

Moral Blame and Responsibility: Microaggressions, Implicit Bias, and Racial Injustice

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The question as to whether one is morally responsible for their implicit bias has been at the center of philosophy and psychology discourses for over the past decade. Implicit bias is difficult to call attention to, primarily because it is generated implicitly and executed subtly. What one can gather from these discourses is that the consequences of one's implicit bias are complex, with many theorists taking opposing viewpoints. Some believe that one simply is not morally blameworthy and responsible for their implicit biases. For example, some posit that if a person is not aware of their action due to implicit bias, then they are not blameworthy for their action. However, there are some who believe that a person is or somewhat aware of their implicit attitudes and actions, and therefore they are more or less morally responsible and blameworthy for these attitudes and actions.

Some of the prominent theorists who believe that individuals are not blameworthy and therefore not morally responsible for their implicit biases are Saul (2013) and Levy (2017). Their premises for this notion of non-blameworthiness are rooted in the fact that people who are not aware or in control of their implicit attitudes cannot be held responsible for them, since it does not reflect their external beliefs. On the other hand, there are those who posit that one is more or less morally responsible for their implicit biases.¹ These theorists have different methods of assessing blameworthiness and responsibility for implicit biases, but nonetheless arrive at the general conclusion that individuals are to some extent blameworthy and morally responsible. Agreeing with neither of these viewpoints, some scholars consider that the criteria for moral responsibility, due to implicit biases, are situational and unique across contexts, and therefore must be assessed differently.² It is within this last group that I will discuss further.

To begin with, what is implicit bias? I define it for this paper as negative evaluations on people that occur without a conscious awareness of that behavior. However, as noted above some would not agree with this definition. That being said, my focus remains on racial implicit biases in the form of microaggressions. Unfortunately, racially biased incidents are not conducted in a manner that can be easily articulated and recognized. Microaggressions, which fall under the purview of implicit biases, function in maintaining racially implicit behaviors. Purposefully, I try to not define microaggression in any simplistic objective way, for this mode of objectifying and labeling is what sustains systems of injustice. The ways in which microaggressions could be defined is as limitless as the ways it could be enacted. While microaggressions occur on the individual level through relational interactions, the explications derive from larger patterns of oppression in a broader cultural context, and thus serve to support these systems of injustice. Because of the role microaggressions play in reinforcing oppressive ideologies, those who wish to dismantle oppressive systems have reason to place their attention on microaggressive behaviors.

¹ See: Washington and Kelly (2016), Holroyd (2012), Zheng (2003), and Madva (2018).

² See: Faucher (2010) and Glasgow (2016).

In this paper, I will first give an in-depth summary of Glasgow's conception of moral responsibility in relation to victim harm. Next, I will illustrate some examples of racial microaggressions and the harmful impact it has on the victim and on their moral trust. Then I will combine Glasgow's work with the context of racial microaggressions to argue that microaggressors should be held morally blameworthy and responsible for their transgressions, more so than explicit racism and actions. To conclude, I will respond to some common objections against my argument to prove that, although there are valid concerns regarding my thesis, it is nonetheless able to withstand these criticisms. Utilizing the work of Glasgow, I defend the claim that implicit attitudes and actions, manifested in the form of racial microaggressions, cause significant harm to the victims of the microaggression; in fact, more harm than explicit racism and aggressions, and due to the content and impact of that harm, microaggressors should be held to the fullest extent of moral blameworthiness and responsibility.

Glasgow's Conception of Moral Responsibility in Relation to Victim Harm

Joshua Glasgow argues that the impact of implicit bias is variant across contexts. He argues that the criteria for moral responsibility is contingent upon the context in relation to harm caused, regardless of whether one feels alienated from their behavior.³ Alienation, according to Glasgow, is when "an attitude that I harbor or an action that I perform does not represent me, that is, if it does not express the part of me that is my responsible, agential self, then my responsibility for it is significantly diminished."⁴ These criteria for moral responsibility is based on what he calls Harm-Sensitive Variantism. According to Glasgow, "Content is just a proxy for harm,"⁵ therefore moral blame and responsibility is determinant upon the degree of harm caused, regardless of whether the oppressor claims alienation from the behavior. Additionally, he explains that society has a set standard of non-negotiable values, meaning that the value is not tolerated by society, and therefore the agent will always be morally responsible if the value is broken, and negotiable values, meaning that the broken value is somewhat not as serious as a non-negotiable value, and therefore moral blame/responsibility on the agent may not apply. He posits that situations such as infidelity or "racist attitudes, even unconscious ones"⁶ violate a societal non-negotiable value. This differs from situations such the "kleptomaniac [who] cannot resist swiping the candy bar or the drug user [who] seeks out one more fix,"⁷ where the violation was a negotiable value. Therefore, Glasgow would state that a person who commits an infidelity or acts upon their implicit biases is morally responsible because of the harm it caused to the victims of these acts.

Examples of Racial Microaggressions and the Harmful Impact it Has on the Victim

Now to fully understand the lived ramifications microaggressions inflict on the victim, I utilize an article by Ross Gay (2013) titled "Some Thoughts On Mercy". In it, he

³ Glasgow, J. (2016). Alienation and responsibility. *Implicit bias and philosophy*, 2.

⁴ *Ibid*, 4.

⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

⁶ *Ibid*, 7.

⁷ *Ibid*, 8.

describes a first-person account shopping as a young black man with his white friend:

"I remember being thirteen and walking into a clothing store at the mall with a white pal. As we perused the racks, it didn't take long for me to realize the security guard was following me and was oblivious to my friend. So, I gradually made my way to the back of the store while I glimpsed my pal up front stuffing a few hundred dollars' worth of merchandise into his backpack."⁸

This instance exemplifies the core of microaggressions. This security guard's behavior is systemic to the constructed bias of the black criminality myth. This false belief is so deeply ingrained in cultural institutions that people are socialized to perceive African-American people as untrustworthy, to such a degree that these notions become implicit in the ways we discuss, define, and interact with each other.

Consider what would have happened that fateful day if Gay had confronted the security guard's action. Recognizing the ingrained socialization processes of racial oppression, one could posit that the security guard would have responded and perhaps whole-heartedly believed 'I was just doing my job, don't be oversensitive.' This response would have exculpated him of any inconspicuous racial wrongdoings, at least in his own mind. Remember that because microaggressions rely on a larger oppressive context to gain their meaning, if someone is unaware or has limited knowledge of those larger contexts, they may be unable to grasp the meaning of the microaggression their committing and thus makes it easier to deny it. The problem that this presents is a complicated one because if microaggressors are able to deny their microaggressions, they can consequently flip and reorient the situation, making it appear as if it is the microaggressee is 'attacking or falsely accusing' the microaggressor. This denial and reorienting allow microaggressors to avoid actively engaging with their own microaggressive behaviors. By making the moral focus of the conversation the supposed wrongness of the microaggressee's confrontation, the microaggressor is able to reaffirm their moral conscious, which leaves the burden of proof solely on the shoulders of the victim. Microaggressees will then begin to question whether their evaluations of microaggressive behaviors are true and will also question whether their decision to express these evaluations is appropriate. These sorts of challenges from microaggressors can work to destabilize a sense of security in one's own rationality regarding the context of bias interpretation.

The choice then becomes whether or not to try and convince microaggressors that their behaviors relate to larger institutionalized systems of racial injustice. In cases where microaggressors have some understanding about the ways in which oppression and implicit bias function, this might not be difficult. However, many microaggressors are ignorant of the ways that oppression operates and reconstructs in a reinforcing fashion. And this ignorance is no accident, since cultural ignorance part and parcel sustains oppressive social structures.

Re-thinking Gay's anecdote, consider the other people in the store that day. Due to ingrained biases in conjunction with the subtleness of microaggressions, the average person in the store would not have been able to recognize that the reason the security guard followed Gay around (and not his white friend) was because he is Black. However, speculate what would happen if the security guard was explicitly racist. Perhaps he says

⁸ Gay, R. (2013, July). Some Thoughts On Mercy.

“You blacks always steal” or something of that nature. Because of the explicitness of occurrence, he said something that is deemed racist given current societies egalitarian views, it would not be far-fetched to claim that the other shoppers in the store would have maybe confronted the security guard by saying “This is racist. You can’t assume he is stealing just because he is black”. Especially given the technological age we reside - in which everything is now being videotaped- if a person’s racial behaviors are explicit, they are most times labeled as a racist by the general public, and consequently shunned or reprimanded by others. In this sense, the victim receives validation that his or her assessments were correct and that the oppressor should be and is morally judged. We can begin to see how microaggressions are sometimes more harmful than explicit racial behaviors if one focuses on the psychological impacts and moral-trust damage to the victim.

If not fully convinced, listen to what Gay says concluding his account:

“I’ve been afraid walking through the alarm gate at the store that maybe something’s fallen into my pockets, or that I’ve unconsciously stuffed something in them; I’ve felt panic that the light skinned black man who mugged our elderly former neighbors was actually me; and nearly every time I’ve been pulled over, I’ve prayed there were no drugs in my car, despite the fact that I don’t use drugs; I don’t even smoke pot. That’s to say the story I have all my life heard about black people—criminal, criminal, criminal—I have started to suspect of myself.”⁹

Gay admits that due to daily experiences with racial microaggressions associating black people with criminality, he himself begins to believe that he is a criminal, even though he has done nothing wrong. This coherence between external racial microaggressions on a daily basis and one’s self-esteem/moral worth creates internalized oppression within the victim, perhaps without even realizing this process is occurring. In Gay’s case, his self-respect is threatened when he suspects himself of criminal activity. However, when Gay is asked “are you a criminal?” he understands that he is not. Gay therefore lacks a feeling that he measures up morally, despite knowing that he does.

In some cases, internalized oppression may make the oppressed more inclined to act in accordance with these beliefs, becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, that is not to say that the opposite is not true, one may purposefully behave in a diametrical way to convey that he or she is disassociated from the stereotype. However, if one decides to negatively act in response to internalized oppression, this paradoxically creates a situation in which the microaggressor will further believe that his/her implicit behaviors are justified. For instance, if Gay had chosen to steal something that day and was caught by the security guard, the security guard (and perhaps others who witnessed the occurrence) would further believe than they implicitly did before that black people are criminals. The security guard would be validated in his implicit attitudes, and due to this positive reinforcement, he would be more willingly to trust that “gut feeling” in the future.

Combining Glasgow’s conception of Harm-sensitive variation to the act of racial microaggressions seen through the analysis of Gay’s anecdote, it is clear that microaggressions, even if their behaviors were unconsciously motivated, should be

⁹ *Ibid.*

regarded as morally blameworthy and responsible. The harm placed upon the victim of the microaggression is substantially damaging, to such a degree that the alienation of the microaggressor's implicit behaviors in relation to their perhaps antiracist external beliefs does not exculpate them of moral blame or responsibility. Therefore, the act of microaggressions could be considered more blameworthy and responsible than certain explicit racist behaviors in certain contexts.

I want to call attention to one possible objection to my paper: if the structure of microaggressions lends itself to promoting self-distrust in the microaggressee, could it be argued that perhaps a microaggressee's interpretation of the meaning of a microaggressive behavior is sometimes inaccurate? I respond by noting that some amount of uncertainty is appropriate with regard to microaggressive behaviors. This is because, since microaggressions occur implicitly, some degree of interpretation will always be necessary to determine whether a microaggression has occurred, and this interpretation is fallible. On the other hand, this does not lead to the conclusion that victims should enter into a state of radical self-distrust when it comes to interpreting microaggressions. While interpretations are not always reliable, this in and of itself should not foster the endless rumination on the possibility of an error. For instance, imagine I sometimes mistake one person (1) for another person (2). This does not mean that when I see 1 walk through the door it would be appropriate for me to endlessly ruminate about the possibility that perhaps it is really 2. That my visual perception tends to be reliable more often than not should be enough to generate (at least some) optimism in my own competence with respect to identifying 1—and thus harbor some degree of self-trust in my abilities.

Concluding, the structure of microaggressions, in particular the fact that they are implicit, can result in victims feeling self-distrust when it comes to their competence in the area of behavioral interpretation. This, in conjunction with how some microaggressees may begin to internalize their own oppressions creates substantial damage to one's moral self-trust. And, thus, makes it easier for patterns of microaggressions to continue uninterrupted. The fact that microaggressions are structured in this way serves to promote and reinforce large-scale oppressive social structures. Therefore, utilizing Glasgow's conception of harm-sensitive variation on moral responsibility and blame in accordance with Gay's account of microaggressions shows that these implicit attitudes and actions are indeed harmful and blameworthy.

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