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DISCUSSION

Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation

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Abstract

Being the victim of a microaggression, that is, a relatively minor act of hostility that targets someone's (marginalized) social identity, can be distressing, but so can merely being in doubt over whether one has been the victim of such aggression. To address this last problem, Regina Rini has proposed a novel understanding of microaggressions that is meant to eliminate such doubts. On her "Ambiguous Experience Account," whenever members of marginalized groups believe they might have been subjected to a microaggression, a microaggression will have been committed *even if* the would-be perpetrator was not motivated by prejudiced aggression. This article challenges this account on grounds of being incompatible with people's lived experiences, including those of the would-be victims, and argues that we should instead accept the conventional account on which microaggressive acts must be consciously or unconsciously motivated by prejudiced aggression. At the same time, it shows that those falsely suspected of having committed microaggressions will still merit blame sometimes for having failed to signal that their behavior was respectful of others, which lessens the concerns that Rini's conceptual engineering seeks to address. I conclude by drawing out some implications for the debate on microaggressions and attributional ambiguity.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Microaggressions are commonly defined as comparatively minor acts of hostility that target other people's (presumed) social identities (Elder, 2021; Freeman & Stewart, 2019; Perez Gomez, 2021) or, more narrowly, as ones targeting their (presumed) marginalized social

identities (Dover, 2016; Friedlaender, 2018; McTernan, 2018; Pierce, 1970; Rini, 2020; Sue, 2010).[1] The kinds of behaviors that have been labeled "microaggressions" are highly diverse, leading some scholars to argue that the concept is too broad to be analytically useful (Lilienfeld, 2017). For example, in a seminal article on microaggressions,[2] Derald Wing Sue et al. (2007) identify all of the following behaviors as instances of racial microaggressions (the ensuing list is not exhaustive):

- Referring to someone as "colored" or "oriental"
- Displaying a swastika
- Asking a Black person: "Why do you have to be so loud/animated? Just calm down."
- Mistaking a person of color for a service worker
- Television shows and movies that feature predominantly white people, without representation of people of color
- Overcrowding of public schools in communities of color
- The statement: "I believe the most qualified person should get the job."
- The statement: "There is only one race, the human race."

Whether or not the term "microaggression" has become too much of a catchall, which is an issue I bracket here, this article proceeds on the assumption that there are clear instances of such aggression—think of one in which someone refers to a Black person as "colored" in order to offend them (cf. Sue et al., 2007) or of one in which the (implicit or explicit) belief that members of a particular ethnic minority are not full-blown citizens leads someone to ask one of its members where they are from (Perez Gomez, 2021)—that are morally problematic for at least two reasons. First, by attacking people's social identities, they are plausibly understood to involve (wrongful) discrimination (Altman, 2016). Second, at least when encountered regularly, they can harm people by impairing their long-term welfare and ability to function (e.g., Friedlaender, 2018; McTernan, 2021; Perez Gomez, 2021; Rini, 2020; for an overview of empirical evidence for such cumulative harms, see Williams, 2020).

In fact, and this brings us to a related problem that will concern us here, Chester Pierce (1970), Regina Rini (2020), and Christina Friedlaender (2021) have argued that even merely *being in doubt* over whether one has been the victim of such aggression can have adverse effects by causing people to fret over whether they were shown disrespect by another person (some examples shortly). To address this last problem, Rini (2018, 2020) has proposed a novel understanding of microaggressions that is meant to eliminate such doubts. On her "Ambiguous Experience Account," whenever members of marginalized groups believe they might have been subjected to a microaggression, a microaggression will have been committed *even if* the would-be perpetrator was not motivated by prejudiced aggression (Rini, 2018, 2020). In this contribution, I challenge this account on grounds of being incompatible with people's lived experiences, including those of the would-be victims, and argue that we should instead accept the conventional account—called the "Motivational Account" by Rini—on which microaggressive acts must be consciously or unconsciously motivated by prejudiced hostility. At the same time, I show that those falsely suspected of having committed microaggressions will still merit blame sometimes for having failed to signal that their behavior was respectful of others or simply not intentionally disrespectful, which lessens the concerns that Rini's conceptual engineering seeks to address and further

[1]For an overview of how the term "microaggressions" has evolved since it was coined by Chester Pierce in the 1970s, see Friedlaender (2021).

[2]According to Google Scholar, the article in question has been cited more than 5000 times.

weakens our reasons for accepting her revisionist account of a microaggression.[3] I conclude by drawing out some implications for the debate on microaggressions and attributional ambiguity.

2 | THE PROBLEM OF ATTRIBUTIONAL AMBIGUITY

Before considering in more detail why we should be troubled by cases where people are in doubt over whether others committed microaggressions against them, it is instructive to look at some scenarios where such doubts can arise. One comes from an experience that Sue had on a plane with a fellow academic:

> Just before takeoff, the attendant proceeded to close all overhead compartments and seemed to scan the plane with her eyes. At that point she approached us, leaned over, interrupted our conversation, and asked if we would mind moving to the back of the plane. She indicated that she needed to distribute weight on the plane evenly. Both of us (passengers of color) had similar negative reactions. First, balancing the weight on the plane seemed reasonable, but why were we being singled out? After all, we had boarded first and the three White men were the last passengers to arrive. Why were they not being asked to move? Were we being singled out because of our race? Was this just a random event with no racial overtones? Were we being oversensitive and petty? Although we complied by moving to the back of the plane, both of us felt resentment, irritation, and anger. In light of our everyday racial experiences, we both came to the same conclusion: The flight attendant had treated us like second-class citizens because of our race. (Sue et al., 2007, p. 275)

As Rini (2020, p. 51) has noted about this incident, it is not clear that the flight attendant on Sue's plane was actually motivated by racism, whether consciously or unconsciously. The reason for this is that there is at least one prima facie plausible alternative explanation, namely that she asked Sue and his colleague to move simply because they were already sitting closer to the back of the plane.

Another example may be found in cases where people are asked where they are from. While this is often a perfectly innocent question, when directed to a member of an ethnic minority, it can, and sometimes does, involve an assumption on the part of the interlocutor that the person in question must come from abroad, which is problematic insofar as it presupposes an ethnicity-based conception of what a member of the relevant society looks like or is supposed to look like (Perez Gomez, 2021). (Of course, such assumptions may come to light when saying that one is from the same country as the interlocutor leads to the follow-up question, "No, I mean where are you *really* from").

Still another example, which has not been discussed within the literature on microaggressions yet, might be found in cases where people only ever criticize Islam for being patriarchal without acknowledging that other religions within their country have patriarchal elements too and in their most orthodox versions are usually highly female-unfriendly as well. Whereas such oversight could be accidental, it can also bespeak a prejudiced desire to target Muslims.

[3]After revisions for this article were largely finished, David Schraub (2023) published a paper in which he defends a related claim, namely that it can be negligent for people to create situations where others are left uncertain over whether they were microaggressed against even if they were not. This article, as I see it, is complementary to his in two ways. First, by providing an in-depth critique of Rini's influential revisionist conception of a microaggression and, second, by offering criteria for determining whether people are guilty of such negligence and showing how signaling can help to avoid it.

Consider, for instance, the Islam criticism of Dutch far-right politician Geert Wilders. In reproaching Islam for failing to respect women, he has, to the best of my knowledge, never mentioned that Orthodox Calvinists in the Netherlands also endorse patriarchal norms, as evinced by, among other things, the fact that as late as 2012, the Orthodox Calvinist party SGP had to be forced by the European Court of Justice to allow women to stand for election and the fact that during the 2021 national elections, this party's electoral list still did not feature any female candidates.[4]

What is pertinent for us is that *even if* there is no ill will in cases like the ones just mentioned, the behaviors in question will still be problematic if, and when, they produce doubts among people as to whether they were microaggressed against. The reason, as Rini points out, is that this not rarely causes "targets to ruminate on the incident long after it occurs because they have no clear cause to reference" (Rini, 2020, p. 76), which can not only be emotionally taxing (see, for instance, Sue's experience in the plane incident) but may also distract them from activities in which they prefer to invest their time and energy instead, especially when they experience such ambiguity regularly as some people report to do (e.g., Friedlaender, 2021; Pierce, 1970; Rini, 2020; Sue, 2010; Williams, 2020). While there will sometimes be the possibility of *asking* the suspected perpetrator whether she was acting microaggressively, it is important to observe that this may not provide clarity. For one thing, those accused of such aggression often have self-interested reasons to deny the accusations, given that within many contemporary societies, there exist taboos on aggressive behavior (Pinker, 2012) as well as on being prejudiced, including racially prejudiced (which, according to Pierce and Frielaender, helps to explain why microaggressions against African Americans have become more common in the United States as macroaggressions against this group have declined; on this view, the former are now a more *salonfähig* vehicle for expressing racial animus. See Friedlaender, 2021; Pierce, 1970). For another, the suspected aggressors will sometimes be *unaware* of the fact that they were driven by prejudiced hostility.

> You might hope that at least the flight attendant could know the truth, since it is the contents of her mind that make all the difference. But since we are talking about unconscious motivations, not even she could confidently know the truth. According to Sue, she might think that she was responding to innocent geometry even if in reality she was expressing unconscious racism. (Rini, 2020, p. 53; cf. Elder, 2021; Friedlaender, 2018)

Besides not necessarily providing clarity, then, asking others as to whether they are being microaggressive with one can be costly and consequently deter people from asking this question at least some of the time. These costs are generated by the fact that there is always a nontrivial chance that, like the flight attendant on Sue's plane, they will be indignant that you suspect them of having committed a prejudiced hostile act, which may lead them to respond in an irritated if not outright aggressive manner (Friedlaender, 2021; Sue, 2010).

3 | RINI'S ACCOUNT OF MICROAGGRESSIONS

For the reasons just mentioned, Rini is right that there is something troublesome about situations where people are in doubt over whether they were the target of a microaggression *even when* they were not. However, I want to suggest in this section and the next that her proposed

[4]In resisting this requirement, the party invoked the belief that "the man is the head of the woman" and that "participation of women in both representative and administrative political organs" is "incompatible with woman's calling." See *SGP v. The Netherlands* (2012).

solution ought to be resisted, which involves redefining what it means for someone to commit a microaggression.

According to what she terms the "Motivational Account of Microaggression," "what makes an act or event count as a microaggression is that it is caused by a perpetrator's . . . prejudiced motivation" (Rini, 2020, p. 54). Because this account, which is the conventional one within the scholarly literature, makes it impossible to know in many cases whether a microaggression was committed (see the examples given in the previous section), she rejects the Motivational Account in favor of what she calls the "Ambiguous Experience Account." On this alternative 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" (p. 70). As she goes on to explain, what the Ambiguous Experience Account does is that it "shifts our moral focus to the victim's experience" by giving this person the authority to decide whether a microaggression has occurred (p. 73), which helps to prevent situations from arising where members of marginalized groups face uncertainty over whether someone was being microaggressive with them with all the potential distress that may come with this. This is because *as long as* they assign a nontrivial probability to this possibility—as we saw Sue did in the plane case—a microaggression will have occurred *even when* the supposed perpetrator was not consciously or unconsciously motivated by prejudiced hostility.

I believe there are several problems with redefining the term "microaggression" thus. For starters, there is a sense in which Rini's agent-relative conception of such aggression appears underinclusive by failing to recognize as microaggressive cases where people engage in small forms of prejudiced hostility against others, or more narrowly against members of marginalized groups, but where their prejudiced hostility *is not noticed by the targets*, perhaps because these individuals did not see or hear what happened. However, since Rini could respond to this by accepting a disjunctive account of microaggressions under which such aggression also occurs when someone engages in a small act of prejudiced hostility *regardless* of whether it is noticed, I do not want to put much weight on this objection.

A more serious objection to her Ambiguous Experience Account is that it leads to contradictory conclusions when two or more members of a marginalized group reach different verdicts on whether a particular action or omission constituted a microaggression against them. An example of this is provided by Rini herself (p. 72), who imagines a case where Sue and his colleague—who are both understood to be members of marginalized groups—disagree about whether the flight attendant's request for them to sit in the rear amounted to a microaggression. Based on the Ambiguous Experience Account's criterion for deciding this matter, it would seem here that it is both true and false that a microaggression was committed.

Rini's response to this ostensible contradiction is to say that in such cases, one of the individuals involved, namely the one who believed that were was a microaggression, was the victim of a microaggression, whereas the other, namely the one who believes there was not a microaggression, was not.

> We do not have to say who is right, because the key question in microaggression is about the experience of the victim. If one person is having an ambiguous experience of possibly encountering oppression, then a microaggression has happened to them. If the other person is not having that sort of experience, then no microaggression has happened. On the Ambiguous Experience Account, there's nothing odd about this situation. (p. 72)

One reason why I think we should resist making the notion of a microaggression agent-relative this way is that such agent-relativity does not chime with people's everyday—or as it is commonly called these days, their "lived"—experiences. Suppose that Sue and his colleague had an argument about whether the flight attendant has committed a microaggression *simpliciter*.

According to Rini, this would be a category mistake in the same way that it appears a category mistake for people to have discussions about which color is prettiest, supposing this to be a completely agent-relative matter. However, when we have disputes over whether someone was being aggressive, we normally believe there to be *an objective or non-agent-relative fact of the matter*, which I assume is an intuition we have strong reasons to want our definition of a microaggression to capture (cf. Olsthoorn, 2017).

Apart from being counterintuitive, there is also a moral problem plaguing Rini's proposed redefinition of this term. There seems to be something deeply condescending about telling someone who complains about having suffered a microaggression, "sure, if you believe that you have been treated aggressively based on a (marginalized) social identity of yours, then that will be true *irrespective* of whether the perceived perpetrator engaged in prejudiced hostility toward you." Such a reply would not take seriously the person's complaints, as the problem for said individual will not normally be that she *believes* that someone ill-treated her but rather that, in her view, someone *actually ill-treated* her, where "actually" means in an objective or non-agent-relative manner. Yet, if this is correct, then knowing that a microaggression was committed under Rini's definition is unlikely to offer much consolation to the supposed victims, who will most likely still want to know, and be more interested in, whether they have suffered a microaggression in the conventional sense.

4 | MICROAGGRESSIONS AND SIGNALING FAILURES

While sharing Rini's diagnosis that merely believing that one might have been the victim of a microaggression in the conventional, or what Rini calls the "motivational," sense can be problematic, I have thus far criticized her proposed solution, which involves redefining the term "microaggressions," on grounds that this redefinition is incompatible with people's lived experiences and does not take seriously the concerns of those who believe that they were microaggressed against. My aim in the current section is to suggest that *even if* these criticisms are warranted, those who are falsely believed to have committed microaggressions in the conventional sense will still not always be in the clear. Whereas it would be wrong to accuse them of having committed a microaggression and expect them to apologize, as Rini thinks is appropriate,[5] they will nonetheless be blameworthy in certain cases for having failed to signal that their behavior was respectful of others or simply not intentionally disrespectful (recall that microaggressions are sometimes the product of unconscious biases), which, if correct, lessens the concerns that Rini's conceptual engineering seeks to address and further weakens our reasons for favoring her Ambiguous Experience Account over the Motivational Account.

To focus attention, let us return to the three cases discussed within the penultimate section. In each of these cases, I suspect that such signaling duties may have been violated. That is, to avoid incidents like the one experienced by Sue, it is plausible that airlines should under certain conditions *explain* their procedure for selecting passengers for the back row before asking individuals to move, just as there are good reasons for thinking that those who ask members of ethnic minorities whence they are should under certain conditions indicate that they are not assuming them to be from abroad and that those who publicly criticize Islam for being patriarchal should under certain conditions acknowledge that other

[5]Rini's belief that apologies are fitting is motivated by the thought that "when you do something that hurts someone, you ought to apologize even if it's possible it wasn't your fault" (2020, p. 73). Although a discussion of this principle is beyond this article's scope, I suspect it should be rejected on grounds that it makes people hostage to the unreasonable sensibilities of others as well as to any mistaken beliefs that others might have that cause them to feel hurt.

religions have patriarchal elements too, in order to avoid creating the impression that they are targeting Muslims.

What grounds such duties and when they do they arise? As to the first question, I believe they are partially[6] grounded in our psychological interests in being assured that others are treating us with basic respect or what Stephen Darwall (1977) calls "recognition respect," which is a type of respect that all humans are owed simply in virtue of being human and which microaggressions prevent us from enjoying—to bring this out, recall that such aggression may not only (cumulatively) harm us, but also discriminates against us by targeting our social identities. These interests are weighty ones, given that humans have evolved to be highly sensitive to their social standing (e.g., Koski et al., 2015) and given that those who fail to show us such respect are treating us as if we were morally inferior or simply had a lesser moral status than we do, which is why merely suspecting that we are on the receiving end of a microaggression can be so distressing (see the penultimate section). Another reason why it is important to assure others that we are not, or simply not deliberately, disrespecting them when this can be reasonably doubted is that this helps to establish or preserve bonds of trust that, as research has shown, can facilitate human corporation within certain contexts (e.g., Balliet & Van Lange, 2013; Kim et al., 2022).

As to the second question, the duty to signal that we are not (intentionally) being aggressive with others or otherwise treating them in a disrespectful manner seems to arise under two conditions. The first is that the *would-be receivers of such signals currently lack sufficient evidence that they are being treated respectfully by us or would lack it if we engaged in a specific action or omission*. Whereas this condition may have been satisfied in all the aforementioned cases, we can imagine versions of them where it has not. Suppose, for instance, that prior to embarking the plane on which Sue and his colleague suffered their alleged microaggression, the airline had announced at the gate that passengers in the row closest to the back might be asked to move all the way to the back in order distribute the plane's weight more evenly. In this case, it may not have been necessary for the flight attendant to inform passengers inside the plane of the airline's procedure for selecting people to sit in the rear, given that this information was provided already. Or suppose that all members of a newly formed ethnically diverse swimming class are asked to tell the other members whence they are. In this scenario, the swimming instructor may not need to indicate that she is not making any assumptions as to whether people are from abroad, given that *everyone* is asked this question, including those who look autochthonous, and given that it is not an unusual question to ask *even if* all participants were autochthonous-looking.

The second condition is that *providing evidence that our actions are/were not disrespectful, or simply not intentionally disrespectful, can be done at reasonable cost*. Like the previous one, this condition may have been satisfied in the original plane-boarding case; the original "where are you from" case; and the Islam criticism case. To see this, notice that it will not usually take much time, energy, or other resources for a flight attendant to explain the airline's policy for selecting passengers for the back row, nor will it be costly in most cases to clarify that in asking someone where they are from, one is not assuming foreign provenance. And while criticizing religions can be, and sometimes is, a risky business (cf. Villa, 2022), it is not significantly more costly within contemporary Western societies to condemn the patriarchal aspects of *all* (major) religions as opposed to only those of one particular religion, such as Islam. By contrast, there are other cases where evidence of our benign intentions *cannot be provided at reasonable cost*. This may be true, for instance, of relatively rare situations where for flight attendants to explain their airline's policy for selecting passengers for the back row risks causing a one-hour delay because the time window for taking off is about to close, which might justify withholding

[6]I do not aim to offer an exhaustive list of grounds here, although the two mentioned in this paragraph strike me as especially weighty ones.

such explanations during boarding *even when* this will raise suspicions of microaggressive behavior.[7]

In passing, it is worth noting that how strong our signals that we are not (intentionally) disrespecting others should be when signaling is required—whereby the strength of a signal is understood to be determined by how costly it is for a person who is being disrespectful to send it (cf. Gambetta, 2009); on this view, simply saying that one means no disrespect need not, and in many cases will not, be sufficient, since this is something that a disrespectful agent can often say at little cost ("talk is cheap")—and will vary from one case to the next depending on several different factors. Without attempting to offer an exhaustive list, one factor is how much microaggression the person(s) who might interpret our actions as disrespectful toward them is prone to suffer. All else being equal, the higher the amount—and, ceteris paribus, the relevant amount will be higher for members of marginalized groups than for members of more privileged ones—the stronger the signals will need to be, as the individual(s) involved will have greater reason to suspect that they are not being shown the respect they are owed. Another factor is how much reason there is to believe that a person A harbors negative biases against another person or group of people B. All else being equal, the more reason there is, the stronger the signals that A should send to B that A is not (intentionally) disrespecting B. So, for Geert Wilders to publicly criticize patriarchal aspects of Islam is likely to call for stronger signals than if a politician who does not have a track record of unfairly singling out Islam were to make these criticisms.

How does recognition of the posited signaling duties mitigate the concerns that Rini's redefinition of the term "microaggression" seeks to address and, in so doing, further weaken our reasons for accepting this redefinition, which, to reiterate, are that those who are uncertain as to whether they were the victim of a microaggression in the conventional sense may, and not rarely do, end up fretting over this? The answer is that being aware of said duties can be expected to make it easier for people to bear such uncertainty. This is because once you know that someone whom you suspect might have committed a microaggression against you in the conventional sense should at least have signaled to you that they meant no disrespect, then you no longer need to worry that any frustration or annoyance that you feel toward this person is (entirely) misplaced. For example, even if Sue and his colleague were not justified in concluding that the flight attendant's motivations were racist, they may still have been justifiably frustrated or annoyed that she did not provide any information on the airline's policy for selecting passengers for the back row. Likewise, even if a member of an ethnic minority lacks sufficient reason for thinking that someone who has just asked about her provenance must be assuming that she is foreigner, she might still be justifiably frustrated or annoyed that her interlocutor failed to indicate that he is not making this assumption.

Lest I be misunderstood, I am not saying that it is always appropriate to *blame* people for failing to signal their benign intentions when they should have done so to avoid raising suspicions of potential microaggressions. Whereas a blaming response will be fitting when someone deliberately disregarded this duty or when they were not aware of its existence but should have been, it will not be when they were nonculpably ignorant about its existence. To illustrate, suppose Alf lives in a part of the country where there are (almost) no ethnic minorities and that nobody ever alerted him to the fact that asking a member of such a minority where they are from might raise reasonable suspicions that one is assuming them to be from abroad. Under these conditions, for Alf to ask this question without flagging that he is not assuming foreign provenance—as I suppose *arguendo* he is not—seems an innocent omission for which a blaming response would consequently appear to be inappropriate. In fact, even when someone *is blameworthy* for having failed to signal their benign intentions, for others

[7]I say "during boarding," as the flight attendant might be duty-bound to address such suspicions later, that is, after takeoff, by informing those who were asked to sit in the back why they were selected.

to blame them for this will still not always be appropriate, given that they might not be in an epistemic position to know that blame is merited (cf. Coates, 2016; Rosen, 2004).

I have argued that while Rini is right to worry about the plight of those left second-guessing as to whether they were the victim of a microaggression, addressing this plight does not require us to redefine the term "microaggression" as she proposes. A better strategy would be to raise awareness of the fact that *even when* someone did not commit a microaggression against you, they may still have acted wrongly by failing to signal to you that their actions lacked ill intent. As I suggested, being aware that a person P should have engaged in such signaling but did not can provide solace to those in doubt over whether they suffered a microaggression at P's hands, since they will know that even if such aggression was not displayed, P still acted wrongly by putting them in this state of (enhanced) uncertainty. But that is not all. Another, hitherto undiscussed, benefit of such knowledge is that it can *empower people to confront potential microaggressors* where they might have been reluctant to do so otherwise based on their uncertainty over whether a microaggression was committed, which has at least two possible desirable effects. First, reproaching others for violating the posited signaling duties might supply us with additional psychological comfort stemming from the feeling that we are standing up for ourselves and/or for other members of our social group who will have been targeted insofar as the would-be culprits were indeed acting microaggressively toward us. Second, it may help to deter future violations of these duties alongside repetitions of any microaggressions that were committed. To see this, notice that although no accusations of microaggression would be leveled in these cases, by communicating that someone should have signaled that their behavior was not microaggressive, or at least not intentionally so, said individual would still be subjected to criticism that they may wish to avoid in the future by abstaining from acts that risk being suspected of instantiating this type of aggression.

5 | FINAL REMARKS

The upshot of this discussion is that Rini and other scholars may have overestimated how bad it generally is for individuals to be uncertain about whether a microaggression in the conventional sense was committed against them. As became clear, what they have failed to notice is that there are various cases where the potential microaggressors will have acted wrongly *simply by having put the potential victims in such a state of uncertainty* and that knowing this can be both comforting and empowering for the latter.

I want to end this article by mentioning one additional reason for thinking that the problem of attributional ambiguity is smaller than it may appear initially, which as far as I am aware has not been discussed within the scholarly literature either. This reason consists of the fact that although for many individual instances of potential microaggressions, it may be impossible for the would-be victims to know whether the would-be perpetrators acted microaggressively toward them (see Section 3), they might still be able to discover that *some, and possibly a large share, of these incidents must have featured such aggression* by comparing their overall experiences to those of other members of their social group as well as to those of members of different social groups. For example, if they find out that members of their group experience potential microaggressions at both high rates and at significantly higher ones than members of other groups, then this may allow them to infer that they are regularly exposed to this type of prejudiced hostility. In such cases, the stakes of knowing whether microaggressions were committed against you on specific occasions are lowered as well, since the knowledge that you are sometimes, if not frequently, subjected to this form of aggression will not depend on it.[8]

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