are instructed to desire bodies of the 'opposite sex', to be oriented towards them, to 'follow a straight line' (2006, p. 70). Heteronormativity can therefore be phenomenologically understood as the repetition of orientations which organises social space such that 'same sex' bodies appear out of reach as an appropriate object of sexual desire. This analysis embraces Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2013) model of space as a 'field of action' (Ahmed, 2006, p. 65) that is shaped by the possibilities for bodies to extend and act within it. Within a heteronormative society, social space is organised such that following *straight* lines of orientation – getting married and having a (normative) family – are well supported. However, when bodily extension fails as one is not properly oriented around these institutions, it produces *queer* effects – you might feel a strange discomfort as your actions become inhibited. To offer a physical example of this, imagine that you are stood upright and are looking into a room that is tilted at 45 degrees. To your perception, that room appears slanted and you are unable to fully make sense of it, and so to correct that slant you can tilt your head 45 degrees to align your vision (see Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013, pp. 259–262). Put otherwise, that room appears *queer* and therefore you *straighten* up your vision to comfortably navigate it (Ahmed, 2006, p. 66).

Expanding upon this, we can understand following *straight* lines as being directed by norms, customs, traditions, and social practices, which potentially allow us to more

comfortably[77] navigate social environments. If we are familiar with the relevant norms, then Ahmed describes how we can 'sink' into the background of the social space we are navigating by 'sinking' into the grooves carved out by the repeated following of *straight* lines of orientation (2006, p. 135). For example, if am eating at a restaurant with my pizza-hating friends, then choosing to order pasta might allow me to 'sink' into the background more. If I were to order pizza, I would probably command attention instead as people question my preferences. On the other hand, if we are unfamiliar with norms, or cannot comfortably behave in the ways expected of us, then we might experience the *queer* effect of appearing 'slanted', failing to 'sink' into the background because we command attention. To explain this, Ahmed uses the example of tracing paper. If you imagine a piece of paper with a series of parallel vertical lines and then draw the same lines on a piece of tracing paper, when you place that tracing paper on top you can align it so that those lines are traces of the straight lines beneath it. They 'sink' into the background. However, if you turn the tracing paper slightly, it becomes 'out of line' with its background, and instead it appears 'slanted', 'wonky', or even '*queer*' (2006, p. 66).

If following *straight* lines of orientation can produce the bodily comfort of 'sinking' in, then we might think that those lines of orientation can themselves have a *straightening* effect on those who do not line up. In other words, the alignment of orientations 'depends on *straightening devices* that keep things in line' (2006, p. 66 my emphasis). A clear example of a 'straightening device' is heteronormativity which, through marrying straightness with that which is 'right, good, or normal' and queerness to that which is 'deviant', functions to 'correct' the 'slantwise direction of queer desire' (2006, p. 72). But this metaphor extends beyond heteronormativity. Ahmed also analyses 'whiteness' as a straightening device: '[white] bodies disappear into the "sea of whiteness" when they "line up" with the vertical' (2006, p. 137). Here, whiteness is a norm, it is the *straight* line against which bodies are repeatedly aligned, as opposed to simply a 'characteristic of bodies' (2006, p. 121). The ability for certain bodies to 'line up' with whiteness inevitably involves bodily characteristics such as skin colour, but understanding whiteness as a straightening device requires a recognition of how (contingently) white bodies have also come to inherit a white world. As Heidegger (1927/1962) reminds us, as 'beings-in-the-

[77] For some people, following *straight* lines of conformity may produce discomfort instead.

world' we always find ourselves situated within a shared world that is imbued with social and historical meaning. In this case, it is a world shaped, amongst other things, by a history of colonialism and racial violence. If orientations arrange space, then in inheriting a world that is 'oriented "around" whiteness', white people also '*inherit the reachability of some objects*' (2006, p. 126, emphasis in original). That is to say that white people may more easily extend themselves within a familiar and comfortable space of action.

When Ahmed refers to the 'reachability of objects', it is important to note that the sort of 'objects' under discussion here are not just physical objects, but can also include 'styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, even worlds' (2006, p. 126). For example, one reason why a white person might find the world of academia more accessible to them than a Black person is because they do not face the same racial discrimination that can hold back people of colour from believing in their academic abilities. As such, an academic job might also be more readily in reach for a white person whose capacities and aspirations have been properly supported by their environment. This captures the spatial and embodied dimensions of privilege given that the world of academia presents itself in phenomenologically different ways for different subjects. To be embodied as white allows one to comfortably 'sink' into that groove of whiteness that supports the ability for white subjects to fulfil their projects. But whilst being embodied as white certainly provides these affordances, Ahmed describes whiteness as a straightening device to capture the idea that people of colour are also encouraged to align themselves as much as possible with the '*straight*' line of whiteness and its attached values. For example, in the workplace a Black woman might feel stereotype threat and therefore regulate her behaviour to avoid confirming stereotypes such as Black women being too aggressive when raising complaints (see Williams & Skinta, 2021). Here, she '*straightens*' herself up to behave in ways that are considered 'civil', 'professional', 'well-mannered', or as stereotypes of people of colour would suggest, 'white'.

One reason why people might *straighten* themselves, assimilate to dominant norms and social practices, is to ensure that they can properly extend themselves into the world without their actions being inhibited. A Black woman might regulate her behaviour in the workplace to try and avoid provoking any microaggressions that would disrupt her day so that she can feel more at ease within the workplace. But this returns us to the concept

of habits – the comfort she seeks is ultimately dependent upon whether the regulation of her behaviour can become habitual within that space. For Ahmed, actions become habitual when they can be repeatedly performed, comfortably, without being inhibited or stopped. In other words, they do not 'command attention' (2006, p. 130). Importantly, habits are not just individual behaviours but are supported by a history of various subjects routinely engaging in them, carving out grooves in social space that allow those engaging in such habits to 'sink' into the background. For example, we can consider Western customs as something which support the habitual action of sitting at a table to eat food. Being able to comfortably navigate many social spaces as a white person is supported by all those reasons I have discussed: that world is oriented around whiteness, which places objects in reach for white bodies, enabling the capacity for white subjects to act uninhibited. One of the privileges experienced by white people then is exactly the fact that whiteness is never encountered as an obstacle, it goes unnoticed. If to *be* white is to be comfortable, then we can therefore understand whiteness itself to also be a habit[78] (2006, p. 132).

As we have seen, orientations involve the ways in which bodies are directed towards objects, and how space is made familiar through this bodily extension. *Disorientation* occurs when those orientations fail (2006, p. 160), in those *queer* moments where one deviates from *straight* lines, where that bodily extension is disrupted, uncomfortable, or fails altogether (2006, p. 11). Moments of disorientation can therefore involve deviation from normative behaviour, the disrupting of those habitual actions that we take for granted. So, if I attend a buffet and take my food to eat at a table but notice that everyone else is eating their food on the floor, then I might feel disoriented and out of place. Recognising space as a field of action, if the act of eating at tables becomes disrupted and unsettled, then this uncomfortable feeling can transform our relation to the space we find ourselves in and 'shatter one's sense of confidence in the ground' we expected to support our actions (2006, p. 157). The 'ground' here represents those norms, customs, traditions, and social practices that we are familiar with, and which support us to comfortably

[78] This is in line with the view I expressed in Chapter 2 that identity is something that we *do*. Whiteness is a habit of oppression because white subjects can comfortably 'sink' into white modes of being that maintain a racially oppressive status quo.

navigate social environments. When we encounter unfamiliar or hostile social spaces, moments of disorientation are uncomfortable because they represent a failure to 'sink' into that new or hostile ground (2006, p. 157). What was habitual therefore becomes disrupted as we find ourselves commanding attention in ways we previously did not.[79]

To explore this through an example, we can see moments of disorientation in the phenomenological experience of a gay couple being stared at in public. This experience involves a failure to sink into the background as one commands attention, reduced to an object of the heteronormative gaze. The action of holding your 'same sex' partner's hand is therefore no longer supported. Instead, the heteronormative gaze acts as a straightening device which seeks to correct the 'slant' of queer desire, rearranging social space such that queer bodies appear distant through the absence of public displays of queer affection. For Ahmed, the idea that one is reduced to an object in moments of disorientation is key for explaining, phenomenologically, why disorientations inhibit our actions[80] (2006, p. 159). A key tenet of phenomenology is understanding the self as *embodied*, a revision of the Cartesian separation of mind and body that recognises how our bodies serve as our point of departure – they orient us in the world (see Freeman, 2017). However, as critical phenomenology shows us, oppression can result in marginalised people experiencing themselves as an object through gaze of the oppressor (see Fanon, 1952/2008; Young, 1980; Yancy, 2016a). The splitting of subject from object here therefore inhibits the intentionality of marginalised subjects as the oppressor's gaze transforms them from the mode of 'I can', as a subject, to 'I cannot' as they are reduced to derivatised modes of being[81] (Fanon, 1952/2008, pp. 82–86; Young, 1980, p. 150; Freeman, 2017, pp. 654–657).

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[79] We could imagine someone who makes a habit of being intentionally counternormative and thereby becomes comfortable with commanding attention in this way. However, there is a difference between habits in the individual sense of someone becoming comfortable with a routine activity, and habits in the phenomenological sense as orientations that are historically and collectively well-established ways of living one's life. We might get used to commanding attention when we make a habit of taking *queer* orientations, but these orientations are not 'habitual' in the way that Ahmed is describing.

[80] This links with my phenomenological analysis of microaggressions in Chapter 2, and how they diminish their targets' subjectivity such that they are left with an inhibited intentionality.

[81] Here, the distinction between can/cannot lines up with the distinction between subject/object because the subject represents a site of possibility and action whereas objects do not act upon the world.

This does not mean that marginalised people cannot actually act within the world, but that feelings of not being welcome, of being dangerous, deviant, and even unworthy all become 'a background and constrained context' of disorientation in which 'one's self, others, and the world are experienced in a way that can inhibit the projects one pursues' (Freeman, 2017, p. 357). This is why adopting a critical lens here is crucial, as it encourages us to acknowledge how disorientation is itself 'unevenly distributed' (Ahmed, 2006, p. 159). Within worlds that are oriented around systems of oppression, it is marginalised people who routinely lose their way, find the familiar out of reach, appear *queer,* fail to 'sink', and command attention as they try to extend themselves into space that does not support their actions. All of this, of course, is a source of existential discomfort. A politics that seeks to encourage dominantly situated subjects to acknowledge how their positionality grants them a level of comfort not afforded to marginalised groups has much to gain from Ahmed's phenomenological analysis. As such, my interest is in how we might characterise a politics that centres this more complex understanding of discomfort, of being *disoriented*. In the closing chapter of *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed shifts her attention towards the potential for what she calls a 'politics of disorientation'. I shall follow by clarifying her analysis and build upon it to argue that we should embrace disorientation as a politics which seeks to disrupt our habits of oppression.

## 5.3 A Politics of Disorientation

Although disorientation seems to be a negative experience, Ahmed nonetheless claims that 'moments of disorientation are vital' (2006, p. 157). When one loses their way, they may feel discomfort as the ground fails to support their actions, but the 'loss' experienced in these moments is not empty. Instead, moments of disorientation open up the possibility of inhabiting the world otherwise. For example, a queer person whose sexuality is not accepted by their family might fail to be oriented around the traditional heteronormative nuclear family[82] as a source of love and support and thus experience the

[82] Although the term 'fail' has a seemingly negative connotation here, Jack Halberstam offers a queer reading of failure as 'a refusal of mastery' (2011, p. 11; also see Singh, 2017) and 'a way of refusing to

family home as a hostile space. Yet, as many queer people do, they may find their own chosen family amongst queer friends. As Ahmed describes, the act of calling such queer friendship groups one's family, of following *queer* rather than *straight* lines of orientation, can produce joy through the 'uncanny effect of a familiar form becoming strange' (2006, p. 177). If moments of disorientation often accompany *queer* orientations, then we need to shift our perspective away from disorientation as something that is wholly negative, and towards a recognition of how these moments of disorientation can help us to disrupt those habitual orientations around hegemonic institutions such as the heterosexual family. Therefore, the key question for Ahmed when considering the possibilities for a politics of disorientation is 'what we do with such moments of disorientation' (2006, p. 158).

The project that Ahmed advances is one which investigates how these moments of losing our way can be transformative, reminding us that '"getting lost" still takes us somewhere' (2006, p. 7). Nevertheless, whilst she recognises the transformative potential of disorientation, Ahmed also warns us against 'legislating' it as a politics (2006, p. 158). She claims that making disorientation a responsibility for *queer* people is too strong a demand as it may not be 'psychically or materially possible or sustainable' to commit to (2006, p. 177). Furthermore, whilst there can be joy in deviating from *straight* lines, such as when we call our queer friends our family, Ahmed worries that legislating disorientation as a politics would simply rewrite which orientations we are expected to take. In doing so, those *queer* lines of orientation are no longer deviations, but instead straighten up and produce straightening effects (2006, pp. 174–175). For example, if a politics of disorientation demands that women display stereotypically 'masculine' traits as a way of deviating from expected 'feminine' behaviours, then being oriented around those 'masculine' traits would be legislated as the new norm. I interpret Ahmed's hesitancy here as a worry that if *queer* people are obligated to deviate, then it opens up a line of critique

acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline' (2011, p. 88). This echoes my criticisms of the 'counterproductivity' critique of anger in Chapter 3. It also lends support to the 'politics of disorientation' I shall unpack here, since both failure and disorientation involve losing our way in the world (2011, p. 121; also see Ahmed, 2006, p. 170), but doing so resists slipping into well-established habits of oppression.

where people can be accused of not deviating enough, or in the right ways, where sufficiently deviating in certain ways becomes a new norm.

My interest, however, is in what sort of demands a politics of disorientation might make upon those who already comfortably follow *straight* lines of orientation. If we follow what Ahmed is suggesting, a politics of disorientation appears to involve encouraging people to experience the discomfort of deviating from *straight* lines, which I have previously stated involve various norms, traditions, customs, and other social practices. In this sense, such a politics is counternormative since it seeks to resist oppressive norms. Yet, to imply that this fully characterises what a politics of disorientation is feels reductive, akin to arguing that a man embracing 'feminine' qualities is sufficient to put the politics into practice. Instead, I want to argue that a politics of disorientation is also concerned with how subjects are attuned to the *queer*, and how they allow themselves to be transformed by moments of disorientation which disrupt our habits of oppression. To make it clear, I am using the term '*queer*' here in the same phenomenological way that Ahmed does[83] to describe that which appears strange or out of place – those alternative ways of existing which run counter to what someone considers ordinary in a given context. Therefore, such a politics is concerned with how we respond to *queer* moments of disorientation which disrupt hegemonic ways of life.

To help us explore how moments of disorientation can disrupt our habits of oppression, Helen Ngo highlights:

> an important distinction between habit as repetitive or *habitual* gesture that has 'sedimented' into the body, and habit as a more general bodily orientation or that to which we have become *habituated* (2016, p. 854, emphasis in original).

Ngo describes habituation as a sort of orientation to the world which produces familiarity, and thus entails habitual action (2016, p. 849). For example, when a straight

[83] This anticipates a potential criticism that I am taking queerness as the model for all oppressions. On the contrary, Ahmed's project is not one that offers a phenomenology of queer identity that is then extended as a basis of all forms of oppression, but one that queers phenomenology by illuminating the relationship between social and spatial orientations and how *queerness* disrupts these relations by failing to follow established orientations (see 2006, pp. 23–24).

couple hold hands in public, this is habitual in the sense that the action is routine and readily available to the couple – they are used to holding each other's hand without thinking about it. But this habit also represents a bodily habituation to a heteronormative world – they are properly oriented along *straight* lines within the heterosexual field of potential action. For a queer couple, holding hands in public might be an intense source of discomfort because it commands attention in virtue of not 'sinking' into the background like public displays of heterosexual affection can. However, the idea that some people are better habituated to a particular world should not be read as though habits are passively 'sedimented' into the body, as Ngo contends that habits have a 'distinctively "lived" dimension' (2016, p. 864). For example, a heterosexual couple habitually holding hands in public do so without ever recognising that holding hands in this way is a habit for heterosexual people because it seems an ordinary thing to do.

This is where the relationship between habits and norms becomes clearer. As discussed earlier, heteronormativity can be described as having a 'straightening' effect on bodies, such that they are oriented along *straight* lines towards bodies of the 'opposite sex'. At the same time, repeated orientations towards bodies constructed as oppositely sexed deepen the grooves carved out by *straight* line of desire, making them easier to 'sink' into, and thus calcifying heterosexuality as the norm. In other words, heteronormativity habituates bodies into following *straight* lines of desire such that 'opposite sex' attraction becomes habitual. But there is more to heteronormativity than simply being attracted to the 'opposite sex' – it also habituates bodies by directing them towards institutions such as marriage and the (normative) family as sites for the reproduction of heterosexuality. In this way, projects such as getting married and creating nuclear families also become habitual for heterosexual people as they are actively sedimented as the well-trodden, and perhaps expected ways of living one's life.

Although norms and habits are related, they are not one and the same. Thinking of microaggressions as an oppressive social practice, for example, suggests that they may be a habit for dominantly situated subjects. They can be comments or actions that microaggressors easily slip into without realising, and at least for those who lack an awareness of what microaggressions are, they command little attention. Yet, it seems

wrong to claim that there is *always*[84] a norm underpinning microaggressions as a 'standard of behaviour' that people should meet (see McTernan, 2018, pp. 279–280). Understanding microaggressions as a habit of oppression still relates to oppressive norms in the sense that microaggressions police those norms. This could be by reinforcing oppressive standards, such as when someone asks a woman why they do not have children, or by sanctioning someone for falling outside such standards, for example by tone policing Black people when they display anger towards racism. This suggests that microaggressors typically engage in such habits because they have internalised those oppressive attitudes and norms, and policing them helps to preserve the social order to which they are habituated, cementing those embodied and spatial dimensions of privilege which enable them to comfortably navigate the world.

To better capture how microaggressions achieve this, and the role that disorientation can play in these scenarios, I return to George Yancy's description of his experience of entering an elevator with a white woman:

> I walk into the elevator and she feels apprehension. Her body shifts nervously and her heart beats more quickly as she clutches her purse more closely to her. She feels anxiety in the pit of her stomach... Like choking black smoke, my Blackness permeates the enclosed space of the elevator (2016a, p. 21).

Yancy explains how habitual experiences, such as taking an elevator, exemplify the ways in which we '*inhabit* space[s] of familiarity' (2016a, p. 32, emphasis in original), and so for both Yancy and the white woman, the habitual activity of taking an elevator becomes disrupted through this encounter. However, they experience disorientation in different ways. For Yancy, the woman's bodily reaction to his presence dislodges him from his habitual activity because he begins to command attention – he can no longer 'sink' into the background. For the white woman, however, her disorientation occurs in virtue of being positioned in proximity to a Black body, a body that usually appears out of reach within her white world. It is a product of how Yancy's presence reconfigures her

[84] Sometimes there may be a norm in the sense that participating in a microaggression is a requirement to be included in some social setting, such as the pressure to engage in or laugh along with misogynistic jokes to feel accepted into a friendship group of men.

relationship to that space, resulting in the elevator being experienced as an unfamiliar confined space from which she cannot escape.[85] Notably, the disorientation experienced by both parties here is uneven. Yancy experiences a sustained disorientation as his subjectivity is curtailed through the white gaze, reducing him to a 'dangerous' object. On the other hand, the white woman is able to manoeuvre through her disorientation back to another familiar habit of visibly expressing her anxiety when forced to navigate an unexpected encounter with a Black man[86] (Ngo, 2016, p. 854).

When I say that a politics of disorientation is concerned with how dominantly situated subjects allow themselves to be transformed by moments of disorientation, it is clear that the woman in Yancy's example is achieving exactly the opposite. Within the unsettling moment of disorientation, she returns to the oppressive habit of enacting microaggressions as familiar ground which she can comfortably sink into. This serves as evidence of the ways in which she is habituated towards whiteness – she is 'not simply influenced by racist practices, but she is the *vehicle* through which such practices get performed and sustained' (Yancy, 2016a, p. 40, emphasis in original). On the contrary, to embrace the potential for disorientation to promote an anti-racist way of living, one 'would not aim to overcome the disorientation of the *queer* moment but instead inhabit [its] intensity' (Ahmed, 2006, p. 107). This could include sitting with the discomfort of being made aware of one's complicity in oppression as a pedagogical tool. For example, a white person can of course actively engage in disorientation by going to an anti-racist workshop, becoming aware of their racial biases and white privilege, and having the comfort these provide disrupted. However, if this moment of discomfort does not stretch beyond the confines of that workshop, transforming how they relate to other people, objects, and the spaces they navigate, then they have failed to properly engage with disorientation as a politics.

[85] Yancy discusses how we experience a similar feeling of being confined when an elevator breaks down, shifting our experience of being-in the elevator to one of being-trapped-in it (2016, p. 32).

[86] This habit might not be conscious, but an automatic somatic response that follows racist social scripts. An alternative explanation for why she becomes anxious might be because Yancy is a man, and she may feel unsafe due to previous experiences of gender-based violence. This further highlights the ambiguity of microaggressions.

That being said, I mentioned earlier that disorientation tends to be seen as negative – losing one's way and commanding attention can be unsettling experiences. Indeed, I previously analysed the ways in which microaggressions are a form of existential violence that diminish the subjectivity of marginalised people, inhibit their intentionality, and degrade their sense of self. Each of these is encapsulated with the concept of disorientation (see 2006, p. 20), so why advocate for disorientation as the foundation for our anti-oppressive politics? The reason for this is that at the heart of Ahmed's project is a recognition that *queer* orientations still support action, even if they take us off the beaten track. As *orientations*, they still direct us, transforming space to gather *queer* objects within what we might think of as *queer* worlds of sense. It is within these worlds that *queer* objects might find themselves habituated and able to 'sink' in, such as when queer people are at a gathering with their chosen family. To follow *queer* orientations is therefore still to live a life worth living, even if it commands attention from others (2006, p. 178). In recognition of this, Ahmed claims that moments of disorientation are vital because they can open us up to the potential of being oriented in these alternative ways. Thus, a key component of a politics of disorientation that I want to take from this is a commitment[87] to resist devaluing that which appears *queer* within your own world of sense.

This point is important because disorientation is not always a product of being made aware of one's complicity in oppression. The woman in Yancy's example was never brought up on her behaviour, but nonetheless experienced disorientation through a *queer* encounter with the unfamiliar – the Black body. If microaggressions are a way of policing marginalised groups, then in Ahmed's terminology, they correct *queer* orientations and reinforce the *straight* lines that the groups being targeted are expected to follow. But to find value in *queer* orientations is to resist the oppressive habit of trying to *straighten* up one's orientations, and so moments of disorientation present opportunities for us to question and shape the way that we live our own lives (2006, p. 177). Through this, we might come to question the oppressive norms that we have internalised and subsequently disrupt some of our own participation in habits of

[87] This would not be a perfect duty in the Kantian sense, but a commitment that they take steps to attune themselves towards the *queer*.

oppression such as microaggressions. This is much more involved than simply reflecting on one's biases and privilege as it implicates not simply the individual in the pursuit of self-transformation, but also the ways that they relate to their social environment. In other words, disorientation has the potential to destabilise the ground of those oppressive worlds of sense within which dominantly situated subjects are habituated.

As it stands, I have characterised a politics of disorientation as involving people allowing themselves to be transformed by moments of disorientation. This could involve specific instances where their habits of oppression become disrupted, for example, by attending an anti-racist workshop or being made aware of their microaggressive behaviours. More fundamentally, however, it involves an appreciation of *queer* ways of life. But for those who are habituated to oppressive worlds of sense, it is clear that embracing disorientation as a politics is going to be less than simple. They are likely to be oblivious to their own habits of oppression, and so it will often fall upon others to actively disorient those people. My previous analyses of anger and cringe as responses to microaggressions can be therefore understood as ways of disorientating microaggressors. Anger is a very forthright response that directly confronts the microaggressor, *drawing attention* to the fact that they are engaging in habits of oppression which otherwise would not command attention. Moreover, cringe can be especially disorienting as it draws particular attention to how the microaggressor is not portraying themselves in the way that they might think they are. This can result in the microaggressor becoming estranged from themselves, producing a *queer* effect that often bubbles up into embarrassment.

However, in imagining the potential for a politics of disorientation to challenge our habits of oppression in sustained ways, the onus also needs to be placed upon those who are deeply habituated to oppressive worlds of sense and how they properly attune themselves to moments of disorientation. Therefore, to explore how a politics of disorientation might be put into practice, I shall introduce Maria Lugones' (1987) concept of 'world-travelling' and analyse it as a practice of disorientation. This builds upon the claim that *queer* orientations can orient us around *queer* worlds, whilst recognising that disorientation is a frequent occurrence for those who, out of necessity, navigate various worlds of sense. More specifically, I show how disorientation is cultivated through world-travelling as both an *epistemic* and *existential* practice. In the first sense, world-travelling

can challenge the worldviews of dominantly situated subjects and encourage them to critically reflect on their ignorances. In the second sense, world-travelling enables us to become more attuned to our existence as *multiplicitous* beings who exist across a multitude of different worlds of sense (see Ortega, 2016). When done appropriately, world-travelling therefore disrupts habits of oppression and opens up dominantly situated subjects to alternative, *queer* ways of living.

## 5.4 To *Queer* Worlds

Lugones uses the concept of world-travelling to describe a practice that marginalised people engage in as they shift from 'the mainstream construction of life where [they are] constructed as an outsider to other constructions of life where [they are] more or less "at home"' (1987, p. 3). In other words, marginalised people acquire the flexibility to travel between dominant worlds where they are constructed *as* marginalised, and marginal worlds where their subjectivity is no longer fully understood through homogenising and inferiorising logics of oppression. Although Lugones does not offer a concrete definition of what constitutes these 'worlds of sense',[88] it is clear from her descriptions that they represent something more than just physical space, or even just a particular worldview. They involve people, their cultures and languages, and social environments with various norms, traditions, customs, and social practices. They are also constituted by the relationships between those who inhabit those worlds, the power dynamics at play, ways of understanding, concepts, and so on (1987, p. 9). For example, we might think of school as being a specific world of sense where students are subjected to certain rules, with teachers sitting in a certain power relation to them and to each other.

There also exists a plurality of worlds of sense, and these worlds are not discrete units but overlap with each other. A queer student not only navigates the school environment as a physical and institutional space but does so in the context of also inhabiting a heteronormative world of sense. Importantly, the overlapping of these worlds gives rise to different experiences, and so in its most basic sense, Lugones is using the term 'world'

[88] I use the terms 'worlds' and 'worlds of sense' interchangeably as Lugones herself does (see 2003).

to offer a 'description of experience' itself (1987, p. 11). Being at school as a queer child is very likely to be a different experience in a heteronormative world compared to one that more readily embraces queer identities. Moreover, some worlds of sense will be more 'dominant' than others when they are highly stable and cast a large sphere of influence. This can result in the destabilising of 'marginal' worlds of sense. As Lugones notes, the traditional construction of Northern New Mexican life is 'highly unstable' because the 'racist, ethnocentrist, money-centred' Anglo world of sense seeks the 'imperialist destruction of traditional Hispano "worlds"' (1987, p. 10). Consequently, some ways of understanding ourselves and experiencing the world will be more readily available, whilst others will be more difficult to sustain.

This can generate discomfort for marginalised people who struggle to navigate dominant worlds of sense, perhaps due to a lack of familiarity or shared history with the people who inhabit that world, or a lack of confidence (or disagreement) with the norms that they are expected to follow there (Lugones, 1987, p. 12). Returning to the language used by Ngo, because they are not habituated to those dominant worlds, they cannot properly 'sink' into the ground in ways that allow them to act habitually. Instead, their encounters with dominant worlds can be disorienting. We see this when marginalised people are constructed within these worlds as homogenous and inferior, promoting a double consciousness where they see themselves through the eyes of the oppressor as well as their own (see DuBois, 1903/2004). Yet, world-travelling can also be a resistant practice. As Marianna Ortega claims, since marginalised people are well versed in world-travelling, they have 'access to other worlds in which the self is constructed differently and thus can see resistant possibilities that lead to resistant practices' (2016, p. 99). Rather than experience the self as a contradiction, the marginalised world-traveller can see that those dominant worlds which construct them as inferior are worlds that need to be changed.

Given this, a key question posed by Lugones is how *dominantly situated people* may deliberately engage in this resistant world-travelling, and what sort of effects it may produce. It is worth highlighting that although world-travelling can be a conscious

activity,[89] such as when marginalised people have to travel to dominant worlds of sense, it can also be something we do without being aware of it. This might be because we remain within the sphere of influence of dominant worlds such that our experiences are relatively similar across the worlds we traverse. For example, a middle-class white student going to university for the first time is likely to be well habituated to the sorts of social practices and power dynamics present in that new environment. Yet, by going to university, this middle-class white student has the potential to be transformed through their encounters with others. Imagine that they attend an anti-racist workshop where they learn about racial microaggressions and hear from people of colour about their own experiences of microaggressions. This might disrupt the student's understanding of what racism can look like. Building in Ahmed's conceptual framework then, we can understand attending an anti-racist workshop as travelling to a *queer* world of sense. Generally, *queer* worlds are those which dominant subjects are not habituated to and so are unlikely to be able to 'sink' into. In the case of the anti-racist workshop, this world is one where white people are challenged to critically reflect on their whiteness, understand that racism can be unintentional and ambiguous, and sit with the discomfort of confronting one's complicity in racial oppression.

Given this, world-travelling is, in part, an *epistemic* practice that may enable us to understand things from another person's perspective. With microaggressions in mind, this can aid dominantly situated subjects in recognising how certain patterns of behaviour are in fact habits of oppression which homogenise and inferiorise marginalised people. This is one reason why world-travelling is an important practice for Lugones, since it can help us to recognise the full subjectivity of others (1987, p. 17), recognising that there is more to them beyond our 'interests and fears and imagination'[90]

[89] Even if someone is not aware of the concept of 'world-travelling', they may colloquially feel like they are 'in another world', or at least might be aware of the phenomenological features, such as disorientation, that can accompany world-travelling.

[90] Lugones discusses how world-travelling can help us to 'lovingly' perceive the full subjectivity of others (1987, p. 17) as a counter to what Marilyn Frye describes as an 'arrogant' perception (see 1983, p. 69) which involves 'skilfully organiz[ing] the world and everything in it with reference to the arrogant perceiver's desires and interests' (Ortega, 2006, p. 59). In this sense, arrogant perception seems to be related to the concept of derivatisation (see Cahill, 2010), which I analysed as a phenomenological feature of experiencing microaggressions in Chapter 2.

(Frye, 1983, p. 75). A man who is socialised to see women primarily as 'childbearers' and 'homemakers' might think that having children and being supported by a male 'breadwinner' is constitutive of a good life. However, travelling to a feminist world of sense might challenge that worldview when he sees women living fulfilling lives beyond the reductive categories that they are otherwise placed in. Within this *queer* world, he might encounter women who are happily unmarried, primary earners, child-free, and so on.[91] Of course, this challenge to his worldview is unlikely to completely transform his outlook, and he may even travel to these worlds with abject horror. But this just means that there are certain considerations to make when considering how the world-traveller can practise a politics of disorientation.

One concern here, however, is that when conducted from a position of dominance, world-travelling can become a form of 'epistemic tourism'. This occurs when the world-traveller 'consumes knowledge and culture, interprets information within her existing system of understanding, and takes herself to have contributed to her own personal and larger social development' (Bowman, 2020, p. 484). This echoes Kruks' worry about how even practices such as world-traveling can adhere to a politics of self-transformation (2005, p. 182) when done for self-serving ends which allow the epistemic tourist to pitch themselves as worldly and open-minded. Imagine that the middle-class white student from earlier is frustrated by the concept of microaggressions at the anti-racist workshop they attend, expressing that 'it is not racist to ask someone where they are from'. When a Black student in attendance tries to explain the potential connotation of such a question, the white student defensively tells them to 'calm down' because they were only sharing their opinion. Afterwards, they feel proud of themselves for going to the workshop but remain unconvinced that something can be racist if it was unintentional. This epistemic tourist fails to put a politics of disorientation into practice because they hold too tightly onto their existing ways of understanding and resist the discomfort of looking at things from a different perspective as prompted by the *queer* encounter of the anti-racist workshop. Instead, they treat the act of attending an anti-racist workshop as something

[91] He might also have his worldview challenged within his own dominant world of sense by women who are enraged by the gendered division of labour – these counternormative cases are not necessary to contest his beliefs.

that is laudable in and of itself, without it supporting any sustained changes in their behaviours.

One issue, of course, is that it is actually very difficult to world-travel without bringing certain expectations and ways of understanding along. As Sandra Lee Bartky asks, 'how can one travel without luggage?' (1998, p. 388). This question is especially pertinent when considering the difficulties in leaving 'the rules of one's world at the door if you follow those rules unconsciously' (Campbell, 1999, pp. 232–233). In the above example, we see the white student policing the tone of the Black student who they interpret as being angry, thus enforcing white rules of civility and reinforcing pernicious stereotypes. Furthermore, the fact that they struggle with the idea that racism can be unintentional speaks to how difficult it is for them to travel to a world where that is a commonly accepted fact. Because it is so difficult to world-travel without bringing along one's baggage, Bowman suggests that this can result in 'white people laying claim to "worlds" that were previously zones of comfort, escape from, resistance to white dominance in other spheres' (2020, p. 480). Lugones describes this sort of world-travelling as 'agonistic' – an attempt to 'try to conquer the other "world"' (Lugones, 1987, p. 16) by, in the student's case, imposing one's own dominant understanding of the concept of racism. As such, when world-travelling is done in service of a politics of self-transformation, it is very likely going to be agonistic since it involves subsuming that world within a defined project of self-development.

To counter these worries, Lugones suggests that for dominantly situated subjects, world-travelling should be 'playful', involving an 'openness to surprise, openness to being a fool, [and an] openness to self-construction or reconstruction' (Lugones, 1987, p. 17). In practice, the playful world-traveller would be open-minded, relinquish the rules of the worlds they depart, and embrace the uncertainty that travelling brings. The student could therefore playfully engage with the workshop by being open to new ways of understanding how racism functions and to the idea that they themselves may be complicit in unconsciously perpetuating racism. Through this, the student might experience the double consciousness of being constructed in contradictory ways, as both 'against' and 'complicit in' racism. But the playful world-traveller would find these contradictions a source of wonder and insight, because they have a deflated sense of self-

importance and remain open to how these moments of disorientation reveal alternative ways of understanding and of living one's life. As such, world-travelling playfully appears to avoid slipping into a politics of self-transformation because it is more concerned with how we are continuously transformed through world-travelling as a sustained practice, rather than a discrete end goal.

Nevertheless, there are some issues with this framing of world-travelling as 'playful'. First, describing world-travelling in this way suggests that there is little at stake for dominantly situated subjects when world-travelling (Ortega, 2016, p. 141). On the contrary, if world-travelling is done in service of a politics of disorientation, this should carry tangible consequences for how subjects navigate those worlds given that the usual habits which otherwise allow them to 'sink' into the background will be disrupted. Since travelling to *queer* worlds of sense can be deeply disorienting in this way, world-travelling is also likely to feel unsettling rather than playful (see Bowman, 2020, p. 142). We might then consider the scenario of the 'hyper-impressionable' world-traveller who, in trying to be playful, adopts such a gleeful sense of wonder towards the adventure of world-travelling that they immediately defer to the worldviews and ways of life that they encounter. Whereas the epistemic tourist resists the epistemic friction of having their worldviews challenged because they hold tightly onto their own existing norms and values, this 'hyper-impressionable' traveller avoids epistemic friction entirely since they do not actually engage any existing worldview to be challenged. Rather than put a politics of disorientation into practice, this impressionable traveller therefore slips into other habits of oppression by being overly deferential to marginalised people[92] and homogenising their experiences based on their limited encounters. This suggests that playful world-travelling needs to be supplemented to ensure that the world-traveller is appropriately transformed by their encounters.

With these worries in mind, Ortega recommends that dominantly situated subjects world-travel in a 'critical' sense, which requires the world-traveller to 'be engaged in an ongoing process of evaluation and interpretation of not only what is learned through

[92] See Taíwò (2022) for an in-depth critique of 'deference politics' and how it actually absolves dominantly situated subjects of responsibility by 'passing the mic' to marginalised people (2022, p. 75).

traveling but also of the very practices of traveling across worlds' (2016, p. 131). This involves more than just being open-minded, requiring that we are critical of our own social location as we travel, and pay attention to how we contend with (and spread the load of) the baggage that we do bring with us from our dominant worlds. A critical attitude is also important to practising a politics of disorientation, since world-travelling can involve 'ruptures of everyday habits' (Ortega, 2016, p. 129). In a feminist world of sense, a man treating women in habitually sexist ways is likely to be quickly disrupted by reactions which are critical of his behaviour, hopefully prompting him to reflect on his oppressive habits. The disruption of these habits is one way in which dominantly situated subjects can experience disorientation, and the *queer* effect of commanding attention. The critical world-traveller would refrain from fleeing from these vital moments of disorientation, reflecting on how this impulse is a desire to return to the comfort of dominant ways of understanding.

Building upon this, it is helpful to consider how these moments of disorientation also involve an inversion of the *queer*. In this feminist world, it is the habitually sexist man who looks out of place, or *queer*, as he fails to be properly oriented towards feminist ideals. He experiences the double consciousness of being seen as sexist by others whilst considering himself to treat women well. Given the existence of a plurality of worlds, world-travelling allows us to recognise how there are a multitude of different ways we can experience ourselves across these worlds. In some worlds we will sink into *straight* orientations, whilst in others, we will produce *queer* effects. Therefore, these moments of disorientation are not just vital epistemic tools that allow us to recognise certain habits as oppressive, they also dislocate the subject from the imaginary of the unified self. The habitually sexist man now recognises himself as being constructed as both sexist and not-sexist. But the upshot for critical world-travelling is that we are required to extend this recognition to others, to experience others in multi-faceted ways which resist the masterful logics of oppression which encourage us to reduce and homogenise. The 'angry Black woman' can instead be recognised as being passionate, assertive, and upholding her own self-worth. In this way, world-travelling is also a deeply *existential* practice that can reveal to the world-traveller a multiplicitous self that defies the homogenising logics of oppression.

This insight is captured by Lugones herself, who imagines world-travelling as a 'shift from being one person to being a different person' across those various worlds of sense (1987, p. 11). There is an *ontological plurality* in Lugones' account, based on the belief that there is no unified self but instead a plurality of selves which we travel between (2003, p. 57). As such, world-travelling reveals the self as *multiple*, rejecting the atomistic, unified, and masterful self of modernity (see Ortega, 2016, pp. 114–116). Whilst I welcome this rejection, I share Ortega's worry that Lugones' ontological plurality characterises world-travelling as a practice of 'self-travelling' (2016, p. 97) as we manoeuvre between our multiple selves. To sidestep this, and any ontological concerns it may bring, I follow Ortega in embracing an *existential plurality*. This view claims that whilst there remains an 'existential sense of being an "I"' (2016, p. 114), world-travelling is 'a practice in which the multiplicitous self has access to an opening or aperture to different worlds' (Ortega, 2016, p. 89, my emphasis). In other words, the self is *multiplicitous* rather than multiple; it is a 'being-in-worlds' that exists across various worlds of sense, and is experienced differently 'depending on the dominant norms, practices, and relations of power at work' (2016, p. 93). So, whilst I am a student, I am also a child, a friend, a board game enthusiast and so on, and the salience of these aspects of my multiplicitous self will shift depending on the environments I am navigating.

One reason why it is important for dominantly situated subjects to world-travel then is because, as an *existential* practice, it can help them become more attuned[93] to their own multiplicity. As I previous noted, just as others may appear *queer* in your own world of sense, you may experience disorientation and appear *queer* within those marginal worlds where they find comfort whilst you fail to 'sink' into your habitual actions. Just as world-travelling can allow marginalised people to develop a double consciousness by recognising how they are constructed in contradictory ways across worlds of sense, the same is true for dominantly situated subjects whereby world-travelling can animate, in different and perhaps contradictory ways, various aspects of the multiplicitous self. As such, this practice gestures towards what José Medina calls a 'kaleidoscopic'

[93] Given that my account denies a view of the self as unified and atomistic for how it is underpinned by an oppressive logic of mastery (see Ortega, 2016; Yancy, 2016a; Singh, 2017), this suggests that deepening our attunement to multiplicity is a way in which we can resist such logics.

consciousness which 'includes the multiplicity of perspectives required for genuine open-mindedness and for avoiding the arrogant white perception that keeps excluding even when it pretends to acknowledge' (2013, p. 58). Therefore, the existential nature of critical world-travelling can bolster its epistemic benefits. If the dominantly situated world-traveller is not open to recognising the multiple ways in which they are constructed across not just dominant, but also *queer* worlds of sense, then world-travelling is unlikely to produce positive epistemic effects.

One concern, however, is that becoming attuned to one's multiplicity can produce a 'psychic restlessness' as the world-traveller experiences themselves not only as a contradiction, but as a *problem* within marginal worlds of sense (Ortega, 2016, p. 129). This can destabilise one's sense of self and produce a desire to flee back to the comfort of familiar worlds, reaffirming the importance of sitting with discomfort as an anti-oppressive pedagogical tool. Allowing oneself to be transformed by disorientation when encountering themselves as a problem is vital to what Yancy calls 'unsuturing'. In the context of race, Yancy describes how white people are 'sutured' because they fail to recognise the ways in which they are constructed through their whiteness, and how this construction relies on sociohistorical factors outside of their own control (2016b, pp. 254–257). The 'sutured' subject is therefore an imaginary which denies the fact that 'we are always already beyond ourselves, dispossessed by forces of interpellation' (Yancy, 2016a, p. 256). To 'unsuture', on the other hand, is to 'be touched by epistemologies, sensibilities, and attitudes that counter my sense of the world' (Sealey, 2019, p. 101). By travelling to an anti-racist world of sense, the white world-traveller may be confronted by the very idea that their whiteness is a problem, regardless of their own commitments to tackling racism. Thus, despite the potential for 'psychic restlessness', experiencing oneself as a *problem* through world-travelling is crucial for dominantly situated subjects to understand how the embodied and spatial comforts they enjoy are contingent upon the maintenance of oppressive fictions.

Taking all of this into account, I want to wrap up by articulating three commitments that I think the critical world-traveller ought to make, especially in the context of tackling microaggressions. First, they should embrace moments of disorientation and reflect on their habits which have become disrupted. How has their privilege allowed them to

comfortably navigate their dominant worlds of sense without commanding attention? Why do microaggressions fail to command attention within dominant worlds of sense, and in what ways may they constitute habits of oppression? Second, the world-traveller should reflect on the value they place in the *queer* worlds they travel to and the sorts of actions which can be habitually performed there. What value do they place on counternormative ways of life? Why do *queer* orientations command their attention? Finally, they should reflect on how the homogenising and inferiorising logics of oppression function to deny the multiplicitous self. How does experiencing oneself through the eyes of another disrupt one's self-understanding? In what ways do microaggressions, as a form of existential violence, diminish the capacity for subjects to understand themselves as multiplicitous beings? The various questions raised here are open ended and exploratory, indicative of a politics of disorientation which pushes us to inhabit moments of disorientation such that we might be transformed through encounters with the *queer.* Not in the service of our self-development, nor to ease any guilt we may feel when confronting our complicity in oppression, but to resist our masterful tendencies to devalue, control, and erase that which appears *queer*.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored the potential for what Ahmed terms a 'politics of disorientation', especially in relation to tackling microaggressions, and in response to popular rhetorics of bias and privilege. I began by explaining how privilege takes on embodied and spatial dimensions such that dominantly situated people are able to more easily engage with the world *habitually*. These habits can enact and reinforce systems of oppression, as I showed is the case with microaggressions, positioning such habits of oppression as a key site for resistance. Following Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology*, I explored how a politics of disorientation can be characterised through the interruption of habits of oppression and an appreciation of *queer* ways of life. On a conceptual level, this involves disrupting those *straight* lines of orientation which are well-trodden and allow individuals to 'sink' into as such activity becomes habitual. To consider how dominantly situated subjects might achieve this, I placed Ahmed's work in conversation

with Lugones' concept of 'world-travelling'. As an *epistemic* practice, I explored how travelling to *queer* worlds of sense has the potential to challenge oppressive worldviews, and provided that the world-traveller adopts a critical attitude, may successfully disrupt habits of oppression. Furthermore, since travelling across worlds of sense can disorient individuals as they experience themselves in a multitude of ways, I have shown that it is also an *existential* practice through which dominantly situated people can become more attuned to their *multiplicitous* self. Consequently, world-travelling presents itself as a practice through which we may advance a politics of disorientation, allowing us to disrupt our habits of oppression, recognise the multiplicitous self, and better appreciate *queer* modes of existence.

# Conclusion

This thesis aimed to address three key questions: (1) 'what are microaggressions?'; (2) 'how do they harm marginalised people?'; and (3) 'how should we deal with them?'.

Chapter 1 responded to the first of these questions by offering a brief review of the psychological and philosophical literature on microaggressions, before ultimately lending support to a *structural* account of microaggressions, characterising them as a *subtly oppressive social practice*. To achieve this, I addressed Regina Rini's (2020b) criticisms of the structural account and provided counterarguments to her ambiguous experience account. Amongst these, I criticised the demand from microaggression sceptics that our account of microaggressions should offer certainty in detection, and the extent to which Rini accepts this. We employ various other concepts without such a high degree of certainty over what counts as satisfying the concept, and so my analysis exposes this sceptical demand for pulling attention away from more critical questions about how microaggressions harm marginalised people, and how we should handle them.

With a working definition in hand, I addressed the second question in Chapter 2, by exploring the ways in which microaggressions enact what I call *existential* violence. I built on Lauren Freeman and Heather Stewart's (2021) work to characterise this type of violence as involving actions/behaviours which contribute to the unjust foreclosing of possibilities for marginalised people to experience themselves as multiplicitous subjects. To show how microaggressions achieve this in practice, I unpacked how they diminish the subjectivity of their targets by *denying*, *homogenising*, and *inferiorising* marginalised people and their identities. By following this up with a phenomenology of microaggressions, I also provided conceptual links between experiencing microaggressions, and the concepts of 'derivatization' (Cahill, 2010) and 'inhibited intentionality' (Freeman, 2017). This helped to further substantiate what makes the violence of microaggressions distinctly 'existential', as well as how they curtail the subjectivity of marginalised people.

Having motivated why microaggressions are harmful, I then addressed the final question of how we should deal with them across the remaining three chapters. In Chapter 3, I provided counterarguments against the microaggression sceptics' claim that people should grow 'thicker skin' when it comes to experiencing microaggressions (B. Campbell & Manning, 2014; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). Following this, I defended anger as a response to microaggressions against Rini's claims that it could lead to 'counterproductive' outcomes. By weaving my own concept of existential violence through Julietta Singh's (2017) analysis of the logics of mastery, I warned against this framing of anger as a 'counterproductive' response to microaggressions since it serves to diminish the capacity for marginalised people to respond to their own oppression. Ultimately, this chapter exposed how Rini's arguments, by uncritically buying into the counterproductivity critique, risk promoting emotional regulation as a tool of masterful neoliberal disciplinary control.

To expand our thinking beyond the confines of this debate between growing thicker skin and getting angry, Chapter 4 discussed the potential for 'cringe' to be a fruitful tool when it comes to responding to microaggressions. Given the limited analyses of cringe in the existing literature, I offered my own account of what makes behaviours 'cringeworthy' – they expose something about a person without them realising, in a particularly embarrassing way. By applying this account to typical examples of microaggressions, this chapter motivated the idea that microaggressions can be seen as cringeworthy, and provided we are able to shift our perception of them from merely offensive, to also embarrassing, we might then cringe at them. Despite there being a few limitations, this chapter argued that responding with cringe can be beneficial in a variety of ways, especially in 'reclaiming' cringe from its otherwise oppressive uses.

Whilst these two chapters handled the question of how we might respond to microaggressions, Chapter 5 concluded the thesis with an exploration into what we can all do, as potential microaggressors, to reduce our likelihood of engaging in the subtly oppressive social practice. Given that popular rhetorics of bias and privilege can be individualistic and self-serving, sliding into a 'politics of self-transformation' (Kruks, 2005), this chapter instead built on Sarah Ahmed's (2006) reference to a 'politics of disorientation' to unpack what this could involve and how to put it into practice. I

characterised such a politics as involving a commitment to allowing oneself to be transformed by moments of disorientation, where we command attention by failing to slide into oppressive habits. To show how a politics of disorientation can be put into practice, I placed Ahmed's work in conversation with María Lugones' (1987) concept of 'world-travelling'. Through this, I argued that world-travelling can disrupt habits of oppression, like microaggressions, and help us to recognise the self as multiplicitous, thus resisting the homogenising and inferiorising logics of existential violence.

This thesis contributes to the literature on microaggressions, and oppression more broadly, in several ways. In adopting a critical approach, I problematise some of the claims made by Rini (2020b) in her *The Ethics of Microaggression* for how they too readily reiterate the narratives constructed by microaggression sceptics. Taking a distinctly phenomenological perspective also helps us to further consider the ways in which microaggressions diminish the subjectivity of marginalised people. For example, my characterisation of existential violence expands our understanding beyond just discussing the sorts of epistemic harms that microaggressions result in. Furthermore, by rejecting the view of the self as unified and atomistic in favour of embracing the subject as *multiplicitous*, this thesis exposes how microaggressions operate through oppressive logics which seek to exert mastery over the self and marginalised others. Therefore, by advancing our understand of what Ahmed terms a 'politics of disorientation', I motivate a politics that seeks to resist not only microaggressions, but also those oppressive logics at a more fundamental level. Finally, whilst there has been some philosophical interest in embarrassment and awkwardness (see Szabados, 1990; Purshouse, 2001; Plakias, 2024), I offer one of the first philosophical accounts of 'cringe' and 'cringeworthiness'. By analysing cringe as a potential response to microaggressions, this thesis therefore opens up space for us to consider novel ways of resisting oppressive behaviours.

Despite this, there are a few limitations of my research that are worth highlighting. I previously mentioned that most of the microaggression research I have engaged with was conducted within an Anglo-American context (see Bettache, 2022), and this potentially limits the applicability of my analyses more generally. This is a reason why I noted that cultural differences in how cringe is experienced, expressed, and understood might limit its effectiveness in some contexts. This thesis also took a general approach to analysing

microaggressions, without a particular focus on specific types of microaggressions, or those faced by any specific marginalised group. Consequently, some of my arguments will likely not be generalisable to all cases. Not all microaggressions will involve the denial, homogenisation, and/or inferiorisation of marginalised people and their identities, for example. Moreover, given that more empirical work is needed to develop our understanding of intersectional microaggressions (Soini, 2022, p. 1605), the examples presented throughout the thesis were analysed primarily from the perspective of a single axis of marginalisation. Lastly, whilst this thesis offers a reasonably holistic philosophical analysis of microaggressions, it only briefly touches upon some important questions asked by other philosophers, such as whether microaggressors are blameworthy (see Friedlaender, 2018; O'Dowd, 2018; Rini, 2020b). My rationale for sidelining these topics was to give greater space to exploring the ways in which microaggressions harm people, and how we can put a stop to them.

What this highlights, however, is that there is plenty more philosophy to be done when it comes to microaggressions, and the contributions made by this thesis open up avenues for further research. For example, more could be done to unpack the sorts of existential harms that microaggressions enact beyond the three species I discussed. Additionally, by introducing the concept of existential violence, there is potential for it to be applied in analyses of other oppressive acts to better understand how they too diminish the subjectivities of marginalised people. My account of cringeworthiness also offers routes for further research that may be of interest beyond the topic of microaggressions. This could involve better understanding the relationship between cringe and related ethical concepts such as contempt, shame, and blame. It also provokes questions about how cringe shapes our moral landscapes. Finally, this thesis was bookended with an exploration into what a politics of disorientation might entail. This politics could be further refined, particularly by investigating other ways in which we may allow ourselves to be transformed by moments of disorientation, as a sustained practice through which our eyes are opened to the possibilities of living our lives otherwise, in defiance of the oppressive status quo.

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