

In the eyes of the beholders: Microaggressions, lived experience, and the collective

Those who protest microaggressions face significant resistance and scepticism. To give voice to the critic, should we care so much about such small in scale acts? Aren't those who detect microaggressions just being too sensitive? Can't what appear to be microaggressions turn out to be innocent errors on the part of the person who commits the act? And isn't it simply *unfair* to blame those who commit microaggressions, when the acts in question are (apparently) small-scale, ambiguous, and open to alternative interpretations?¹

Regina Rini's new book offers a nuanced and compelling engagement with, and answer to, these critics (Rini 2020). First, the book offers us a new account of microaggressions that promises a way to settle the disputes over whether to interpret some act as a microaggression, the Ambiguous Experience Account. Second, it describes the kinds of blame that are appropriate for those who do commit microaggressions, and yet would be fair: a form of proleptic blame, one that gives external inducements to behave better the next time, followed by blame in its fuller sense if people do not 'offset' their contributions to systemic oppression. The book thus offers an account of the morality of the microaggressor: of how to tell when we've committed a microaggression and an answer to whether (and to what extent) we are blameworthy when we have done so.² It is a much needed and impressive treatment of an important topic.

This response focuses on Rini's Ambiguous Experience Account of microaggressions. This account is designed such that we can *know* whether some act is a microaggression: it is when a member of a marginalised group experiences it as such. As such it promises to overcome some of the scepticism about microaggressions, especially that grounded on the idea that the act could

¹ One impressive aspect of Rini's book is its generous depiction of, and answers to, microaggression sceptics (2020). See, for instance, pp. 6-9; on the conflict averse egalitarian, pp. 11-12 and again pp. 23-26.

² 2020, p.2.

be differently interpreted or is too nebulous for us to be to be sure what is happening. With this account, the book also captures an important strand of public debates that has received limited philosophical attention: the idea that microaggression is in the eye of the beholder. This idea is sometimes voiced by critics, who argue that individuals find microaggressions in their interactions but ought not: that microaggressions are *merely* in the eye of the beholder. But this book rescues the idea for those who aren't sceptical of microaggressions, explaining why we should accept the individual's lived experience. One highly illuminating aspect of the book is the way in which Rini demonstrates how our understanding of microaggressions thus rests upon a particular understanding of oppression and what it is to defer to lived experience. However, this response offers three challenges to the Ambiguous Experience Account of microaggressions, which are based on a collective, rather than individualistic, understanding of lived experience and the harm that microaggressions do. This amounts to a partial defence of a structural – or at any rate, a more collective – account of microaggressions.

1. The three accounts of microaggressions

In pinning down what counts as a microaggression, the goal is to capture a particular kind of experience that members of oppressed groups have: the way in which they are frequently confronted with everyday small-scale slights, putdowns, or degradations.³ How should one go about that? In her book, Rini criticises two existing accounts of microaggressions and proposes an alternative.⁴ To begin, then, here is Rini's helpful taxonomy of the three accounts.

³ Following Chester Pierce's definition, e.g. 1995, p.281.

⁴ I'm not entirely sure that these, as portrayed are full accounts of microaggressions. I suspect that to count as a microaggression, an act also needs to meet other criteria: to illustrate, not all acts stemming from unconscious prejudice are *microaggressions*.

The first, which Rini attributes to Chester Pierce, who coined the term ‘microaggression’ and to Derald Wing Sue, a key figure in contemporary research on microaggressions, is the *Motivational Account*:

‘What makes an act or event count as a microaggression is that it is caused by a perpetrator’s (unconscious) prejudiced motivation’ (Rini 2020: 43).

The second is Rini’s own proposal, which she labels the *Ambiguous Experience Account*:

‘What makes an act or event count as a microaggression is that it is perceived by a member of an oppressed group as *possibly but not certainly* instantiating oppression’ (Rini 2020: 59).

And the third Rini labels the *Structural Account*, which I have defended elsewhere:⁵

‘What makes an act or event count as a microaggression is that it *implements a function of subtle oppression* within a social system’ (Rini 2020: 78).

So, how do we choose between these accounts? In her book, it seems to me that Rini provides us with two main deciding factors.⁶ One is that we can overcome ‘diagnostic scepticism’: the worry that we can’t know for sure whether some act is a microaggression or not, especially in the

⁵ See McTernan 2018; a similar line emerges in work on microaggressions that considers how they function, see for illustration on racial microaggressions keeping people ‘in their place’, Huber & Solorzano 2015: 302.

⁶ Other considerations are offered in favour of the Ambiguous Experience Account too. One is the account accommodates the fact that blaming people for microaggressions is morally difficult, especially as compared to large scale harm, Rini 2020 e.g., p.81. But it appears that all the accounts do this: on the Motivational Account, unconscious prejudice is hard to blame people for, partly as we can’t be sure that their act results from such prejudice; and on the Structural Account, that microaggressions contribute in a subtle, cumulative way to oppression makes it hard to see exactly what to hold the microaggressor accountable for. Another is that the account centres ambiguity, but all the accounts make space for the ambiguity of microaggressions: the lack of certainty over the motivations of the microaggressor on the Motivational Account, and the subtle nature of the act in the Structural Account that permits a plausible deniability and so often protects the microaggressor from being blamed or shamed. A third is to do with how the public debate goes when we take one or other approach to defining microaggressions, but I take it the circumstantial luck, considered shortly, may make public acceptance of microaggressions on the Ambiguous Experience Account, tricky.

face of competing interpretations of participants in the interaction.⁷ After all, those who commit microaggressions often deny that they have done anything wrong. The second is that one appropriately respects the lived experience of marginalised people, and their clear expertise on their own oppression.

The first of these tells against the Motivational Account. To distil Rini's detailed, compelling argument in chapter two to what I take to be its essential point: we lack good epistemic access to the information that would settle whether some act is, or is not, a genuine microaggression on this approach. These are the inner states – motivations, and especially unconscious prejudice – of the agent who commits it. That is problematic, especially if one wants to attribute blame or settle a dispute over interpretations. Rini is right that this is an account that appears to make it hard to tell whether to blame the person committing the apparent microaggression. You'd need to know what is going on in my head, to hold me responsible. That will be very hard, even impossible, to be certain about, particularly if it is my unconscious motivations that are at issue.⁸

Both deciding factors tell against the Structural Account. First, the Structural Account, just like the Motivational Account, seems to make the question of whether some act is a microaggression rest on a very tricky to discern question: in this case, does this act contribute to a system of oppression in a subtle way, by constituting a small, everyday putdown or degradation that ties in the correct way to broader prejudices and hierarchies?⁹ Second, the Structural account does not always appear to respect the lived experience of the individual. Rini argues that

⁷ For a discussion, see Rini 2020, ch. 2. See also the subjectivity problem, that there can be competing interpretations, and if we accept one, aren't we 'simply privileging one subjective perspective over others', described on p.42.

⁸ See also the discussion of tragic coincidences, where there is an innocent explanation for a microaggression, Rini 2020: 57-59.

⁹ In Rini's terms, it makes determining if some act is a microaggression depend on facts 'far out in social space' that 'may be irresolvable and are certainly disputed', 2020, p. 81.

if a marginalised person does not recognise act A as a microaggression, even if other members of the very same group count A as a microaggression, who are we to override the lived experience of the individual? But the Structural Account seems to require that acts that contribute, in general, to the reproduction of oppression are microaggressions, even if some members of marginalised groups do not experience them as such (Rini 2020: 80).

In contrast, we can see that the Ambiguous Experience Account respects individual lived experience *and* it provides a definitive answer on the matter of whether some act is a microaggression: it depends on the view of the marginalised person. If the individual member of a marginalised group perceives it as such (as an act possibly, but not certainly, instantiating oppression), then it is.

However, despite its advantages, I'll offer a set of challenges to the Ambiguous Experience Account, that go some way towards defending the Structural Account. The first begins with a problem case of the well-known microaggression, to explore the kind of ambiguity present in the experience of a microaggression. The second questions the fairness of being accused of committing a microaggression on the account—even where the blame that results is an attenuated sort. Doing so raises the issue of how best to conceptualise the harms created by microaggressions: as a collective harm, or as a harm done to the individual who directly experiences the microaggression. The third gets to grips with the underlying commitments about the nature of lived experience, raising a question about the second of Rini's criteria.

2. The challenge of well-known microaggressions

Some microaggressions appear to lack the kind of ambiguity that lies at the heart of Rini's account, of being 'perceived by a member of an oppressed group as *possibly but not certainly* instantiating oppression', whilst remaining microaggressions. Here, I have in mind especially well-known microaggressions. These probably include being asked 'but where are you really from?'; touching a black woman's hair; referring to adult women as 'girls'; or using the phrase

‘that’s so gay’. Despite being well-known, and widely regarded as definitely instantiations of oppression, these are still microaggressions. They are widely agreed to be such, amongst researchers on microaggressions and amongst activists, and they are thought to contribute in a small, subtle way to an oppressive pattern, being amongst the small, everyday, ‘putdowns and degradations’ that Pierce coined the term ‘microaggressions’ to describe.¹⁰ But, despite the lack of uncertainty for those well versed in microaggressions about what is going on when experiencing one of these, it would be strange for an account that prioritised lived experience to deny that these counted as microaggressions. That is especially so since such examples are amongst the paradigm cases highlighted by those members of marginalised groups protesting microaggressions.¹¹

The other two accounts clearly regard these cases as microaggressions. Despite being well-known, at least amongst those who have such experiences inflicted upon them, these can still stem from unconscious prejudices, rather than being done deliberately, and so fit into the Motivational Account. I might have read an article (or many) on not asking people who aren’t white where they are ‘really’ from, or on not using the term ‘girls’ for adult women and slip up anyway given that these slips reflect unconscious biases that I’m yet to correct. And the fact that they are well known only supports their being read as microaggressions on the Structural Account: they tap into such familiar prejudices and biases, of precisely the kind that structure our social world in hierarchical and oppressive ways. But still, the act is subtle: it is small in scale and the perpetrator’s intentions may be unclear, making these acts hard to resist and protest without risking accusations of being unreasonable, for instance.

But the fact that they are well-known makes it less than clear that the Ambiguous Experience Account can accommodate them. A marginalised person confronted by one of these

¹⁰ E.g. Pierce 1995.

¹¹ Of course, here I am using lived experience in a somewhat different way to Rini, to which I return shortly.

won't, it seems to me, have an ambiguous experience in the sense seemingly relevant for this account: she will be pretty certain she faces an instance of the small-scale, apparently innocuous everyday 'putdowns and degradations' that serve their role in reinforcing and enacting oppression. So, she'll be pretty certain that she experiences an act that 'instantiates oppression', to use Rini's phrasing, especially given the theorising offered by activists and scholars as to the way in which these acts are part and parcel of an oppressive system.

Three replies might be offered. The first bites the bullet: Rini may have a reply ready, since she observes at one point that '*any* account of microaggressions is going to have problems with *some* cases' (2020: 66). With that I agree. So, one could dismiss well-known microaggressions as simply outliers, or one that it is acceptable for an account of microaggressions to fail to include. But I think that would be a mistake. Such cases are not outliers rather, I suspect, they'll will only become more common. As we become better educated about microaggressions, more and more will likely enter the category of being well-known. More importantly, the fact that they are well-known does not, I think, undermine the impact of these microaggressions: that they are common in an oppressed group's experience is one reason why they have the effects they do, especially of constantly drip feeding the message that others see one as being 'other' or 'lesser'. They ought to be included.

Second, someone might respond that to commit one of these acts is no microaggression, but rather an act of deliberate, overt prejudice. That would explain the absence of uncertainty – but also, makes sense of why, indeed, one ought to deny that these are microaggressions. Instead, they are aggressions. As such, it should be untroubling that the Ambiguous Experience Account fails to accommodate them. But that doesn't appear quite right. For a start, the acts in question remain small scale and every day, which makes calling them 'aggressions' appear inapt. Further, there can be instances of these cases that would be ill-described as openly aggressive or even deliberate: where members of the dominant group are not as well informed as members of the marginalised group, or where they know about the microaggression but nonetheless slip up

as a result of their remaining unconscious bias. Strengthening this point, note that the most common sense in which some act becomes well-known as an example of a microaggression, and the one that most troubles their inclusion on the Ambiguous Experience Account, is being well-known amongst members of the very marginalised group that is targeted by the microaggression.

As one last reply, third, one might think that despite appearances, the Ambiguous Experience Account *can* still count these well-known acts as microaggressions. Perhaps there is ambiguity, still, in such well-known cases: surely, we can't be *certain* that *any* small-scale act 'instantiates oppression' of a subtle kind. After all, I didn't claim above that the person who is a member of an oppressed group and experiences the well-known microaggression is *completely* certain that they are confronted with an instantiation of oppression. Rather, they are pretty certain. That might fit into a capacious understanding of 'possibly but not certainly' instantiating oppression.

But, then, what does get excluded by the definition of microaggressions? One thing any account of microaggressions needs to do is mark some line between microaggressions and macro, larger scale acts of prejudice and oppression. If our line is that a member of an oppressed group isn't *entirely* certain that some act instantiates oppression, then some overt, deliberate, and larger scale acts of prejudice look likely to be included, in so far as there is any room for doubt that they truly instantiate oppression.

Further, one might ask if, drawn so capaciously, the account captures the kind of ambiguity of experience that it promised, so appealingly, to capture: the lack of certainty about what is going on in this interaction. Take Saba Fatima's opening to a description of a microaggression that she experienced: 'Something – which was perhaps nothing – happened'

(2017: 147).¹² If the ambiguity now needed to count as experiencing a microaggression is being not entirely certain that this act instantiates oppression – but encompasses being pretty sure – is that still the relevant kind of uncertainty? By contrast, the other accounts provide other ways in which to accommodate the ambiguity of an interaction involving a microaggression, even well-known ones. On the Motivational Account, even for well-known microaggressions, we still can't be sure what the other intends, or what motivations drive them. On a Structural Account, the acts remain small-scale, small contributions to a broader structure, and ones that it is hard to resist or protest without, in that one interaction, seeming like one overreacts to something so – apparently – nebulous.¹³ The ambiguity, then, stems from the subtle nature of the act in the Structural Account, and the unclear motives in the Ambiguous Experience Account. The question that arises, then, is what creates it in the Ambiguous Experience Account, if drawn to include well-known microaggressions.

3. Moral luck, fairness, and who is affected

The second issue raised by the Ambiguous Experience Account begins with a challenge from moral luck and fairness but leads to a deeper question about conceptualising the harm of a microaggression. So, if we adopt the Ambiguous Experience account, here is how we should think about two contrasting cases:

The frequent offender

Suppose that Amy routinely commits some act, φ , that nearly all members of some particular marginalised group agree is a microaggression. But it just so happens that the small handful of

¹² See also Fatima's discussion of ambiguity and how each incident can be hard to explain to others, even when the microaggression is frequent (2017: 152).

¹³ Here I am perhaps suggesting that the other two accounts capture the ambiguous experience of a microaggression more clearly – but that it is a lack of certainty about diagnosis, perhaps of a kind Rini would be troubled by.

people from that marginalised group that Amy encounters do not see it as a microaggression.

On the Ambiguous Experience Account, Amy gets off the hook on the account: she is not guilty of committing any microaggression.

The one-off mistake

Suppose that Bill as a one-off, commits the very same act, φ , but happens to do so in front of a person from the marginalised group who does regard φ as a microaggression. Bill doesn't get off so lightly: on the Ambiguous Experience Account, he has committed a microaggression.

Why is that troubling? First, it looks unfair. There is a clear sense in which the attribution of having committed a microaggression, even if the blame is attenuated in some way, depends on moral luck: the circumstantial misfortune of doing φ in front of the member of the marginalised group who does treat φ as a microaggression. By contrast, Amy gets off scot free, as a result of the circumstantial luck of who she encounters. One can tweak the case further, if this alone isn't sufficiently worrying. Suppose that very few members of a marginalised group in fact do see some act that Bill commits as a microaggression. If so, then Bill turns out to be particularly unlucky in his circumstances.

Second, the case reveals a possible issue with the framing of the Ambiguous Experience Account. This account treats microaggressions as one-on-one interactions. Taking that view of microaggressions is liable to produce an ethics of microaggressions that pays too little attention to their effects on third parties (or to use the terminology in keeping with the account, the effects on third parties of a microaggression, or of a microaggression-identical act that was committed on an indifferent main party). Amy may be doing harm by constantly committing φ , even if those she interacts with don't care about it. Suppose that φ is an act that reinforces, in a small way, the prejudiced assumptions that members of the dominant group tend to make about members of the marginalised group. Then it seems strange not to hold Amy responsible for the

broader harmful effect in committing a microaggression-identical act towards an oblivious individual. But on the Ambiguous Experience Account, no microaggression has been committed.

One response might be simply to reply that Amy is still to be blamed (or otherwise held accountable in some partial sense) for the harm she does to third parties, even though on the Ambiguous Experience Account she commits no microaggression. But I think we'd need better reasons to carve off the third-party harms of microaggressions in this way when thinking about what a microaggression is and what they do. If all that microaggressions did was a tiny amount of harm to the individual who experiences them, and nothing more, they'd be akin to ordinary impolitenesses and the everyday slights and exclusions we all face – if, perhaps, something that marginalised groups experienced significantly more of. But they aren't, because microaggressions tap into, and contribute too, a broader, wider harm, of oppression. Further, the harms to third parties are of the same sort as the harms done to the individual who experiences the microaggression: an othering, being 'put in one's place', a reminder and enactment of one's unequal social status.

But against this argument from similarity of harms stands Rini's lived experience argument. What could justify overriding the lived experience of the member of the marginalised group? Who could be better placed to know if some act is a microaggression for them, then the member of the oppressed group to whom it is directed? That leads to a particularly fascinating aspect of Rini's book, with which the rest of this review is concerned: the understanding of lived experience, and how an account of microaggressions depends upon it.

4. Lived experience and collective understanding

I begin with an account of Rini's position on lived experience. She offers us the example of a Black woman who loves having people touch her hair. On the Ambiguous Experience Account, then for that woman, having her hair touched is not a microaggression. On a Structural Account,

by contrast, it is: on that account, what matters is if the act subtly contributes to a hierarchical system, reinforcing some bias, prejudice or similar. It is widely felt that touching hair without permission, does exactly that. But this raises a deeper question, as Rini explains:

‘Hovering behind this point is an immensely complicated, unsettled issue in thinking about oppression. Do victims of oppression frequently suffer ‘false consciousness’, a denial of their own oppressed status foisted on them by a powerfully deceptive society? Does anyone have the standing to tell people who *welcome* a social practice that they are unwittingly accepting their own subjugation or are complicit in their own oppression? My own view (which I can’t fully defend here) is that we should defer as much as possible to people’s own experiences. I certainly don’t think I, as a white person, am in any position to tell a Black woman who loves people asking to touch her hair that *she* is misperceiving her social relations’ (Rini 2020: 80).

The Ambiguous Experience Account does not involve saying anything so clearly unattractive: it really is down to her. On this account, the expert in oppressive experience *is* a particular individual, who says this act is, or is not, a microaggression.

But it is important here to see just how individualistic the above take on lived experience appears. On the face of it, this take appears to be in tension with how social justice movements proceed. If the individual is an expert merely qua membership of the group, what purpose have the various speeches or pamphlets or campaigns that are aimed at building solidarity and understanding amongst a group? After all, they’d already have the relevant understanding of their oppression, given that mere membership of a group suffices. Further, one might ask whether on the individual account, there could be any knowledge gained by collecting together, say, as consciousness raising groups of feminist movements did, since shared experience (however imperfect) means little. Rather, it looks like the individuals, however unreflective and divorced from the collective effort of her group, are right. So, too, most groups have terms used to describe members of their group who collude in, or collaborate with, their group’s oppression,

although many are controversial. As an illustrative few, take the idea of ‘internalised homophobia’; ‘handmaidens of the patriarchy’; or the term ‘scabs’, for striker breakers or workers who cross picket lines. Should we instead describe those who are (correctly) so labelled experts in their own oppression? This set of practices tells against a purely individualistic understanding of lived experience and the idea that an oppressed group has particular knowledge of its own oppression.¹⁴

Instead, then, I’d endorse a group-based approach. On it, one can still endorse the idea that lived experience confers expertise. Members of marginalised or otherwise oppressed groups have the best understanding of their oppression: they are the ones who live it. But it does not follow that each and every individual has *all* the knowledge of the group. The same is true after all for other areas of expertise, and so why not for lived experience too. The undergraduate student in biology doesn’t know as much as the professor; so, too, the professor of microbiology doesn’t know as much as the professor of epidemiology about the spread of diseases. There, too, we find that knowledge is a collective endeavour: no one scientist knows everything that science has discovered. The same idea that it is through collective understanding that one comes to grasp the nature of one’s oppression and come to see it more clearly appears, too, in discussions of microaggressions. For instance, when discussing one of Rini’s earlier pieces on how a culture of ‘victimhood’ is really one of group solidarity, Fatima states: ‘it is the sharing of our stories within marginalized communities that allows us to critically reflect on our cumulative experiences’ (Fatima 2020: 166).

If one adopts this group view, however, then one of the book’s major arguments against the Structural Account fails: that it fails to respect lived experience. Rather, when determining what counts as a subtle contribution to oppression, those who live with the oppression are experts. Lived experience comes in when determining what acts perform the subtle functions of

¹⁴ Rini does note that some may not see what is happening in cases of oppression and acknowledges that there are objective facts about social structures, 2020:81.

oppression: to decide that one can hold that those who live under it are the experts, but it does not follow that in each case, each individual will know, unreflectively. That, after all, would leave very little room for ambiguity in one's experience.

Why, then, would one adopt the individual view of lived experience? Understandably Rini does not offer a full defence in the book, but she does offer some reasons to endorse it. One is specific to defining microaggressions. To adopt a group-based account might seem to make 'the *identification* of microaggression dependent on facts... far out in social space – that may be irresolvable and are certainly disputed'. How can we know if some act serves the oppressive function in this instance, given the complexity of oppression and the need to be sure that one has the expertise to determine whether this act is a microaggression? Instead, on the Ambiguous Experience Account, with its individualistic take on lived experience, we can just defer to the particular individual. But, first, that something is easier, doesn't make it right. Second, the collective knowledge of a group is accessible, if not always instantly nor without reflection.

Rini offers two more general reasons in favour of an individualistic account. One is that it would be off-putting and offensive to potential allies: 'insisting you understand her life better than she does' (2020, 80). Second, as Rini rightly observes, surely as a white woman I shouldn't be comfortable telling a Black woman that she is wrong about her own oppression. Of course, the second doesn't follow from a group-based account of lived experience: outsiders do not have the relevant lived experience – but other members of one's group, do. And the first of these points is claim about the pragmatics of creating a movement, rather than a reason to think differently about the nature of the knowledge gained from lived experience. Perhaps it is better not to insist that you understand your group's oppression better than someone else, but it doesn't follow that there is no variation in the expertise that people have about their own oppression.

This response is too short, of course, to settle the question of how to conceptualise the idea of lived experience. But I hope to have explored some of the deep choices that Rini's book, *The Ethics of Microaggression*, shows us that we make when we define microaggressions in how we conceive of oppression and lived experience. Further, this piece offers some reasons to be concerned about thinking about expertise in overly individualistic terms: expertise is a collective and not entirely individual, achievement. That, along with the difficulty of capturing well-known microaggressions and the role of circumstantial luck, may tell against the Ambiguous Experience Account.

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