# Microaggressions and Macro-Injustices: How Everyday Interactions Reinforce and Perpetuate Social Systems of Dominance and Oppression

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## Abstract

This article provides a framework that reveals microaggressions as an integral component of systems of social injustice. Microaggressions are a subset of micro-interactions, minute components of everyday interactions such as facial expressions, gestures, and words. Research and theory in social cognition provides the context for why microaggressions, usually based in race, gender, or sexual orientation, exert such a powerful impact on individual experiences and social behaviors. This framework illuminates why the experiences of dominant-class people who commit microaggressions are often so disparate from those of targeted-class individuals, and why microaggressions exert such power over the recipient. This article also examines the role of microaggressions in sustaining the very macro–systems of oppression and structural injustice from which they arise. This connection has been largely overlooked in scholarly analysis, in part because different scholarly disciplines use different lenses to analyze social systems, e.g., psychology privileges individuals and interpersonal interactions, while sociology focuses on populations and social norms. Drawing upon multiple disciplines, this framework recognizes that a multitude of interactions between individual people leads to emergent characteristics at the population level. These characteristics in turn affect individual experience and behavior. The micro constructs the macro; the macro shapes the micro.

*Keywords:* microaggressions, social injustice, social cognition, race, gender, sexual orientation, implicit bias, systems, oppression

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"Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me."

"Don't be so sensitive; get over it!"

These familiar words of advice send the message that to be wounded by the words and seemingly minor deeds of others is to be weak. In other words, "Buck up!"

Along with the message to toughen up, these admonitions convey a sense of the world as a rough-and-tumble place where being the recipient of a bit of the rough and some of the tumble is just the way it is.

We believe that these refrains are misguided—and troubling. First, they place the responsibility for managing the hurt that often is caused by the words and seemingly small deeds of others solely upon the recipient. Second, they rest on an assumption of universal understanding and vulnerability; in other words, they assume that a particular word or deed conveys the same meaning to all listeners or observers. This assumption allows me, then, as an observer of harsh words directed at you, to judge both the degree of pain that you should feel and how you should respond. In other words, if I can shrug off a "sling or arrow," you should be able to as well.

This false assumption of universal sensitivity is applied even when the words and deeds in question are directed at individuals with identities frequently discriminated against or oppressed. "Microaggression" is the term used to describe the everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to individuals "because of their group membership (people of Color, women, LGBTs)" (Sue, 2010, p. 24). The term was first coined by Harvard psychiatrist Chester Pierce in 1970 and later widely popularized by Derald Wing Sue, a counseling psychologist at Teachers College, Columbia University. Sue and his colleagues' broad body of research defined, categorized, and studied the impact of microaggressions on individuals (Sue et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2008). This scholarship has had a powerful influence within the field of counseling psychology and, more broadly, in public discourse. The word itself is frequently invoked in conversations about racism, sexism, and anti-LGBTQIA+ rights. And yet, there remains disagreement about how microaggressions should be understood and how they should be addressed. Underlying the disagreements are the two issues we raised above. First, who decides how harmful a particular act is or should be to a recipient? Second, if a recipient is hurt by a comment or gesture, is it up to them to swallow the pain? Or does the person who spoke or acted in a manner that was received as harmful have some responsibility, at least for greater self-awareness?

In the public discourse about microaggressions, there are divergent views about how the harm triggered by these everyday words and deeds should be calibrated and addressed. Concerning racial microaggressions, for example, social critics such as Ibram Kendi and Ijeoma Oluo argue that the prefix *micro-* minimizes the cumulative harm caused by these everyday interactions that target an individual's racial identity and thus trigger a history of discrimination and oppression (Kendi, 2019; Oluo, 2018). As Oluo describes it, "the cumulative effect of these constant reminders that [because you are Black] you are 'less than' does real psychological damage" (Oluo, 2018, p. 169).

Alternatively, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt (2018) recommend that those who experience microaggressions employ strategies to modify their responses

to these painful words and deeds. These authors privilege the presumed intent of an individual whose act is received as a microaggression (citing the reasoning of moral philosophers) for determining whether he or she is guilty of bigotry or racism. Lukianoff and Haidt do acknowledge that "some members of various identity groups encounter repeated indignities because of their group membership" (2018, p. 43). However, they advise microaggression recipients to dial down their experience of pain through employing cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) techniques. They also suggest that this strategy will avoid making bad interpersonal encounters even worse. With their focus on the perpetrator's *intent*, Lukianoff and Haidt refer only tangentially to systems of "marginalization or oppression" (p. 44) or to the role of implicit biases.

The bulk of the scholarly work to date, primarily by Sue and his colleagues, has been focused on the individual; it documents, describes, and categorizes the effects of microaggressions on individuals. Most popular discourse has used this lens as well. We believe that identifying the impact of these everyday words and deeds on people who identify with targeted groups in our society is an extremely valuable first step.

However, the framework we present in this article allows us to step back and take a larger, more systemic view. This vantage point makes clear that to understand the harm experienced by a recipient of a microaggression, we must consider the social location of both the actor and the recipient. And, importantly, this framework reveals the relationship of the "micro" to the "macro" and how microaggressions are an integral component of our systems of social

oppression. The role of microaggressions in sustaining the macro—systems of oppression and structural injustice—has been largely overlooked in scholarly analysis. In part, this lacuna results from the fact that different scholarly disciplines use different lenses to analyze social systems. For example, psychology focuses primarily on individuals, interpersonal interactions, and small groups, while sociology mostly explores populations and social norms. And yet, a multitude of interactions between individual people leads to emergent characteristics at the population level. These characteristics, in turn, affect individual experience and behavior. The micro constructs the macro; the macro shapes the micro.

The broader, multi-layered framework presented here also addresses two important limitations of the existing scholarship on microaggressions. First, current work fails to situate the phenomenon of microaggressions within the extensive psychological literature about the processes of human social cognition. Microaggressions are not a unique, isolated phenomenon but rather a subset of a much larger universe of micro-interactions between individuals: the tiny bits of information produced and shared in the dance of social exchange. Situating microaggressions in this broader context gives further weight to their importance and why they should not be minimized or dismissed. And, contrary to the old saws with which we began this article, social cognition research explains why and how mere words, a prevalent form of micro-interaction, do matter – not only in the context of microaggressions but universally. *Microaggressions*, then, should be understood as instances of the universe of micro-interactions, the lingua franca of social interaction.

Second, as noted above, microaggressions have systemic as well as individual effects. Social systems manifest and are reinforced not only by explicit laws and rules but also by billions of everyday interactions and micro-interactions between individuals. All of us are socialized through these large and small touches: words and actions from our parents and families, our friends and teachers, and later from our colleagues and the wider world (Harro, 2000). We are also socialized to occupy many different roles, and we soak up this knowledge and act through and from it. Microaggressions are a class of micro-interactions that serve to reinforce existing practices of social oppression. Social oppression may occur based on race, gender, and sexual orientation, as described by Sue, and along other social lines of hierarchy (Wells, 2013).

The framework that we present here incorporates these important—and previously excluded—properties of microaggressions. Situating microaggressions in the universe of micro-interactions helps to explain their powerful impact. This framework also highlights how microaggressions are an essential and integral part of macro systems of social oppression. Using this frame provides insight into the mechanisms through which systemic social oppression is sustained and therefore, ideally, to our capacity to dismantle it.

Social systems holistically belong to no single discipline. As a result, our framework draws from both psychology and sociology as well as from the academic disciplines of philosophy and law. We bring to this analysis an overall multi-disciplinary understanding of social systems as complex adaptive processes comprised of interacting individuals. The organization and style of this article reflect the cross-, inter-, and multi-disciplinary ways in which its frame emerged from wide-ranging discussions between the authors. Specifically, the article proceeds as a conversation in which two distinct disciplinary melodies thread through in counterpoint. Claudia brings the perspective of a cognitive social psychologist and a practitioner who consults to organizations about individual and systemic change and development. Palma offers an understanding of injustices as emergent properties of complex social systems in which legal institutions and structures are accepted and patterned modes of interacting that reproduce predictable outcomes. Both of us are grounded in the inter-disciplinary field of conflict engagement. Both of us have extensive practice engaging in and facilitating cross-racial conversations about race and racism. In addition, both of us have experiences as women "interlopers" who have been on the receiving end of gender microaggressions in male-dominated professions. And as White cis-gender individuals, both of us have observed racial and sexual orientation microaggressions targeted at others.

We begin by laying the groundwork for the framework—both micro and macro. In Part I, Dr. Cohen describes how microaggressions should be framed theoretically as a subset of the much larger universe of micro-interactions rather than as an isolated phenomenon. She also documents how an individual's history and social location determine the impact that this category of micro-interactions has upon them. Then, in Part II, Palma offers an overview and analysis of how macro-hierarchies of power and oppression are reinforced through everyday interactions between individuals. Moving to our central focus, Cohen provides in Part III an account of how microaggressions arise from and

"call up" individuals' cognitive architecture of social associations, including, but not limited to, those based in hierarchy, privilege, and power. Next, in Part IV, Palma describes how microaggressions reinforce systems of power and oppression. Finally, in Part V, we reflect together on the implications of this analysis, both intra- and inter-personally, as well as on the enhanced potential for strengthening our collective ability to disrupt and transform structural oppression. Part VI offers conclusions and takeaways.

**Microaggressions Are Not an Isolated Phenomenon: The Micro Matters (Claudia)**

Derald Wing Sue and colleagues have developed a taxonomy of microaggressions that contains three categories or types of actions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2008; Sue, 2010). *Microassaults* are the most explicit form of microaggressions; they are verbal or even physical assaults which may be characterized by violence, name-calling, and discriminatory actions. Sue describes *microinsults* as characterized by "rudeness and insensitivity;" often, they demean an individual's racial heritage, gender, or sexual orientation (Sue, 2010, p. 31). Finally, *microinvalidations* are communications that "exclude, negate or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of certain groups, such as people of [C]olor, women and LGBTs" (Sue, 2010, p. 31). In our discussion of microaggressions, we focus on the latter two categories—microinsults and microinvalidations—as they are more often unseen or overlooked by observers and perceived as relatively harmless. Naming and defining these three categories make it easier to discuss differences within the universe of microaggressions. The

taxonomy, however, does not provide insight into the troubling evidence that the target of a microaggression and its perpetrator often have wildly differing perceptions of its importance and impact.

Sue's (and others') framing of microaggressions as a unique phenomenon is limiting in two ways. First, from a scientific perspective, this location leads microaggression researchers to overlook a large, relevant body of theory and research in social cognition and psychology (Cantor & Kihlstrom, 1981; Cohen, 1981a; Cohen, 1981b; Fiske & Taylor, 2013; Freeman & Ambady, 2011; Wyer & Srull, 2011). Second, from a social justice perspective, treating microaggressions as an aberration, existing in isolation of other sorts of cognitive processing, allows people in dominant groups to ignore or discount the existence of microaggressions and the harm they can cause. Understanding that *microaggressions* are a subset of micro-interactions and that they operate from universal socio-cognitive processing addresses both of these issues.

As noted previously, Sue's work focuses on the individual target of the microaggression, appropriate within the field of counseling psychology but overlooking the broader cultural context through which stereotypes and implicit biases are transmitted to individuals and groups, thus seeding the soil for microaggressions and their harmful effects. Our framework assumes that all micro-interactions activate connections to broad bodies of knowledge received throughout a lifetime. Therefore, as with other micro-interactions, microaggressions are not processed by the people who experience them as one-offs. Rather, these activated messages have an impact that extends far beyond a single remark; microaggressions

may trigger a lifetime's worth of messages. When those messages demean one (or more) of the target individual's core social identities, these tiny micro-interactions—microaggressions—bring to bear on the recipient the weight of an entire social structure. A microaggression is like a magnifying glass that focuses sunlight to the point of combustion.

Understanding microaggressions within a broader understanding of cognitive processing adds clarity to Sue's (and others') descriptions of the nature of many microaggressions as subtle or hidden. Let us name two issues that run through the microaggression literature and clarify how we address them here. First, the prefix *micro-* signals the brief, casual, and discrete nature of these interpersonal moves. They may be contained in a single word, a grimace, a head shake, a brief phrase; *micro* conveys that if the move is not relevant to you, you might easily miss it or perceive it as not meaningful. "Subtle" or "hidden" are ways that Sue conveys this property. We will rely on the prefix *micro-* to convey the description we provide above.

The second theme is related but distinct. The reported experience of many individuals who commit a microaggression (as experienced by the recipient) is that "they did not mean it." This can be confusing to analyze and calls up a complex and fraught conversation about defining "consciousness" as well as "intent." The professor who tells a Black student, "You are so articulate!" *does* intend to use those words and may well report that they were meant as a compliment. At the same time, the note of surprise in her tone may well belie an underlying learned implicit bias: "Black students tend to be less 'articulate' than fellow White or Asian students." A fuller discussion of consciousness and intent

is outside the scope of this article. However, we affirm that because an actor's web of associations related to the social location of another is often outside of their conscious awareness, the perpetrator of that particular microaggression may well report that she did not mean it. And yet, this speaker is influenced by and reaffirming damaging stereotypes about Black and White communication styles. The combination of acting based upon one's web of associations while not consciously intending harm makes the conversation about what an actor meant understandably complex.

A substantial body of research in social psychology confirms that micro-interactions—small bits of information contained in brief interactions—can have a surprisingly powerful impact. For example, in the 2010 book "Whistling Vivaldi," social psychologist Claude Steele recounts the compelling story of a young Black academic psychologist walking to his home in Chicago after dark.[i] The psychologist is well aware that he may engender unfounded and potentially dangerous fearful responses from the White residents he passes by based solely on his skin color. He discovers that when he whistles Vivaldi's "Four Seasons," a well-known piece of classical music, he neutralizes those unwarranted (and racialized) fear reactions. This small bit of information, a few notes from a classical masterpiece, evokes a very different association with his Black body: a cultured individual who does not pose a threat rather than a thug, who does.

Greg Walton and his associates have conducted a series of studies that reveal how what they refer to as "brief social-psychological interventions" can powerfully impact individuals' experiences, behavior, and even achievements (Walton & Cohen,

2007; Walton & Cohen, 2011; Walton & Crum, 2020; Walton & Wilson, 2018). This work is part of a broader initiative in the social sciences to promote positive behavior change in various settings such as voting in elections, greater student engagement, and signing up to be organ donors. Walton and Cohen (2011, p. 18) distinguish two forms of intervention: snapshot interventions (also referred to as "nudges"[ii]) and movie interventions. In social-psychological experiments, *snapshot interventions* are designed to influence an individual's behavior at a specific point in time. *Movie interventions* are meant to impact an individual's underlying beliefs about themselves and their abilities and thus affect their behavior over time and in a variety of settings. For example, in the Walton and Cohen (2007) social-belonging intervention study, college students were provided with a narrative for their feelings of uncertainty and "not belonging;" they were reassured that many students feel this way at first but over time come to feel at home. Remarkably, a single one-hour session with an at-risk student during their first year in college raised their achievement levels over the next three years. This movie intervention was of far longer duration and greater complexity than the micro-interactions we have discussed. However, though this social-belonging intervention was scaled up in terms of duration and complexity, this outcome reinforces more broadly the surprising power of relatively brief "moves" or communication acts.

The previous references and many others substantiate the underlying premise of microaggressions: a small bit of information such as a joke, a glance, or a chuckle calls up a complex web of previously learned associations. As a result, meaning is created. Thus, placing microaggressions in the larger context of normal cognitive processing reveals that we should not be surprised that substantial meaning is communicated via relatively brief, minute signals; rather, we should expect it.

Further, small exchanges can carry large emotional weight. Individuals who operate from high-power or low-discrimination social locations may accept that these associations occur yet still be skeptical about the emotional impact of these brief interactions. They may discount it, reasoning, "Okay, so this word (or gesture) calls up unpleasant associations. No big deal…get over it!"

To counter this dismissive response and highlight how universal the vulnerability to being wounded can be, even for those in privileged social locations, consider the following thought experiment: Imagine that you are the sole non-athlete in a large family of super-athletes. Growing up, you witnessed your folks and siblings excelling at swim meets, in tennis tournaments, and impromptu touch football games. You had no aptitude for these activities, and you gravitated to pursuits where you were more talented, such as reading or playing chess. Despite your other accomplishments, you always felt "othered" and diminished by your lack of physical skill. Now, fast forward to the present day. You are with a group of colleagues in the city, sprinting for a train whose doors are about to close. You reach the door dead last and just barely make it onto the train. As you stumble to a seat, one of your colleagues' quips, not knowing your sensitivity about physical prowess, "I bet you weren't on the track team in high school!" You feel simultaneously ashamed and angry, though you are not sure why.

The offhanded comment made by your colleague triggers your discomfort and even buried shame at being seen as a non-athlete. In your family, this identity meant that you were an outsider; you didn't belong. Because of your personal background, athletic "chops"—or lack thereof—became a charged emotional component of your identity. You thus experience your colleague's casual joke in a visceral and emotionally laden way due to the powerful response it invokes through your particular network of meaning. This occurs even though your colleague did not intend to harm you.

Someone with a different family history might well react differently, perhaps with humor, to your colleague's comment and might be puzzled by your "over-reaction." Their formative experiences related to "being a super-athlete" were very different. Their personal network of meaning may ascribe little valence—positive or negative—to athleticism.

What else can we take away from this thought experiment about micro-interactions and microaggressions? First, the impact of the micro-interaction upon a recipient cannot be evaluated accurately by *anyone else*, including and perhaps in particular, by the perpetrator. This is particularly true about microaggressions, as an identity-related subset of micro-interactions. Because these interactions are micro, they may be of little notice or importance to the initiator of the interaction. Yet because of the fine-tuning of human social cognition, they are often highly significant to the receiver.

Second, the wounded, non-athlete scenario, while painful for the hero, would not be considered a microaggression in Sue's taxonomy. Microaggressions occur in the context of power and privilege differentials, especially connected to race, gender, or sexual orientation. In the case of microaggressions, the triggered associations are not solely individualized as in the wounded, non-athlete example. Rather, they bring to bear a lifetime's awareness of the social hierarchy of being excluded, silenced, diminished, and marginalized because of the very identity one is reminded of.

An alternative scenario reveals how microaggressions operate within a system of targeted identities and related oppression. Imagine that you work at a large tech company holding its yearly management "all hands" meeting at a local conference center. You are standing with the Senior Vice President of Sales, Bill Cooper, whom you know slightly, each of you nursing a beer. You and Cooper each identify as White and non-Latinx. Manuel Garcia, a newly hired marketing manager whom you know slightly, approaches you to say hello. Cooper, failing to identify Garcia as a management employee, asks him to get you each another "cold one." Clearly, Cooper is assuming that Garcia is a member of the wait staff. Your heart sinks, and you are frozen, unsure what to say or do. Leaving you to your discomfort, let us examine this micro-interaction between Cooper and Garcia—what Sue would surely label a "microaggression."

Senior Vice President Cooper, insulated perhaps by his Whiteness, maleness, and powerful role, does not notice that his assumption that Garcia is a part of the wait staff is contradicted by some data: Garcia is wearing a sport coat rather than a uniform jacket, and there is no name tag affixed to his lapel. Rather than investigate further, however, Cooper issues the request (order?) to Garcia to refresh his drink. Further investigation by Cooper could entail having

been attentive to racial and ethnic disparities in the company's staffing and having participated in efforts to recruit more minorities. It might also entail becoming attuned to his stereotypes of who comprises the population of marketing managers (predominately White males and some females) and examining each Latinx or Black individual more carefully to distinguish management employees from wait staff or other roles.

For Garcia's part, we imagine that he is wounded and humiliated as a result of this misidentification and yet not surprised. Being mistaken for the wait staff calls up dozens and hundreds of social messages received throughout his lifetime reinforcing that he does not belong at a tech company, much less in a managerial role. This micro-interaction is disorienting and painful for Garcia, though not, unfortunately, unique. This is true even though Cooper may not have consciously intended to wound but apparently did so through carelessness…along with a lack of self-knowledge and a blindness toward systems of racial power and privilege.

This micro-interaction, like the "track team" comment described previously, evokes a message of non-belonging. However, the message here invokes not the dynamics of a particular family and an individual's experience within it but rather a systemic social hierarchy in which White **I.** people are executives and people of Color serve them. Cooper's drink request (order?) reminds Garcia of this social hierarchy. Cooper's comment also reminds you, a White and non-Latinx bystander, of this social hierarchy. Another co-worker and bystander, who is Latinx, is also reminded of this hierarchy and her place in it. And because Cooper is a senior vice president in the company, his comment communicates

not only his personal view of who belongs where but the fact that the company he belongs to is structured so that his personal view is normative, and therefore he thinks nothing of expressing it.

Situating microaggressions in the larger context of normal processes of social cognition reveals not only the potency of micro-interactions generally but, more importantly, the particular potency of microaggressions. The vast body of research and theory describing human cognitive structure and processing illuminates why microaggressions carry such strong social and emotional messages. This framework also sheds light on how and why microaggressions are interpreted through one's particular life experience and social location.

Overall, expanding the analysis beyond Sue's focus on the individual target of a microaggression to the broader field of socio-cognitive theory and research allows us to understand it as part of a much larger phenomenon. It also invites inquiry into the wider issue of how stereotypes and implicit biases, based on cultural hierarchies, are transmitted to individuals and groups, seeding the very soil for microaggressions. We pursue this inquiry in Part III.

**Part II**

**Macro-Systems of Power and Oppression Emerge from Individual Interactions (Palma)**

As we have seen, microaggressions have powerful effects at the individual, interpersonal level. But we claim that they are also significant at the social, structural level—at the macro level. This claim rests on an analysis of how social systems operate and, in particular, of how social systems of

power and privilege are sustained. A relational understanding of power connects system-level structural injustices to individual-level interactions.

The word "power" is a noun, and we generally use it as such. *Power*, we tend to say, is something we have—or something we do not have. In *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (1990), political philosopher Iris Marion Young calls this a distributive paradigm of power: "Conceptualizing power in distributive terms means implicitly or explicitly conceiving power as a kind of stuff possessed by individual agents in greater or lesser amounts. From this perspective, a power structure or power relations will be described as a pattern of the distribution of this stuff" (p. 31).

Young (1990) asserts, however, that "power is a relation rather than a thing" (p. 31). A relational understanding of power illuminates power dynamics in modern societies, where institutional structures dominate. Power dyads between two individuals occurs in a larger context. Young gives the example of a judge and a prisoner and the power relation between the two:

> A judge may be said to have power over a prisoner, but only in the context of a network of practices executed by prison wardens, guards, recordkeepers, administrators, parole officers, lawyers, and so on. Many people must do their jobs for the judge's power to be realized, and many of these people will never directly interact with either the judge or the prisoner. (p. 31)
> Where is power in this web of interconnections? According to Young (1990), the "dynamic processes of interaction within regulated cultural and decision-

making situations" produce power, and "many widely dispersed persons are agents of power without 'having' it, or even being privileged" (p. 33). The judge's power over the prisoner emerges from the contributing and coordinated interactions of the various actors in the criminal justice system. A clerical member of the structure is part of this production of power, though they may feel powerless.

Young's (1990) insight illuminates the microaggression example of Cooper and Garcia discussed in Part I. Cooper mistakes Garcia for a member of the wait staff, a microaggression that Garcia experiences as an exercise of Cooper's power—the power to define who is a professional and who is not. Part of what sustains that power is the silence of bystanders, their affirmation of Cooper's power vis-à-vis Garcia—not only Cooper's personal power but also his empowerment (dominance) as a member of the White racial group relative to the disempowerment (subordination) of Garcia as a member of the Latinx racial or ethnic group. In this example, the microaggression both evinces and reinforces existing systemic power dynamics.

As Young eschews a distributive view of power, she also eschews a distributive understanding of justice. "Justice," she writes, "should not be conceived primarily on the model of the distribution of wealth, income, and other material goods…The scope of justice is wider than distributive issues" (1990, p. 33). Rather, justice relates to whether the institutions of a society serve to support individuals in realizing two values that Young relates to the ability to live a "good life": "(1) developing and exercising one's capacities and expressing one's experience, and (2) participating in

determining one's action and the conditions of one's action" (p. 37).

According to Young (1990), then, injustice arises when institutional conditions and processes interfere with people's ability to develop and express themselves. She terms this kind of injustice "oppression"[iii] (p. 38). Injustice also arises when institutions "inhibit or prevent people" from influencing the social conditions that govern them. She terms this kind of injustice "domination" (p. 38).

Again applying Young's insight to Cooper's microaggression toward Garcia, we can see how Cooper's reminder to Garcia of his membership in a subordinate group may interfere with Garcia's ability to express himself and with his influence in the social context of the business meeting. When we are reminded that we do not belong, stress and anxiety spring into action to impede our capacity to contribute. Work on stereotype threat, for example, has documented how Black test-takers who are simply asked to provide their racial information under-perform on standardized tests (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Steele and Aronson (1995) conclude that this effect occurs because Blackness has historically been viewed as inconsistent with high academic achievement. Reminders of being Black trigger stress associated with the pressure of going against social expectations, and that stress can interfere with performance.

Similarly, when individuals are reminded that members of a certain group (women, for example) do not belong, receptivity to those group members' contributions diminishes. For example, *mansplaining* was coined to describe the phenomenon of women's contributions to a discussion being overlooked. These same

contributions are rendered visible and valuable only when repeated by men (Rothman, 2012).

The Cooper-Garcia microaggression contains the potential for both oppression—Garcia's diminished capacity to contribute due to stress associated with this reminder of lower status and non-belonging—and domination—the discounting or dismissal of what Garcia has to offer. Both, per Young, are manifestations of injustice.

The forms of injustice Young (1990) describes enable members of one group of people—those who are included or belong—to take advantage of and resources from members of another group. This advantage may take the form of appropriated labor, exaggerated autonomy, monopolized attention, heightened recognition of value, particularized personal safety and security, or more control over collective decision-making. The corollary disadvantage to members of groups of people who are excluded or "do not belong" may take the form of expropriated labor, diminished autonomy, lessened attention, lowered recognition of value, threatened personal safety and security, or less control over collective decision-making. The key is that society is structured into "haves and have-nots"—though because of different gradients of oppression and domination, most people will experience both conditions in different elements of their lives.

The social dynamic underlying these forms of oppression and domination is one of a kind of "othering" that operates to exclude, a dynamic that creates injustice by denying the fulfillment of another individual's full humanity. When social structures provide opportunities to members of one group and deny those opportunities to members of another group, an Us-versus-

Them, insider-outsider dynamic emerges. In this dynamic, some people and some groups matter; they belong. Other people and other groups do not matter or matter less; they do not belong. These fundamental messages of relational power underlie institutional and structural arrangements that benefit a dominant group and disadvantage a subordinate group. These arrangements channel how individuals interact with each other in the context of social institutions, and as individuals interact in alignment with these messages, they reproduce injustice.

Returning to the Cooper-Garcia-bystander microaggression once more, the essential social message contained in the micro-interaction is one of non-belonging, of power-over, of exclusion. Sue's taxonomy categorizes this as a "second class citizen microaggression" (Sue, 2010, p. 33). This microaggression serves to remind Garcia of his membership in a socially defined outgroup vis-à-vis corporate power. At the same time, it reinforces the ingroup-ness of both Cooper and the silent White bystander. Because this micro-interaction arises in the context of group-based social oppression and evokes that power dynamic, it constitutes a microaggression.

Overall, Young (1990) parses the convoluted language of power and injustice in today's institutionally structured society. She illuminates for us how individuals acting and interacting within institutional collectives create and re-create oppression by ensuring, denying, or limiting access to opportunities and participation. Many of the actions taken by individuals constitute only a small contribution to large-scale production and exercise of power relationships; each individual interaction may seem insignificant and its causal link to the overall effect difficult to discern. Yet when many individuals—hundreds or thousands or more—act, the cumulative collective effects of those acts cascade into substantial social phenomena. Per Young, individual interactions contribute to the creation of injustice.

Individual interactions thus reinforce the social roles that individuals occupy and perform. As people interact, they reproduce social institutions and hierarchies and strengthen these structures for themselves and those around them. Social roles and structures then manifest power, privilege, oppression, and injustice, perpetuating social order and hierarchy. But it is through individual actions and interactions that these roles and structures are maintained.

Many of the social roles that Young (1990) describes are explicitly delineated and defined—the social roles of judge and prisoner, for example. Other social roles, however, are more amorphous and implicit, and we may engage in them less intentionally and with less awareness. In the next part, we consider how cognitive processing theory illuminates the functioning of the latter.

**Part III**

**Social Cognition:  We See the World as We Are (Claudia)**

To better understand why and how microaggressions—and other micro-interactions—operate, it is essential to begin with a review of how people process social information more generally. "Process" here means how we collect information about the interpersonal universe: what we notice, how we interpret it, and what we conclude and remember about it.

A common saying reflects the current understanding of cognitive-social

processing: "We don't see the world as it is; we see the world as we are."[iv] While the scientific evidence bolstering this claim is not cited by those who have used this phrase, there is a vast body of knowledge that supports and documents this observation in the social-psychological field of social cognition.

The social cognition field was born roughly fifty years ago. In 1973, psychologist Eleanor Rosch popularized the concept of the *schema* as an internal structure for organizing perceptual and semantic categories. This structure accounts for experimental data describing the errors that observers make when recognizing examples of categories such as bird or chair. Rather than identifying a bird, for example, by checking off a comprehensive mental list of features (e.g., beak, wings, feathers, etc.), data suggest that people recognize a "bird" holistically, as if comparing the image with the prototypical bird (e.g., a robin) they have stored.  This conclusion is based on the extraordinarily rapid response times in which people can identify images as birds. Also, when participants make errors, they frequently report "seeing" or "remembering" attributes of a specific bird image that are more consistent with a prototypical bird (e.g., robin) or bird schema than with the specific bird that they actually observed.

Early applications of schema theory, including in the field of person perception, can be found in this author's work and that of other contemporaries (Cohen, 1981a; Cohen, 1981b; Crocker et al., 1984; Hamilton, 1979; Hastie, 1981; Markus, 1977). These cognitive social psychologists argued that people's social perceptions, such as perceptions of other people*,* must logically also be stored and processed in a manner similar to that of a bird or chair. In one study by this author, participants who

observed a video vignette of a woman at home, interacting with her husband, noticed and remembered different things about her based on whether they were told she worked as a waitress versus as a librarian (Cohen, 1981b). If participants believed her to be a waitress, they more often reported that she had been drinking beer[v] while those who thought that the woman, they observed was a librarian were more likely to remember that she drank wine. This was also true for many other features of waitress and librarian stereotypes or schemas (e.g., musical taste, appearance, demeanor).

More recent research in social cognition and person perception specifically confirms this early work and offers a more detailed analysis of person perception processes. Freeman and Ambady (2011) offer a theory of person construal that extends our understanding of how schemas or stereotypes operate in action. Underlying the perception of other people is a "dynamical system involving continuous interaction between social categories, stereotypes, high-level cognitive states, and the low-level processing of facial, vocal and bodily cues" (Freeman & Ambady, 2011, p. 247). This model confirms the saying cited earlier— "We don't see the world as it is; we see the world as we are"—and offers a greater understanding of how the "we are" influences the "seeing the world."

Social psychological theorists have also applied a schema-based model to perceptions of members of oppressed and/or less powerful groups: the domain of microaggressions.[vi] Sandra Bem studied popular conceptions of masculinity and femininity and explored the much-debated question of how sex-typing develops in children (Bem, 1981). She defined *sex-typing* as the process "by which a society transmutes male and female into masculine

and feminine" (Bem, 1981, p. 354). In other words, she asked: how does a culture pass on male and female gender roles, including behaviors, attributes, and self-concept, to the next generation of boys and girls?  Bem argued that this gender-role-related information becomes organized into a "heterogenous network of sex-related associations" or a "gender schema" (p. 355). Children develop the gender schemas dictated by their particular culture. Bem further contended that sex-typing results when an individual's self-concept is assimilated into the gender schema. She posits that the children who most completely incorporate gender schemas into their own self-concept are the most likely to become sex-typed. These children are more likely to perform the behaviors and attributes of masculine or feminine with little question or self-scrutiny.

Another line of research adopts the term "implicit bias" to describe how, within a society, people have widely shared internalized schemas[vii] that relate to gender, race, and other social-group signifiers. Banaji, Greenwald, and associates demonstrate how societally-provided associations (e.g., men & work; women & home; White & good; Black & bad) underlie how we perceive our world. At a level below our awareness, the term "woman" is more closely associated with home than work, while for the term "man" it is just the reverse (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013). Banaji and Greenwald (2013) argue that many of the associations that shape our expectations are based on images promoted in the media, in advertising, and in entertainment (such as movies and television), rather than in first-hand observations of actual persons in real settings.

These lines of research in social cognition demonstrate that we are highly influenced in our ongoing perceptions of others and their behavior by our vast mental database of knowledge and associations, organized into schemas and other patterns of associations. As noted, these processes generally operate outside of conscious experience. Micro bits of data—a few words, a gesture or facial expression—coalesce into a cohesive back-story. We complete the picture and fill in the gaps, confirming what we expect to see. And we rarely recognize the perceptual and cognitive leaps we have made. Chris Argyris provides another useful analysis of social cognition, the concept of the *ladder of inference*, to describe those mental feats of analysis that operate outside the realm of our conscious thoughts (Bartunek, 2014).

Consider a colleague who has frequently failed to observe the norms of the workplace. One day, she arrives very late to an early morning meeting, carrying a "to go" cup of coffee. Likely you will conclude that she does not care about punctuality and even that she stopped at a local coffee house on the way to work, making her even later! Now imagine a different colleague who is always punctual and very concerned about how he is perceived. He arrives late to a different meeting, also with a tell-tale take-out cup. You will likely construct—at a below-conscious level—quite a different story about this colleague. Maybe he left home early but then had car trouble. Or, unexpectedly, he had to take his child to school. Maybe someone else handed him the coffee. Most likely, and importantly, you will be unaware that you are actively interpreting these behaviors. The ladder of inference does its work outside of our arena of consciousness. Rather, you will find that your perception of colleague #1 as a dissatisfied, rule-breaking employee is reinforced without remembering why or how you came to that conclusion. And you

may not remember the tardiness of colleague #2 at all, or, if you do, you may approach him with concern later in the day to see whether he is all right.

"Seeing the world as we are," then, refers to the ongoing analysis and interpretation of the words and behaviors of others, filtered through our previous knowledge and associations and mostly below our level of conscious awareness. The raw input of what we see calls to the surface preexisting schemas and other psychological structures, and they in turn shape what we perceive.  What we perceive, in turn, affects the actions we take.

The judgments that one might make about a colleague's behavior based on a to-go cup of coffee have a very localized and limited effect. But the stereotypes and schemas that society promotes about members of oppressed or targeted groups have widespread and substantial consequences.

One well-known study, for example, demonstrates that potential employers prefer candidates with White-sounding names over candidates with identical qualifications who have Black-sounding names (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2003). Another study found gender bias in evaluation of the characteristics and achievement of medical students, with men more likely to be described as quick learners than women (Axelson et al., 2010). Because of social cognition's grounding in schemas and implicit associations, people who are in positions to offer opportunity—employers, medical personnel evaluating medical students—may swing doors open for some and shut them in the face of others. And yet, the evidence shows that people normally act without awareness of these associations or schemas, which leads individuals to strongly resist being labelled "racist" or "sexist." These actions, which represent tangible allocations of important social advantages—and disadvantages—are grounded in the same schemas that manifest as microaggressions or other micro-interactions that enforce norms and roles.

The research-based socio-cognitive architecture described above informs the answers to several questions about microaggressions. First, how do brief comments, actions, or gestures have the power to powerfully wound, demoralize, or demean the recipient of these microaggressions? Second, why do some bystanders receive the noxious message, vicariously impacted like the recipient, while others remain oblivious and perhaps even make judgments about the "over-sensitivity" of the target person? And, finally, what does a socio-cognitive lens reveal about intentionality or consciousness on the part of the perpetrator of a microaggression—an issue identified in Part I above?

Imagine that after a female colleague has made a big sale, a successful male member of a sales team says to her: "It's no surprise that you made that sale; the client could not keep his eyes off of you!" Despite the apparent embedded compliment about her appearance, that is not what she experiences. From a socio-cognitive lens, his comment may well invoke two different schemas or webs of association: on the one hand a schema of a "master salesman" who is male and on the other hand a schema of an "attractive female" who is subordinate to the male, perhaps a secretary. It is not surprising that the female sales colleague would feel diminished. She has covertly been reminded that she does not belong on the sales team and that her looks are her strongest attribute,

not her smarts or her extensive on-the-job experience.

As to the first question, microaggressions wound or demean the recipient because they are micro-reinforcements of social structures of power and hierarchy that remind individuals of their place. The socio-cognitive architecture described above illuminates how naturally that occurs. Targets of microaggressions have been carefully taught and frequently reminded of their one-down status. Brief utterances or subtle gestures call up relevant schemas and webs of association; that is the way our cognition operates.

Regarding the second question, why might two colleagues—one male and one female—who overhear the remark mentioned above perceive it differently? A male colleague may perceive the comment as complimentary if his schema for attractive woman is invoked and his "male-salesman" schema is dominant. A female colleague who hears the exchange, in contrast, may share the target's experience of dissonance between the successful male-salesman schema and that of the attractive-subordinate woman. The female observer is also reminded of the different spaces in which men and women may comfortably operate, as dictated by the web of associations transmitted by the culture.

Finally, what about intentionality and consciousness? Understanding the functioning of socially-defined schemas casts these constructs in a different light. The successful salesman intended both to comment on the success of his colleague's big sale and to make a statement about her attractiveness. Did he intend to demean her? Perhaps because of his membership in the male-dominant sales culture, it did not occur to him that reminding her of her gender

would call up the web of association in which being female means one is subordinate and thus out of place as a leader on the sales team. At a minimum, this is a failure of empathy on his part. He also intended to praise her sexual attractiveness in this context, an even greater failure of empathy because it implied that her success is based on appearance rather than competence. Either he was oblivious to the possibility that he might be insulting her, or if he knew that the possibility existed, he was not affected by it. Perhaps he was even annoyed that a politically-correct analysis would be used to interpret his behavior.

The socio-cognitive architecture framework, implicit bias research, and Argryis' ladder of inference all observe that these associations often occur outside consciousness. As noted in Part I, Cooper likely operated without conscious awareness of his schemas and associations about the roles that Latinx men (and women) are likely to play in the corporate workplace. As a White man in a powerful role, his failure to explore his implicit bias may well align with the corporate culture and thus continue undisturbed.

**Part IV**

**The Micro Enacts and Reenacts the Macro, Including Oppression and Injustice (Palma)**

Though schemas operate psychologically on individuals, the actions that they drive have broader social effects. Schemas provide an internal image with which our actions seek to align. Among other effects, this impetus toward alignment leads us to the "should" associated with various social roles and also to actions to align our behavior and that of others with those roles.

Where Young (1990) brings into focus the phenomenon of how institutional structures operate to create injustice through myriad individual interactions, sociologist Cecilia Ridgeway reveals how everyday interactions between individuals reinforce and reproduce social structures and practices. Ridgeway studies gender relations. She wondered why traditional system-level patterns of men working longer hours outside the home and women taking more responsibility for work in the home persist, given substantially increased social attention to gender equality (2011).

In *Framed by Gender* (2011), her careful exploration of this question, Ridgeway concludes that when spouses talk through and arrive at joint decisions about caretaking and work allocation, they both come into the interaction with gender schemas and paradigms—stories and frames about what men and fathers do and what women and mothers do. They—we—learn and internalize these stories from our parents and families, from the media, from other community members, and from how the larger institutions of our society are organized. They—we—are socialized and acculturated to recognize and reproduce traditional gender roles.

According to social psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner, these *social roles* can be understood as the ways humans interact in a social ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to Bronfenbrenner, a key aspect of human development is learning, adapting to, and eventually occupying social roles. As children, we learn about the roles of parent, child, sibling, friend, teacher, and more. As we learn the roles, we are also socialized to adapt to them; others instruct us overtly and indirectly in performing them as we fit into social niches. Eventually, we reinforce the roles and relationships we have learned and

internalized in our interactions with others. So, for example, when boys and girls encounter and are socialized to perform traditional gender roles, they tend to reproduce those roles and enforce those roles on others.

Ridgeway's findings make visible an important dimension of individual decision-making: "As contemporary men and women confront social situations at the edge of social change in the United States, then, the cultural stereotypes they have to draw on to frame their encounters with one another will be considerably more traditional than the innovative circumstances they face" (Ridgeway, 2011, p. 171). Cultural stereotypes or schemas that reflect female domesticity supporting male-gendered "ideal workers" [viii] who are free of care responsibilities, for example, will be at play when spouses who both work full-time make decisions in situations in which work needs and care needs conflict. When spouses negotiate the daily allocation of who will get the kids up and fed in the morning, who will do the grocery shopping, who will mow the lawn, who will make time for doctor's appointments, and who will arrange for childcare to enable a business trip, the sociocultural stories of gender are in the room. In fact, the spouses bring those stories (or roles, norms, schemas, and frames) into the room with them. These traditional frames hold sway even when both spouses have market work outside the home. And the power of these stories is such that men and women are drawn to reenact them, perhaps even when consciously they do not buy into them. The perpetuation of traditional gender patterns is the result.

In other words, couples do not sit down and have a summit in which they decide that the man will take on the more traditionally masculine role and the woman will take on

the more traditionally feminine role. Rather, in incremental negotiations over small-scale tasks and everyday decisions, the siren call of traditional gender stories pulls each outcome a little bit away from gender equality—and over time, the swerve becomes apparent. Accretive everyday interactions between individuals build to macro-level patterns of gendered activities, including structural and institutional reinforcement of social norms and roles.

Though Ridgeway (2011) does not flesh out the specific nature of the individual interactions she highlights, experience tells us that many of these interactions take the form of subtle cues—micro-interactions—rather than explicit negotiation. A father might telegraph hesitancy or inexperience in a hurried exchange over who will change a child's diaper; a mother might look bewildered in the face of the need to tighten a leaking faucet.

In these everyday interactions, the individuals involved are unlikely to consider how their in-the-moment responses and reactions align with existing gender roles. They are unlikely to be thinking of how falling into habitual gender roles reenacts social patterns. And they are even more unlikely to be conscious of how their interactions contribute to macro-level social oppression and domination, to structural injustice. Philosopher Kate Manne, however, draws the connection between everyday micro-interactions and the exercise of relational power that perpetuates social hierarchies.

Manne's description of the social phenomenon of misogyny, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (2017), begins by describing accepted gender roles for men and women. Women's socially accepted role, Manne asserts, is to support and assist men. Women should be neither too "out in front" in terms of doing their own outstanding work nor too remiss in failing to support men in fulfilling roles of prominence, leadership, and achievement.

Manne characterizes *misogynistic enforcement* as the fallout that women receive when they step out of line—out of their assigned and expected gender role. She asks, "What could be a more natural basis for hostility and aggression than defection from the role of an attentive, loving subordinate?" (p. 49).

And what might that hostility and aggression look like? Though it might take the form of physical violence, its more common form is verbal or emotional aggression or correction. Women who talk are talked over. Women who take the lead are met with sniping or undermining remarks. Women who fail to defer to men find themselves targets of particularly pointed criticism. Women who work long hours are undercut by questions about their dedication to their children. Women who do not act as they "should," in fact, are reminded via microaggressions from others (often, but not always, men) that they are stepping out of their lane—and should hasten back into it.

Misogyny defined this way is the enforcement arm of the social system of patriarchy.  And, importantly, enforcement here is not undertaken by some sort of centralized patriarchal police force that steps in whenever departures from patriarchal norms and practices occur.  Instead, enforcement is undertaken by men (and sometimes women) who happen to be on the scene. Everyday patriarchy takes the form of misogynistic enforcement by co-workers and colleagues, family and friends. This enforcement is sometimes direct and overt,

more often indirect and implicit. And it results in precisely the kind of decentralized reproduction of gender roles that Ridgeway (2011) describes.

Awareness of how micro-interactions communicate and reinforce social norms and roles calls to mind an anecdote from this author's childhood—an interaction with my grandfather. I was perhaps nine or ten. Old enough to have, for whatever reason, learned to whistle. Young enough to still just be a kid. I was visiting my grandparents and demonstrating my new achievement.

My grandfather said to me, "Whistling girls and cackling hens come to bad ends."

I remember that his remark caught me off guard. It was clearly not meant as praise but as an admonition it was oblique. Was I supposed to be somehow like a cackling hen? And what was the problem with a hen cackling? What kind of bad end were we talking about here—it seemed uncertain but ominous? And, which perhaps exercised me the most, why whistling girls in particular?

Later, I asked my mother what it meant. I cannot remember exactly what she said, but it was along the lines of I should whistle as much as I wanted, but perhaps not in front of Grandpa.

These kinds of everyday comments are the way that others instruct us and remind us of our roles.

I would not place my grandfather's elliptical admonition into the same category as the misogynistic microaggressions that Manne (2017) describes. I do, however, note that his little rhyme contained a message about gendered social schema: It invited and warned me not to whistle so as to not come

to a bad end—rather, in other words, to be "ladylike."

Among the roles that we learn through socialization are, of course, roles related to gender. Ridgeway (2011) highlights how internalized traditional roles shape men and women's behavior and individual interactions as they navigate everyday family and spousal duties. Manne focuses on how decentralized individual interactions, including microaggressions, keep women within patriarchy-defined gender roles.

Ridgeway (2011) and Manne (2017) reveal that social roles do not magically reproduce themselves: We occupy and re-create roles through norms and stories that we have learned and internalized. We also send messages to others about what roles we find appropriate for ourselves and what roles we find appropriate for them, especially as their actions-in-role intersect with our actions-in-role. As noted previously, much of this process is probably outside of our conscious awareness, though some of it may be intentional. Though these messages may be small and subtle, they are nonetheless significant: Micro course corrections steer a macro journey.

Ridgeway (2011) and Manne (2017) are both investigating gender relations, but their insights apply more broadly. Racial roles and relationships, for example, are reproduced through everyday individual interactions similar to those Ridgeway describes. While misogynist microaggressions enforce a system of patriarchy, racial microaggressions enforce a system of racism or White supremacy. The microaggression of Cooper toward Garcia described in Part I, for example, reminds Garcia of his racial/ethnic place. It establishes Cooper's privilege of

obliviousness. And it reminds bystanders of the "proper" social order and the norm of White solidarity and silence. The microaggression of the senior salesman to his female colleague in Part III similarly reminds her that she does not belong as an equal. It establishes his power to violate professional norms by invoking her attractiveness. And it reminds other members of the sales team who the "real" salesman are—and are not.

Individual interactions, then, reinforce the social roles that individuals occupy and perform. As they interact, individuals reproduce social structures and institutions. As noted, these individual interactions may be extremely brief, seemingly insignificant words or phrases. They may even be wordless facial or vocal expressions such as a smirk or a laugh. Nevertheless, these interactions can and powerfully do affect the recipient. Despite their brevity or offhanded nature, communication occurs; the message is delivered.

When social roles and structures manifest power, privilege, oppression, and injustice, micro-interactions reinforce and reproduce power, privilege, oppression, and injustice. Through these microaggressions, a lower-power individual—and other witnesses—are reminded of that person's one-down position. Microaggressions are thus far from insignificant. Instead, they are the everyday decentralized enforcement and reproduction of social oppression and injustice.

A final point has to do with the brevity or offhanded nature of the interactions mentioned above. As actors and observers, we are often unaware of the details of the specific micro-interaction or microaggression that triggered a sense of discomfort or non-belonging, even as we are

very aware of the impact. Because the work of schemas and the ladder of inference is lightning-quick and often hidden from us cognitively, we may be puzzled by exactly what it was that conveyed the message. This "what just happened?" quality of micro-interactions and microaggressions may contribute to a failure to give credence to the significance of their effects. Yet awareness of those effects cautions us to pay attention, diagnose what did happen, and address it rather than ignore it. Not doing so perpetuates existing power dynamics.

## Part V

### Microaggressions and Macro-Injustices

Many of the overt institutional arrangements that have historically enacted power and oppression in the U.S. have been discarded. These institutional structures, created and endorsed by explicit and formal law, designated and enforced insider and outsider roles of advantage and disadvantage. Slavery, Jim Crow, exclusions from voting, married women's lack of capacity to own property or be protected from domestic violence, including rape, and lack of status for same-sex relationships— these and other legal provisions expressly set forth relationships of hierarchy and injustice.

Though much overt discrimination has been repudiated by law, the social roles and relationships that prior laws articulated and enforced persist (Strand, 2015). Norms, attitudes, and expectations embedded in roles producing oppression linger. Implicit bias research, as described above, has shown that people in the U.S. have internalized longstanding understandings and expectations about racial and gender roles that lead to positive associations for Whiteness and negative associations for

Blackness, to associating men with high-status occupations and women with other occupations (Axt, Ebersole, & Nosek, 2014; Raymond, 2013). Schemas and stereotypes associated with racial, gender, and other power hierarchies persist.

Micro-interactions frequently communicate approval when people fulfill assigned or expected social roles appropriately and disapproval when people step out of line. Micro-interactions of approval affirmatively endorse and reinforce expected and normed social roles. Micro-interactions of criticism or disapproval negatively enforce those same norms and roles. These micro-interactions matter because humans respond to even very subtle social cues. Micro-interactions are like the electric zings from an invisible fence that remind us of our role boundaries so that we adhere to the social roles that others continuously remind us of. Micro-interactions, including those we call microaggressions, thus play a critical part in reproducing the social order of the macro-world by working to keep us all in our socialized roles. The macro social order both elicits and reinforces micro-interactions that reproduce and reinforce it.

This function of micro-interactions can be benign, as when the social roles and organization of the macro-world align with our values and beliefs, with equity and justice. But the macro-world does not always so align; equity and justice are not the universal norm. The world we live in is one in which some social positions are dominant and others are subordinate. Belonging to one social group or another matters in terms of access to various resources and the ability to perform certain functions in a range of ways. As with all roles, we are socialized to dominance or subordination by an accumulation of social

interactions, including micro-interactions as well as explicit instruction. When micro-interactions reinforce social roles of hierarchy, oppression, and dominance, they become microaggressions.

These microaggressions reproduce macro-injustices. We described above how microaggressions affect interpersonal reproduction of hierarchies and recreate lines of belonging and exclusion. The social structure enforcement function of microaggressions operates most directly on people who are its targets. But the *effects* of microaggressions extend to members of all social groups. For members of a socially dominant group, for example, microaggressions serve to enforce group solidarity: Members of the socially dominant group must not step out of line by showing empathy for or solidarity with members of the socially subordinate group. Racial or gendered jokes, for example, let members of a socially dominant group know who is to be objectified and stereotyped and reinforce in listeners the work of objectifying and stereotyping. The silence of listeners in the presence of these jokes, like the silence of bystanders about Cooper's microaggression toward Garcia or of the sales staff about the microaggression the sales manager directed toward his female colleague, supports the social status quo.

This foundational understanding of the social-oppression function of microaggressions dovetails with work on the maintenance of the systemic status quo of structural injustices. Essentially, microaggressions serve to remind members of different social groups of their place. While each individual microaggression may be brief and perhaps overlooked by many observers, the cumulative effects on the recipient of many are pervasive and potent. In response to a question we raised earlier

about this role of "boots on the ground" enforcer of social roles, it does not make a difference that some—or indeed many—microaggressions may be unintended by the perpetrator. Moreover, awareness of how microaggressions operate to enforce social oppression suggests that the injury they cause may be particularly acute. Harmful words that reproduce well-established social stigmas are likely to carry heavier social weight than words that evoke more individualized or transitory pain or discomfort.

Microaggressions thus represent the daily and mundane face of structural and systemic oppression. Within institutions such as workplaces, schools, neighborhood groups, and families, individuals regularly remind others of the roles and relationships that they consciously or unconsciously expect. People of Color are reminded directly and indirectly that they are lesser, not as important, do not belong in certain historically White spaces (Anderson, 2015), are not normal, are dangerous and deviant (Steele, 2010), that their experiences and stories are irrelevant and unimportant, that they are suitable for menial roles, lack merit, and more. Women are reminded directly and indirectly that they are lesser, not as important, do not belong in certain historically male spaces, are not normal, are threatening and deviant, that their experiences and stories are irrelevant and unimportant, that they are suitable for menial roles and sexual objectification, lack merit, and more. Conversely, White people and men are reminded directly and indirectly of their one-up position and that they have a social role to play in maintaining racial and gender hierarchies.

The deniability of the importance or very existence of microaggressions by perpetrators and observers represents an additional layer of oppression, which we call *epistemological oppression*. As we noted in Part I, Sue and others use terms like "subtle" and "hidden" to describe the nature of microaggressions (Sue, 2010). The brevity of microaggressions in combination with the assertion of intent (or lack thereof) as the determinant of social responsibility gives rise to deniability. This deniability sometimes occurs at the individual level, and it sometimes takes the form of a more global challenge to the use of the word "aggression" to describe microaggressions at all—*aggression* being contended to require a level of intent. When a member of a dominant group commits a microaggression against a member of a subordinate group and then claims that a lack of intent on his part trumps injury that she experiences, he effectively invokes the power of his epistemology over hers. What he experiences and knows submerges what she experiences and knows. Hewing insistently to intent as the crucial variable for assessing the responsibility of people who engage in microaggressions endorses a kind of societal gaslighting of the lived realities of people who are the targets of microaggressions as members of socially oppressed groups.

Philosopher George Yancy, referring to race, describes a social epistemology born of "a shared history of Black people noting, critically discussing, suffering and sharing with each other the traumatic experiential content and repeated acts of white racism" (Yancy, 2008, p. 849). When the interpretation of a particular epistemological community (e.g., Blacks, women) is consistently disregarded in favor of the interpretation of another epistemological community (e.g., Whites, men), oppression is compounded. The target of a microaggression is thus reminded of their socially subordinate status, of their not belonging. On top of that, through

deniability—which turns on a lack of intent—a person experiencing a microaggression is also reminded that they lack the power to define what is or is not real or not socially recognized as real. If it suits the purposes of members of a socially dominant group to disregard harm caused, that is their prerogative.

Microaggressions, in this view, take on additional significance. Women, such as our talented sales associate who experiences misogynistic microaggressions in the workplace, are being reminded of their place and the consequences of stepping out of that place. They do not belong; they do not count. They are herded into a subsidiary and supportive role by repeated verbal "zaps" that chastise and correct them when they depart from being appropriately supportive or seek to assume a leadership role. Their experience of all of this is, moreover, discounted and denied. Students of Color in a classroom who experience racialized microaggressions in the form of microinvalidations (Sue, 2010) are reminded that they do not count and that they are unlike those who have succeeded academically before and who are likely to succeed in the future. They do not belong; they are different, no matter how "articulate" they are. They are alienated into a separate and marginalized role through subtle but triggering messages of subordination and exclusion. Their experience of all of this is, moreover, discounted and denied. Bystanders to these microaggressions are also reminded of the existing social hierarchy and warned not to disturb it. And that message is presented in a manner that can be denied when it is convenient to do so.

Overall, microaggressions are an essential contributor to the perpetuation of systems of social injustice.

Microaggressions, operating through ubiquitous and lightning-quick psychological processes, are the decentralized and relational enforcement of social roles and hierarchies. Microaggressions, far from being insignificant, are the individual locusts that make up the swarm of a macro-unjust culture. Individually, the locusts may not be significant; as a swarm, they define an environment.

**Conclusion and Takeaways**

We started working on this project with the conviction that microaggressions matter. We suspected that a cross-disciplinary, micro-macro exploration of microaggressions in the context of systems of injustice and oppression would yield useful perspectives for understanding their potency. We believed that a new lens and theoretical framing could help to make sense of the discrepancies between the testimonies and lived experiences of people experiencing the power and pain of microaggressions and the reports of those who do not notice them or are skeptical about their importance. We conclude that microaggressions, when understood in the larger psychological context of social cognition, perform an under-acknowledged yet critical role in the enforcement and perpetuation of social systems of hierarchy. That they are brief, decentralized, and often unnoticed by some does not render them trivial or unimportant, nor does it warrant ignoring their role. Rather, the very fact that they are pervasive and yet frequently overlooked by many gives them formidable reach and power.

We offer three major takeaways from this understanding of the fundamental importance of microaggressions in the production of systemic social injustice.

First, while the construct of microaggressions has been widely adopted, it has also been widely criticized by both scholars (Lilienfeld, 2017) and social commentators (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). Placing microaggressions within the larger realm of micro-interactions provides the psychological context for understanding how microaggressions operate and why their effects on targeted recipients are inevitable, substantial, and not to be minimized. The seemingly minute verbal or nonverbal reminder of subordinate social status can trigger an avalanche of well-learned schemas and messages about social value and place. "Who are YOU" demands a microaggression against a member of a historically oppressed group, "to think that you can step out of the place to which centuries of social practice have assigned you?" Ibram Kendi captures the magnitude of the cumulative effect of microaggressions' repeated reminders of non-belonging: "A persistent daily low hum of racist abuse is not minor…Abuse accurately describes the action and its effects on people: distress, anger, worry, depression, anxiety, pain, fatigue, and suicide" (Kendi, 2019, p. 47). At the same time, the broader psychological context helps illuminate why actors of superordinate social status are frequently oblivious to the impact of microaggressions that they commit…as well as uncurious about them. These micro-interactions, operating below level of the socially dominant actor's conscious attention, are unlikely to be emotionally laden for them. They may even think they are being complimentary ("You are so articulate!") and are not motivated to explore their implicit biases or their schema of "articulate student" that provokes such a comment.

Second, understanding the role of microaggressions contributes to and solidifies an understanding of social systems of oppression. Young's (1990) work describes how power is relational and how myriad individual interactions are the essence of structural injustice. Ridgeway's (2011) work reveals how traditional system-level patterns and social roles are reproduced through interactions and mini-negotiations between individuals that reproduce social roles. Manne's (2017) work highlights how decentralized reminders of accepted social roles enforce power hierarchies. The work on schemas by Bem and by Cohen connects individual cognitive processing with observed and experienced social structures. Taken together, this body of work connects structural injustices to everyday interactions and relationships. These everyday interactions and relationships, it turns out, are the kind of light-touch, brief, off-the-cuff comment or gesture that we all engage in. Understanding microaggressions as instances of micro-interactions and placing them in the context of social cognitive processing connects the sociological and political to the psychological and individual and so brings systemic injustice home to us. The personal reflects the political; the political emerges from the personal; the personal reinforces the political.

Third, recognizing the psychological avalanche that the smallest microaggression can cause makes it disturbingly clear that chiding recipients to "get over it!" and "not be so sensitive" reveals a profound obliviousness on the part of some members of the dominant group. This very obliviousness helps perpetuate a dominant group member's privilege within a larger system of social group oppression. This obliviousness of individuals with the greatest privilege can be seen as a symptom of epistemological oppression because it means that a dominant's group version of the

world operates as if it holds unchallenged sway.

These three takeaways point toward actions that each of us can take to counter microaggressions and their individual and systemic effects. Understanding how microaggressions reinforce, sustain, and recreate oppression, particularly oppression based on race, gender, and sexual orientation, reveals the many opportunities individuals have to interrupt them. Structural injustice can appear so vast and entrenched as to be impervious to resistance and change. And yet it is through individual interactions (often individual micro-interactions, in the form of microaggressions) that the social systems maintaining injustice are reproduced and sustained. Because the macro does indeed emerge from the micro, individuals can commit to shifting from perpetuating a cycle of socialization to creating a new cycle of liberation that can disrupt systems of injustice (Harro, 2018). The personal-political mutually reinforcing feedback loop *can* be interrupted. The personal *can* destabilize an established political.

This is the everyday work of social justice. When we challenge prevailing social roles of dominance and subordination in our spheres of influence (Tatum, 2017), we create disturbances in the system. If enough of us undertake those challenges in our spheres of influence, change is possible. We can choose to forgo the defensive talisman of "lack of intent" and instead listen to and honor the lived reality of people in oppressed social locations. Once we become

aware, we can notice and interrupt ourselves prior to engaging in a microaggression. As bystanders, we can speak or otherwise intervene to identify and challenge a microaggression, listen when the recipient names its impact, and contribute to dismantling an epistemology of obliviousness and ignorance. We can be in solidarity with people who experience the social harm of a microaggression by engaging intentionally in micro-inclusions-—small, everyday interactions that send messages of belonging to members of historically marginalized social groups.[ix]

Microaggressions, we conclude, are integral to the reinforcement and perpetuation of social systems of dominance and oppression. Microaggressions ground and manifest macro-injustices. Microaggressions bring the weight of these macro-injustices to bear on individual people. To challenge and dismantle systems of injustice, we must step up and name, counter, and interfere with these small yet powerful acts.

**Notes**

[1] The psychologist is Brent Staples, PhD, who has gone on to be an acclaimed journalist. Staples recounts his story in an essay titled "Just Walk on By: A Black Man Ponders His Power to Alter Public Space" (1986) *available at* https://www.livingston.org/cms/lib9/NJ01000562/Centricity/Domain/723/Just%20Walk%20on % 20By%20A%20Black%20Man%20Ponders%20His%20Power%20to%20Alter%20Public%20S p ace%20by%20Brent%20Staples.htm.

[2] For further discussion of "nudges" see Richard Thaler & Cass Sunstein, (2009) *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness*. Penguin.

[3] In discussing oppression, Young highlights manifestations of injustice that go beyond, though they may include, distribution of resources. She identifies "Five Faces of Oppression": "exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence" (p. 40). These differentiated forms of oppression all interfere with people's self-development and self-expression.

[4] This saying has been variously attributed to Anaïs Nin, H. M. Tomlinson, Steven Covey and even scholars in the Talmudic tradition.

[5] If the research were conducted in 2021, my students report that she would be seen "taking shots."

[6] Ambady and associates have also applied their Person Construal theoretical framework to the perception of race and to how racial prejudice interacts with the perception of Black versus White individuals. See Pauker, K., Apfelbaum, E. & Ambady, N. (2010) Race Salience and Essentialist Thinking in Racial Stereotype Development, 118(2) *Child Development* 1799-1811.

[7] While Banaji and Greenwald do not use the term "schema," their model rests in assumptions about closely associated characteristics of individuals that are stored in such a way (e.g., a schema) that they are called up together.

[8] See, for example, Williams, J., (1999). *Unbending gender: Why family and work conflict and what to do about it.* Oxford University Press. Williams describes the "ideal worker" as someone with no care responsibilities, gendered male.

[9] The term "micro-inclusions" is drawn from a presentation by Lauren Aguilar, "Belonging in Science" on file with Author (Strand).

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