

Listen! Micro-aggressions, Epistemic Injustice and *Whose* Minds are Being Coddled?

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INTRODUCTION

What is it like to be a student of color at an Ivy League university? In order to bring attention to their experiences on campus, Black students at Harvard University engaged in a social media campaign entitled, “I, too, am Harvard!”¹ The posters and skits the students produced offer a picture of the microaggressions that cause students to be and feel alienated from their institution and classrooms. Some of the signs that represented their experiences included: “I don’t see color – does that mean you don’t see me?”; “Having an opinion does not make me an ‘Angry Black Woman!’”; “I’m not pulling the race card – you’re just racist!”; and “(#I, too, am Harvard!)”. These apparently “innocent slights” convey the message that students of color do not belong at Harvard and that Harvard was not created for them or students in similarly racially marginalized groups.

This recent focus on microaggressions prompted a number of social commentators to object to the growing movement on college campuses that restricts words, ideas, and people that might cause discomfort or give offense. These responses posit that such “policing” suffocates the intellectual discourse required for democracy and that students need to learn how to live in a world full of potential offenses.

Prominent among these responses is an *Atlantic* essay titled, “The Coddling of the American Mind,” in which Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt contend that the widespread adoption of trigger warnings and microaggression training is creating a culture of coddling devised to protect students who cannot withstand criticism or the discomfort that comes from being exposed to differing opinions.² They understand the concern over microaggress-

sions as largely an issue about emotional well-being and argue that students are being overprotected resulting in them becoming “whiny.” According to Lukianoof and Haidt, campus wide programs aiming to prevent microaggressions reinforce identity-based divisions and foster feelings of victimization that impede the development of resilience. The authors assert that:

... an increased focus on microaggressions coupled with the endorsement of emotional reasoning is a formula for a constant state of outrage, even toward well-meaning speakers trying to engage in genuine discussion.³

Indeed, they emphasize coddling is bad for American democracy:

... When the ideas, values and speech of the other side are seen not just as wrong but as willfully aggressive toward innocent victims, *it is hard to imagine the kind of mutual respect, negotiation, and compromise that are needed to make politics a positive-sum game.*⁴

Rather than coddle students, the authors advocate that colleges should help them learn to endure the contexts that make free speech possible.

In this article, I will argue that when students protest the microaggressions they experience on campus it is misleading and dismissive to explain this as an issue of “offense” or only about emotional well-being. Appealing to the recent work on epistemic injustice, I demonstrate that microaggressions are often a form of injustice to persons in their capacity as knowers. When microaggressions are understood as a form of epistemic injustice, it becomes clear that when universities across the United States attempt to address the larger systemic issues that allow racial microaggressions to flourish on their campuses this is not coddling students but rather a serious effort to counter the epistemic impediments to dialogue across difference that is essential for democracy.

Moreover, the arguments that Lukianoof and Haidt present are not just an opposing opinion on the topic but rather a promotion of the systemic ignorance that continues to silence the perspective of the marginalized. Their

insistence on understanding microaggressions as about “merely offense” perpetuates the epistemic injustice that naming microaggressions attempts to disrupt. I argue that exposing microaggressions does not constrain the dialogue essential to democracy but, instead, expands it by breaking down barriers to cross-racial engagement and enriching cross-racial interactions. Trivializing the effects of microaggressions functions as a “technology for not hearing.”⁵ When Lukianoof and Haidt narrow their understanding of microaggressions to “offense,” they not only do damage to the epistemic agency of the marginalized, they also cannot “hear” what the marginalized are saying. Consequently, unexamined beliefs about sexism, racism, and homophobia can remain comfortably unchallenged. If so, the question arises: Whose minds are being coddled?⁶

MICROAGGRESSIONS – NOT ONLY OFFENSE!

Research on microaggressions on college campuses has continued to document the everyday racism that students of color experience.⁷ Chester Pierce, an African-American medical doctor and psychiatrist, first introduced the idea of racial microaggressions in the early 1970s in his attempt to name the everyday racism that Black people experience.⁸ While any instance taken in isolation might be in itself minor and may seem inconsequential, according to Pierce microaggressions manifest *a pattern* that is relentless and repetitive and that has harmful effects over time. According to Pierce, microaggressions function as one of the major and inescapable expressions of racism in contemporary United States.

Further expanding this idea, Derald Wing Sue defined microaggressions as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership.”⁹ Whether communicated verbally (“You speak good English”) or nonverbally (clutching one’s purse when a Black man enters an elevator or locating a symbol like the confederate flag in public space), such communications are a form of everyday racism that serve to keep the racially marginalized in their place. Sue proposed various

classifications of racial microaggressions, one type of which is particularly salient for my argument. Microinvalidations are discursive practices that function to undermine the thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of persons of color in which the perpetrator is usually oblivious of their effects. Sue demonstrates how microinvalidations put the target in a double bind because if they complain, their experience can be dismissed and denied as “being oversensitive” or “paranoid.” The perpetrator honestly believes s/he has done no wrong. If, however, the target chooses not to confront the perpetrator, the emotional toll has psychological consequences. The target is left to question what actually happened and feels confusion, anger, and an overall drain of energy.

Microinvalidations, in particular, and microaggressions, more generally, are more than just an annoyance or a slight that one has to learn to live with. The recent scholarship around the concept of epistemic injustice can help to flesh out the harms of certain forms of microaggressions.

The concept of epistemic injustice emerged out of a rich line of feminist philosophy and philosophy of race examining epistemic exclusion, silencing, and systemic ignorance. This scholarship is based on the premise that epistemology cannot be examined without considering dimensions of power. Miranda Fricker first coined the term, but the scholarship around this concept has been further developed in various directions.¹⁰ Some of this scholarship enriches our understanding of how certain forms of microaggressions diminish the epistemic agency of the systemically marginalized, on the one hand, and maintain systemic ignorance and shield systemic injustice from challenge, on the other hand. Examining the proliferating research that addresses the various types of epistemic injustice facilitates an expansion of our understanding of the nature and harms of microaggressions.

THE EPISTEMIC DIMENSION OF MICROAGGRESSIONS

Epistemic injustice, as defined by Fricker, names the harms done to people in their capacities as knowers and is a form of what Kristie Dotson refers to as “epistemic oppression” or the “persistent epistemic exclusion that

hinders one's contribution to knowledge production."¹¹ Fricker identifies two types of epistemic injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when "prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word."¹² As an illustration of testimonial injustice, Fricker draws from a movie in which a man dismisses a woman's comments about murder by asserting, "Marge, there's female intuition, and then there are facts."¹³ In doing so, the information that the woman had about the death was written off simply because she is a woman.

According to Fricker, when women are continuously dismissed as knowers, they are not taken seriously as human beings because being considered a reliable knower is a fundamental aspect of being human.¹⁴ The term "gaslighting," popular on social media, refers to the ways in which a hearer explicitly or implicitly conveys the message that a speaker's claim is not serious, or that the speaker is overreacting or not interpreting events properly. Gaslighting is a form of testimonial injustice. The term originates from a 1944 film called *Gaslight* in which the main character intentionally convinces his wife that she is suffering delusions so that she will doubt her memory and self-perceptions. "Gaslighting" is currently deployed to refer to subtle forms of dismissal that are often done unintentionally.¹⁵ Fricker emphasizes that the consequence of testimonial injustice is that self-confidence is undermined, and feelings of self-doubt are developed.

Kristie Dotson addresses other consequences of testimonial injustice when she examines two types of silencing practices: testimonial quieting and testimonial smothering. Testimonial quieting occurs as a result of the failure to recognize the speaker as a knower. Because the speaker is not given the appropriate uptake, it is as if the speaker did not speak at all. Testimonial smothering ensues when one knows that the audience will not give one the appropriate uptake, and so, in response, one truncates and limits one's testimony in order to ensure that "the testimony contains only content for which one's audience demonstrates testimonial competence."¹⁶ Dotson argues that while it appears that the speaker "smothers" his/her own testimony, this should still be understood as "coerced silencing."

Another effect of testimonial injustice is that one may become justifiably angry in the face of being persistently ignored, but then in cyclical fashion this anger becomes the justification for being ignored. In her examination of anger, Sara Ahmed explains that when women of color are read as being against *x* because one is angry rather than being angry because one is against *x*, they become entangled in their anger and angry at not being heard.¹⁷ This then has been used to provide validation for dismissal by confirming that only anger grounds the truth behind their speech.

While testimonial injustice harms the speaker in her capacity as a knower, it also has consequences for the silencer. Testimonial injustice curtails what one can hear. Evidence, opposing ideas, and new concepts that are conducive to knowledge expansion can be ignored. Ignorance, in other words, thrives and is an effect of testimonial injustice. Hermeneutical injustice, a second form of epistemic injustice, is also a tool for the perpetuation of ignorance.

Hermeneutical injustice occurs because “the powerful have an unfair advantage in structuring collective social understandings”¹⁸ and this results in a lacuna in the conceptual or linguistic resources of a society. Fricker underscores that hermeneutical injustice makes it difficult for the marginalized to articulate wrongful social experience. Fricker offers that before the term sexual harassment entered our public language, it was challenging for women to name their experience of unwanted sexualized attention because their experience was rendered unintelligible due to gaps in the shared epistemic resources.¹⁹

A number of philosophers²⁰ have pointed out a gap in Fricker’s own construal of hermeneutical injustice. Fricker assumes that if there are no epistemic resources in *dominant* frameworks of intelligibility, then the marginalized will lack understanding of their own experience. Marginalized groups, however, have often developed their own epistemic resources, concepts that make their experience intelligible amongst themselves even if these experiences may “still remain systematically misunderstood by others ... when they try to communicate about those experiences.”²¹ This critique is significant because not only does it point to a limitation of Fricker’s account, it also shifts critical

attention to how systemically privileged knowers listen when the concepts necessary to hear what the marginalized are saying are available but repudiated.

Kristie Dotson, for instance, challenges Fricker's conception of hermeneutical injustice in that it assumes a single collective hermeneutical framework—the dominant one.²² Dotson points out that Fricker implies that both the marginalized speaker and the dominant hearer have equal difficulty in making marginalized experience intelligible. The marginalized, however, may very well understand their experiences and have their own epistemic resources that make their experiences intelligible. However, as Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. explains, dominantly situated knowers pre-emptively dismiss such epistemic resources.²³ Pohlhaus refers to this as “willful hermeneutical ignorance” which occurs “when dominantly situated knowers refuse to acknowledge epistemic tools developed from the experienced world of those situated marginally.”²⁴ In other words, the systemically privileged place too much confidence in their own experiences and interpretations of events so that they cannot “hear” the conflicting testimony provided by the marginalized. This refusal to know allows the systemically privileged to “misunderstand, misinterpret, and/or ignore whole parts of the world”²⁵ and it preserves ignorance.²⁶

This influenced Dotson to develop a third type of epistemic injustice (different from testimonial and hermeneutical injustice) that she terms “contributory injustice.”²⁷ Contributory injustice refers to systemically privileged perceivers’ willful hermeneutical ignorance that allows them to utilize dominant resources rather than engage with marginalized frameworks. The result is that conceptual tools the marginalized have to offer are persistently not taken seriously. This serves to obstruct the ability of the marginalized “to contribute to shared epistemic resources within a given epistemic community.”²⁸ The emphasis on “contributory” also highlights the ways in which the systemically privileged are complicit in blocking from mainstream discourse the interpretive resources that are crucial for understanding marginalized experience. Attempts by the systemically marginalized to “prove” the pervasiveness of patterns of sexism and racism, for example, become tiresome and fruitless because there is no uptake or engagement.

On the one hand, the epistemic agency of the marginalized is not respected and, on the other hand, the systemically privileged can continue to remain ignorant as the marginalized experience remains unintelligible to them. Charles Mills emphasizes the interrelationship between epistemic injustice and white ignorance that, he maintains, work in tandem. Mill explains, “People of color will be denied credibility, and the alternative viewpoints that could be developed from taking their perspective seriously will be rejected.”²⁹ The point here is not that epistemic justice requires the uncritical acceptance of the testimony of the marginalized, but rather it is to expose the ways in which dominantly situated knowers have the “privilege” to immediately doubt and dismiss the marginalized speaker’s testimony. According to Dotson, to address contributory injustice, it is crucial that one be open to and seek out marginalized interpretive frameworks. Two related types of epistemic injustice further elucidate the complexities of how microinvalidations function.

CONCEPTUAL COMPETENCE INJUSTICE AND EPISTEMIC EXPLOITATION

Derek Anderson distinguishes another form of epistemic injustice that he labels “conceptual competence injustice.”³⁰ In contrast to testimonial injustice in which the *testimony* is dismissed as unreliable or false, with conceptual competence injustice it is the knower’s *competence* that is dismissed as unreliable, even when the knower is an expert in some domain.

When the marginalized put out a concept that would explain their experience, they are unjustly regarded as having failed to grasp one or more of the concepts expressed in their claim. Conceptual competence injustice also differs in a significant way from contributory injustice. In the latter, the perpetrators know that there are other conflicting conceptual frames but intentionally decide not to give appropriate uptake, while in the former *the person is presumed incompetent* so the possibility of conflicting intellectual frames does not even arise.

An example of conceptual competence injustice that some of us in

the audience might have experienced is referred to as “mansplaining.” Lily Rothman defines this as explaining without regard to the fact that the explainee knows more than the explainer.³¹ In a book titled, *Men Explain Things to Me*, Rebecca Solnit documents the ways in which women are treated as less credible than men.³² She maintains that the phenomenon implies an over-confidence in dominant group epistemic competence. Solnit focuses on gender relations, but the practice applies to other axes of privilege and oppression, as well.

In a profoundly insightful point, Anderson explains that presumptions of incompetence might not even manifest in an implicit bias against the marginalized but rather may be an effect of an arrogant degree of confidence in one’s own intellectual authority. To this, I would add that one way to shore up one’s presumed epistemic competence is by deprecating the other’s lack of competence. Conceptual competence injustice severely thwarts marginalized agents’ attempts to add epistemic resources to our framework of intelligibility.

While competence injustice refers to credibility deficits when the marginalized try to speak about the nature of oppression, “epistemic exploitation”³³ refers to harms that result from dominantly situated knowers’ expectation that the marginalized will educate them. Nora Berenstain categorizes the unremunerated labor that the marginalized enact when put in a position to educate the systemically privileged. In characterizing this labor, she draws attention to a primary challenge the marginalized face when they offer testimony: “default skepticism of the privileged.”³⁴ Crucial to this account of epistemic injustice is that the skeptic positions him/herself as “the epistemic peer of the person of color with respect to this particular domain,”³⁵ and thus skepticism seems to him/her to be a legitimate objection. In fact, it can seem to the skeptic that s/he is being engaged and open.

Berenstain points to the ways in which such exploitation masquerades as epistemically virtuous forms of intellectual engagement (e.g., a pursuit of truth, a harmless exercise of curiosity, just wanting to know), but, in effect, it is an abuse of marginalized people’s labor. When the systemically privileged demand to be educated but then fail to utilize and seriously engage with what

they are told, the active ignorance of the dominantly situated is maintained, and dominant epistemic frameworks are protected from challenge, all under the guise of the pursuit of knowledge.

The disproportionate pressure on the marginalized to respond and the fact it is emotionally exhausting to constantly justify and substantiate one's understanding of one's experience to those who do not have "the ears to hear"³⁶ is often ignored by those with the "privilege" to be ignorant. Epistemic exploitation also keeps the marginalized busy with the needs and interests of the systemically privileged. Because they refuse to entertain the concepts that the marginalized employ to articulate their experience, the systemically privileged set the terms of the debate.

Microinvalidations, specifically, and microaggression, in general, have an epistemic dimension. When one considers the harms of epistemic injustice to the marginalized and how epistemic injustice impedes dialogue across difference, it becomes clear that microaggressions are not benign or trivial. Resilience, it follows, is not a remedy for the epistemic harms of microaggressions.

ON CODDLING AND MICROAGGRESSIONS: CONCLUSION

In *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, George Yancy recounts how a white student dismissed with a confident outburst of "Bullshit!!" his description of the "elevator effect."³⁷ Yancy poignantly describes how when he enters an elevator and a white woman clutches her purse, her practice marks him as "Black." The student's pre-emptive rejection of Yancy's explanation of the "elevator effect" can be understood as a distancing strategy³⁸ that reflects white fragility,³⁹ or the inability to stay with the discomfort of having to consider something one does not know.

Yet, there is also an epistemic dimension to this refusal to engage with non-dominant epistemic resources. Acknowledging this epistemic dimension helps us understand why microaggressions are pervasive and harmful. Those who allege that students are being coddled on university campuses because universities are attempting to remedy the climate of microaggressions insist

on a very narrow understanding of microaggressions as offense. This position is not just another opinion, but more significantly *a refusal* to engage with a more grounded conception of microaggressions as a form of epistemic injustice. The result is that the perspective of the marginalized is further trivialized and silenced, and a system of ignorance is perpetuated. The refusal to openly engage with other understandings of microaggressions enables the epistemic injustice that naming microaggressions attempts to disrupt. When Lukianoff and Haidt restrict their understanding of microaggressions to “offense,” they not only do damage to the epistemic agency of the marginalized, they also cannot “hear” what the marginalized are saying. Consequently, unexamined beliefs about sexism, racism, and homophobia can remain comfortably unchallenged. If so, I cannot help but wonder: *Whose* minds are coddled?

When microaggressions are apprehended as merely about offense, this stigmatizes efforts to challenge epistemic injustice. On the one hand, microaggressions that undermine the credibility of knowers harm individuals in their capacity as epistemic agents. On the other hand, when microaggressions are conceived as only about offense, the role that systemically privileged subjects play in maintaining systemic ignorance can remain hidden. Universities that address microaggressions as a form of epistemic injustice contribute to the awareness, acknowledgement, and possible collective work needed to remedy social injustice.

Students on college campuses are not coddled when they are taught about microaggressions but rather are being educated about systemic injustice and their roles in maintaining such systems. Understanding the epistemic dimension of microaggressions helps us explain why what the students on college campuses are protesting is not just a matter of offense or hypersensitivity, but more importantly a matter concerning the impediments to dialogue across difference that is so necessary for democracy.

1 <http://itooamharvard.tumblr.com/> (accessed August 18, 2017).

2 Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, “The Coddling of the American Mind,”

The Atlantic, September, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., emphasis added.

5 Sara Ahmed, "Embodying Diversity: Problems and Paradoxes for Black Feminists," *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 12, no. 1 (2009), 47.

6 For an excellent and relevant discussion of a similar topic see Eamonn Callan, "Education in Safe and Unsafe Spaces," *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 24, no. 1 (2016): 64–78 and Cris Mayo's response, "Anger and Pedagogy," *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 24, no. 1 (2016): 86–90.

7 Daniel Solorzano, "Critical Race Theory, Racial and Gender Microaggressions, and the Experiences of Chicana and Chicano Scholars," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 11, (1998): 121–136.

8 Chester Pierce, "Psychiatric Problems of the Black Minority," in *American Handbook of Psychiatry*, ed. S. Arieti (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 512–523.

9 Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 2010), xvi.

10 Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

11 Kristie Dotson, "Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression," *Social Epistemology* 28, no. 2 (2014), 115.

12 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 1.

13 Ibid., 9.

14 Ibid., 59.

15 Rachel McKinnon, "Allies Behaving Badly: Gaslighting as Epistemic Injustice," *Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, eds. Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr James Kidd and Jose Medina (New York: Routledge, 2017): 167–174.

16 Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2011), 244.

17 Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press: Durham, 2010), 68.

18 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 147.

19 Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 155.

20 Rebecca Mason, "Two Kinds of Unknowing," *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 294–307; Jose Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

21 José Medina, "Hermeneutical Injustice and Polyphonic Contextualism: Social Silences and Shared Hermeneutical Responsibilities," *Social Epistemology* 26, no. 2 (2012), 207.

22 Kristie Dotson, "A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 33, no. 1 (2012): 24–47.

23 Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., "Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance," *Hypatia* 27, no. 4 (2012): 715–735.

24 Ibid., 715.

25 Ibid., 716.

26 Because Fricker maintains that hermeneutical injustice is strictly structural and

does not necessarily involve an individual perpetrator, she insists that it does not necessarily entail culpability. Therefore, she argues that hermeneutical injustice is not coexistent with white ignorance although they may overlap. I find this problematic but do not have the space to address this position here.

27 Dotson, "A Cautionary Tale," 24–47.

28 Dotson, "A Cautionary Tale," 32.

29 Charles Mills, "Global White Ignorance," in *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*, eds. Matthias Gross and Linsey McGoey (London/New York: Routledge, 2015), 222.

30 Derek Anderson, "Conceptual Competence Injustice," *Social Epistemology* 31, no. 2 (2017): 210–223.

31 Lily Rothman, "The Cultural History of Mansplaining," *The Atlantic*, November 1, 2012, <https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2012/11/a-cultural-history-of-mansplaining/264380/>.

32 Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014).

33 Nora Berenstain, "Epistemic Exploitation," *Ergo: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 22 (2016): 569–590.

34 Ibid., 578.

35 Ibid., 579.

36 Alison Jones, "The Limits of Cross-Cultural Dialogue: Pedagogy, Desire, and Absolution in the Classroom," *Educational Theory* 49, no. 3 (1999), 308.

37 George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 227.

38 Kim Case and Annette Hemmings, "Distancing Strategies: White Women Preservice Teachers and Antiracist Curriculum," *Urban Education* 40, no. 6 (2005): 606–626.

39 Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54–70.