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Microaggression Accountability: Blameworthiness, Blame, and Why it Matters

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Abstract

Despite the broad agreement that microaggressions cause harm, there is disagreement on how to capture microaggressor's accountability. Friedlaender (2018) argues that, in many cases, survivors of microaggressions are not justified in holding the microaggressor blameworthy or blaming them (Friedlaender 2018, 14). I argue, in contrast, that we are generally justified in holding most microaggressors blameworthy and blaming them. By adopting a broadly blame-inclusive account of microaggressor accountability, we are in a position to satisfy the desiderata an ideal account should meet: (1) account for cumulative harm; (2) consistently allow for standing to forgive; and (3) be risk sensitive to the microaggressed. By possessing these virtues, I believe my view of microaggressor accountability better equips us to take seriously the harm caused by microaggressions and center the well-being of microagressees. I respond to Friedlaender's concerns regarding epistemic ignorance and what they call the disaggregation problem. In contrast to Friedlaender's broadly blame-exclusive responsibility model, I motivate a broadly blame-inclusive model for holding microaggressors accountable, explaining how it fulfills the desiderata. I respond to the objection that my account is too blame-inclusive by providing examples of (1) justified microaggressions; (2) excused microaggressions; and (3) blameworthy microaggressions where blame is justified all the same.

Those with marginalized identities in the US face many challenges that those with dominant identities do not. One of these challenges is the only recently studied phenomenon called "microaggressions." Psychologist Kevin Nadal, interviewed by Andrew Limbong (2020) defines microaggressions as subtle interactions or behaviors that indicate a kind of bias toward historically marginalized groups. The term was coined by Chester Pierce in reference to the microaggressions that Black Americans face every day (Pierce et al. 1978). The interactions or behaviors manifest in relatively minor verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights that play a part in a greater system of oppression. Microaggressions have been proven to cause significant short-term and long-term harm to the physical and mental well-being of those who are subjected to them (Spanierman and Sue 2020).

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While many agree that microaggressions cause concern-worthy harm, there is disagreement over whether those who microaggress are blameworthy and whether or not survivors of microaggressions are justified in blaming the microaggressor. Christina Friedlaender argues in their paper, “On microaggressions: Cumulative harm and individual responsibility,” that in many cases, survivors of microaggressions are not justified in either holding the microaggressor blameworthy or blaming them (Friedlaender 2018, 14). To support their negative position, Friedlaender appeals to the concepts of genuine epistemic ignorance and the disaggregation of harm. They argue that, due to the prevalence of genuine epistemic ignorance in cases of microaggressions, microaggressors are not blameworthy. The issue they find with blaming microaggressors is that the harm caused by microaggressions does not neatly disaggregate to individual actions and instead results in disproportional cumulative harm. Friedlaender finds this problematic because they claim we cannot blame individuals for cumulative harm. For these reasons, Friedlaender supports what they call a “forward-looking” approach for holding people accountable for microaggressions. How we hold microaggressors accountable is important because, as I will argue, there is much at stake for the victims of microaggressions.

In the following sections I will unpack Friedlaender’s negative arguments and argue that both Friedlaender’s concerns about individual blame can be addressed and overcome. I will first address the epistemic ignorance concern by showing that, when one specifies an account of blame, there are several well-established accounts where this issue does not interfere with blameworthiness. Second, I will respond to the disaggregation problem by challenging the intuitions of similar thought experiments and by arguing individuals can be individually blameworthy for contributing to cumulative harm. Then I will include my concerns with the blame-exclusive responsibility model. Next I motivate a broadly blame-inclusive account for holding microaggressors accountable and explain how it fulfills the desiderata that accounts of microaggression accountability must meet. This is followed by a section where I will address the objection that my account is too inclusive and renders intuitively non-blameworthy agents blameworthy and the justified targets of blame. I conclude with some final thoughts.

Friedlaender against blameworthiness and blame

The ought-implies-can problem: against blameworthiness

Friedlaender agrees that microaggressions can cause immense harm: “a single microaggression can cause negative emotional, behavioral, and cognitive responses” (2018, 7). Friedlaender argues, however, that often microaggressors are not blameworthy. To explicate this they use an example of a professor misattributing a constructive idea a female student voiced in class to a male student. Having experienced this, the female student is likely to undergo negative cognitive effects and avoid future class participation. There is the possibility in this scenario that the professor knowingly misattributed the woman’s idea to the male student. Many microaggressions, however, are not committed knowingly. Some instances of microaggressions are the result of ignorance. Friedlaender argues that microaggressors are not blameworthy when their microaggressions stem from *genuine epistemic ignorance*. Friedlaender explains genuine epistemic ignorance as the contrast to *ought-to-have-known ignorance*. While ought-to-have-known ignorance describes an individual lacking knowledge that they could be expected to have known, genuine epistemic ignorance describes an individual who lacks

knowledge that they could not be expected to have known (2018, 11). For Friedlaender, we can expect individuals to know accessible information, but not information that is largely inaccessible. Friedlaender's example of what they take to be paradigmatic genuine epistemic ignorance is the ignorance that necessarily arises from hermeneutical injustice—an epistemic injustice that arises when one lacks a concept required to make sense of an integral social experience due to one's marginalized identity (Fricker 2007, 155; Friedlaender 2018, 11). They argue that genuine epistemic ignorance accompanies most instances of microaggressions as microaggressors are generally lacking the required concepts due to the marginalization of that knowledge (Friedlaender 2018, 11).

Friedlaender argues that genuinely epistemically ignorant microaggressors are not blameworthy because they do not possess the concepts required to know they are microaggressing. According to Friedlaender we cannot regard agents as blameworthy for microaggressing because that would violate an "ought-implies-can principle."¹ If one accepts "ought" implies "can," then blameworthiness for the transgression implies that one could have refrained from transgressing as such (Levy and McKenna 2009, 101). But if an agent is genuinely epistemically ignorant, then they do not have the relevant concepts that are required to act other than they do. As the microaggressor *cannot* avoid microaggressing, to hold them blameworthy would violate an ought-implies-can principle.

Friedlaender takes a moment to clarify how holding *genuinely* epistemically ignorant individuals blameworthy results in an ought-implies-can violation by explaining how those with *ought-to-have-known* ignorance do not violate this principle. When individuals microaggress as a result of ought-to-have-known ignorance, they are blameworthy because they have the ability to overcome their ignorance as there is no hermeneutical gap (Friedlaender 2018, 12). For example, when one microaggresses from an implicit bias they know they have, they are in a position to know the possibility of contributing to cumulative harm. Because they have this ability, ought-to-have-known ignorance does not preclude blameworthiness. While some microaggressions are the result of ought-to-have-known ignorance, it seems most cases of microaggression occur from genuine epistemic ignorance and it is in these cases that Friedlaender argues microaggressors are not blameworthy.

The disaggregation problem

In addition to arguing that most microaggressors are not blameworthy, Friedlaender argues that we ought not blame microaggressors. When we individually blame microaggressors, it results in what Friedlaender calls the *disaggregation problem*. When we blame individual microaggressors, we fail to attend to the cumulative harm of microaggressions. They argue that, if we assume that all contributors to the harms of microaggressions are blameworthy, then—because individuals cannot be blameworthy for cumulative harm—we should blame only for their individual contributions. Friedlaender thinks this is problematic because it fails to capture the cumulative harm of microaggressions: "Microaggressions create a certain amount of harm as individual events, but the quantity of the harm is not specifiable in isolation because microaggressions are not isolated events" (14). For example, when they explain microaggressions, they ask us to imagine someone that keeps having their foot stepped on. They are only a little bothered and in a small amount of pain initially, but finally when the last person steps on their foot, they get very angry and are in a lot of pain. It is not just the individual instances of microaggressions that Friedlaender thinks we

ought to account for, but the cumulative harm of microaggressions. And this is an aspect of microaggressions Friedlaender thinks we cannot capture with blame.

To clarify this point, Friedlaender uses the example of CO₂. If one person is emitting CO₂ then the harm from that emission can be individually isolated and blamed, but if a person is emitting CO₂ in the context of millions of people's emissions, the individual's emission cannot be judged as an isolated instance of harm. Friedlaender says this is because the harm of CO₂ is about a "tipping point." If it reaches past the tipping point, the harm intensifies where it no longer correlates to a disaggregation of harm to individual emitters. They think the CO₂ example is a direct parallel to microaggressions. Microaggressions result in a "tipping point" where, thereafter, the harm intensifies, making it so that the harm does not correlate equally to the individual microaggressors. Friedlaender takes this to mean that we should not blame the individual as it does not account for cumulative harm and allocates blame in a way that assumes equal disaggregation of harm.

Friedlaender on how to hold microaggressors accountable

Friedlaender does not see most microaggressors as blameworthy due to genuine epistemic ignorance and finds the individual blaming of microaggressors to not account for the cumulative harm.² So what should be done in cases of microaggressions? Friedlaender's solution is to use a forward-looking responsibility model to hold microaggressors accountable: "we, as individual perpetrators, have a responsibility to respond to the cumulative harm to which we have individually contributed" (17). By "forward-looking" Friedlaender means that, while some microaggressors are not blameworthy or "innocent," all microaggressors need to accept responsibility for their actions in the way that they act moving forward. For example, if Suzy misgenders Jo and continually misgenders Jo after being corrected or gaslights Jo for reacting angrily, Friedlaender would say that Suzy has failed to appropriately respond to her contribution of cumulative harm and therefore failed to take responsibility for her actions. As in the foot-stepping example, Friedlaender thinks one is justified in being "very angry" in response to the cumulative harm of microaggressions and the gaslighting of these reactive attitudes contributes to the harm involved (2018, 15–16). Part of Friedlaender's project involves giving an account of responsibility that mitigates this gaslighting and allows for the justification of the reactive attitudes microaggressed individuals experience in response to cumulative harm (16).

Friedlaender makes use of Iris Marion Young's distinction between different kinds of responsibility to flesh out what exactly they mean by "taking responsibility." Young divides responsibility into two different models: a *social connection model* of responsibility and a *liability model*. The social connection model displaces focus from self-aware actions and disregards backward-looking blame, shame, guilt, or punishment (Friedlaender 2018, 17).³ Friedlaender suggests that the three of the elements of Young's model help make sense of microaggression responsibility. The combination of shift in focus from individual to cumulative harm (1), with the acknowledgement of the normatively charged structural conditions (2) and the causal relations of how the microaggression occurred (3) are argued to hold microaggressors accountable in a way that blameworthiness and blame cannot do. Specifically, Friedlaender uses these pieces of the model to account for how microaggressors are responsible even when they are not blameworthy (genuinely epistemically ignorant) and how to hold them accountable for their cumulative harm without facing the problems of blame disaggregation.

While accepting most of the social connection model, Friedlaender diverges from the theory by suggesting individual responsibility is necessary for navigating non-environmental microaggressions.⁴ In this divergence, Friedlaender suggests that the liability model can be useful in its capacity to account for one's causal relationship between microaggressor and harm (Friedlaender 2018, 17). Many microaggressions are caused by individual agents (as opposed to environmental microaggressions) and so we need a model of responsibility that addresses the individual's action.

For Friedlaender, this cannot be achieved on the level of shared-responsibility because "we do not have a shared responsibility to change our behavior once we have knowledge of a particular act as a microaggression" (2018, 18). Instead, the responsibility we have is to not repeat that action as an individual and work to prevent future transgressions. The ways to accomplish this are argued to be unshared and include (1) self-education; (2) critical self-reflection; (3) reducing implicit bias (2018, 18). The move towards individual responsibility is seen as the ideal strategy for holding microaggressors accountable because it avoids the problem of epistemic ignorance/ought-implies-can violation and the disaggregation problem, while still doing the necessary work of addressing the cumulative harm of microaggressions and requiring microaggressors to take steps to avoid committing future microaggressions.

Responses to Friedlaender

Response to the ought-implies-can problem: blameworthiness

It may be the case that the tension Friedlaender finds between epistemic ignorance and blameworthiness dissolves when microaggressing is discussed in the context of a specific account of blameworthiness. While Friedlaender assumes an unidentified theory of blameworthiness where ought-implies-can violations preclude blameworthiness, this is a controversial claim that a significant part of the moral responsibility literature rejects (Levy and McKenna 2009). Source compatibilists and attributionists generally find no problem with the lack of ability to do otherwise that comes from ought-implies-can violations (Frankfurt 1969, Fischer 1994, Wallace 1996). The first camp avoids the ought-implies-can issue by appealing to either one's "well-functioning" psychology or reasons-responsiveness. The latter argues that all that matters for blameworthiness is that one's attitudes be "appropriately attributable" to them (Levy and McKenna 2009, 115). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to unpack the details of this already non-exhaustive list, I will outline T. M. Scanlon's attributionist account and how it makes sense of blameworthiness even when one lacks the ability to do otherwise.

For Scanlon, to decide that an individual's action is *blameworthy*, we judge that they have acted wrongly such that they have betrayed standards that all of us have reason to highly regard. Scanlon does not spell out exactly what these standards are, but he does say they are distinctly moral standards that pertain to a "kind of concern that we owe to each other" (2008, 124). Scanlon says that this concern we all owe each other constitutes a moral relationship we have with all rational agents. When someone fails to have this concern, we *blame* by modifying our relationship with them (141). In a case of wrongdoing, we "take that action to indicate something about the person that impairs [our] relationship with [them], and to understand that relationship in a way that reflects this impairment" (Scanlon 2008, 123). For example, if my partner cheats on me, I see that action to indicate a lack of loyalty in our relationship, so I now understand our relationship lacks loyalty from my partner and is affected by my new deficit in trust of my partner. I judge my partner to be blameworthy for an action, cheating, that displays my

partner's unfaithful attitude towards me. Our relationship as well as my attitude towards our relationship is now modified, and appropriately so because of my accurate judgment. In this way, I blame my partner for cheating on me. Note that there is nothing in Scanlon's account that requires the ability to do otherwise. Scanlon explicitly argues that "adequate opportunity to avoid" is not necessary for blame:

We have no claim against others that they not draw such conclusions [of blame], so long as they have good grounds for thinking them to be correct. Since we have no such claim, there is no need to appeal to the idea of our having had "adequate opportunity to avoid" being blamed. Psychological (and moral) accuracy provide all the justification that blame requires, when it is understood in this way. (2008, 184)

What matters is not the ability to have not done wrong, what matters is that the attitudes are still "attributable to him, and their occurrence is still a moral defect" (Scanlon 2008, 195). It is clear that, by this account, what Friedlaender calls genuinely epistemically ignorant microaggressors would be blameworthy. Friedlaender's genuinely epistemically ignorant microaggressor does not possess the knowledge to act otherwise, but their transgression remains an attributable moral defect and therefore can be blameworthy.

Now that blameworthiness has been situated in an account of blame that, like other well-motivated attributionist and source compatibilist views, does not uphold the ought-implies-can principle, I will revisit the case of the professor misattributing the female student's idea.⁵ Imagine that the microaggression was the result of a deep-rooted, unconscious bias the professor has and the microaggression he committed was the result of genuine epistemic ignorance—he did not know that he possessed this bias. The female student judges with moral accuracy that he acted wrongly in his discrimination, an attitude attributable to him, finding him blameworthy. This story fits within the Scanlonian conception of blameworthiness, explaining the compatibility of the professor's blameworthiness and the lack of ability to do otherwise that arises from genuine epistemic ignorance.

Note that we are able to hold microaggressors blameworthy even in cases where the microaggressor lacks the necessary concepts to not microaggress. The professor, even when genuinely epistemically ignorant, is only ignorant that he was doing something wrong, not ignorant of concepts necessary to not do something wrong. The professor knows how to properly attribute ideas, he is simply unaware he is misattributing. But even in cases where there is more robust ignorance, we can hold the microaggressor blameworthy. Imagine Shota, a femme-presenting, nonbinary individual visiting a small, rural town. They walk into a convenient store and are greeted by the clerk with "Welcome in Ma'am." Shota has experienced a microaggression—misgendering—that they likely experience frequently. This microaggression causes them a lot of pain, making them feel dysphoria and as though their identity does not matter. Shota judges the clerk as failing a moral standard, and therefore takes him to be blameworthy. Even if the clerk, due to his cultural upbringing, does not have epistemic access to the concept of nonbinary and therefore is genuinely epistemically ignorant not just morally, but factually, he is blameworthy.⁶ Despite his ignorance, he acted in a way that "is contrary to standards that we all have reason to regard as important" and acts like this due to a discriminatory judgment—that anyone who is femme presenting is a cis woman—this judgment is attributable to him and he is therefore blameworthy (Scanlon 2008, 124).⁷

Thus far I have laid out accounts of blame that would take no issue with ought-implies-can violations and therefore do not share Friedlaender's concern for genuine epistemic ignorance. Later in the paper, I will suggest that we have reason to prefer accounts such as these at least in the context of microaggressions, as they better situate us to successfully meet the desiderata an account of microaggression responsibility ought to satisfy. In the next section, I will address the concern that blaming individuals for microaggressions does not capture cumulative harm.

Response to the disaggregation problem: blame

Friedlaender's second concern regards blaming individual microaggressors. Blaming individuals for microaggressions leads to the disaggregation of responsibility to mere individual wrongs and as a result, does not account for the cumulative harm of microaggressions. I think, however, we can blame individuals for the wrongs they commit, partially in virtue of their *contributing* to cumulative harm.

In response to the claim that one cannot blame individuals for cumulative harm, it may be the case that one cannot blame an individual for the entirety of cumulative harm, but one can certainly blame an individual for contributing to it. In blaming them for contributing to the cumulative harm, we can blame them for more harm than they do individually, because their blameworthy action is part of a bigger pattern of harm. For example, suppose a teacher is having a bad day and makes a mean remark to one of the students in class. Now suppose the child that the teacher snapped at is consistently bullied by other teachers and students. At first it seems that all the teacher can be blamed for is the snapshot incident of lashing out at a student. However, once we add the context that the student is continually bullied, it is clear that the teacher can be blamed not just for the individual incident, but for contributing to the pattern of abuse the student suffers.⁸ This may be reflected, for example, in how the teacher might appropriately apologize to the student. The apology would be incomplete without including that they are sorry to have *added* to the suffering of the child. We may even think that to qualify for forgiveness, the teacher would be required to express remorse not just for their comment, but for how it contributed to the pattern of transgressions against the student. For example, according to Hieronymi, one of the judgments we must hold to forgive is that the act in question was wrong, and a serious moral failing—perhaps to judge the act as appropriately “serious” would be to acknowledge its role in the cumulative harm (Hieronymi 2001).

Friedlaender believes that, if we were to blame microaggressors, we would have to disaggregate to individual contributors because individuals are not to be blamed for cumulative harm (Friedlaender 2018, 14). Part of what Friedlaender takes to be problematic is that not all microaggressions cause the same amount of harm. Rather there is a tipping point where, after it is reached, the harm intensifies. To clarify this point they use the CO₂ case. I have different intuitions than Friedlaender in the CO₂ case. The fact that there is a tipping point that results in more harm caused by CO₂ is consistent with fitting blameworthiness and blame for cumulative harm. To motivate this intuition, consider a case that flips the question from blame to praise.⁹

Vegans make up a group that together have a positive impact on the environment. No one vegan makes this positive impact and, like the CO₂ case, there is a tipping point where the number of vegans starts to make a positive impact. Let's say the tipping point is 1,000 vegans. It is not as if the one-thousandth vegan is more praiseworthy than the 999 before them just because they were the one to meet the tipping point.

All the vegans deserve praise for being members of a group that meets a tipping point that causes positive environmental results. We can praise individual vegans in a way that recognizes this contribution to cumulative good by assessing them as praiseworthy in a way distinct from the praise deserved if they had not met the tipping point. Specifically, all vegans become more praiseworthy after the tipping point is met as they now individually contribute to greater patterns of goodness. Similarly, all CO₂ emitters are blameworthy for being part of a group that meets a tipping point that causes negative environmental impacts. The same applies for blame and microaggressions. Microaggressors can be blamed for more than their individual transgressions as they contribute to a cumulative harm that surpasses a tipping point, causing even more harm.¹⁰

Perhaps the most dangerous consequence of Friedlaender's disaggregation argument is that it would consider victims unjustified to blame in cases where blame is clearly justified. Take again the example of the professor misattributing the female student's idea to a male student. Imagine that this was done knowingly. The professor knows that he has a bias against female students, knows it was the female student's idea, and intentionally misattributes her idea. I think it obvious that the professor is blameworthy and can be blamed for his particular act and blamed more so for his contribution to the cumulative harm of microaggressions. If, however, Friedlaender is right in claiming that we cannot blame individuals for cumulative harm, then it seems we cannot even blame the blatantly sexist professor for his contribution to cumulative harm. This is an unintuitive result that strikes me as dangerously false. We are justified in blaming the blatantly sexist professor for his individual contribution to the cumulative harm of microaggressions.

Response to Friedlaender's responsibility model

In this section, I will respond to Friedlaender's positive account on how we should navigate microaggressor accountability. While I agree that microaggressors of all kinds should take responsibility for their actions, I have difficulty pinpointing exactly what Friedlaender takes responsibility to be and how it differs from blameworthiness.

To illustrate how responsibility and blameworthiness come apart, Friedlaender briefly gestures to an example of a baby breaking a vase. According to Friedlaender, the infant is responsible, but not blameworthy. But the sense in which a baby is responsible seems drastically different than the way Friedlaender argues that microaggressors are individually responsible for their actions. The baby is merely causally responsible for breaking the vase, but Friedlaender takes microaggressor responsibility to be much more robust than causal responsibility.

While Friedlaender does not offer an account of responsibility, they do gesture at several important aspects of holding agents responsible, including: requiring agents to take accountability for their action, requiring reparative action by changing one's actions moving forward, allowing victims of those responsible for microaggressions to justifiably hold reactive attitudes (e.g., being angry), including a backwards-looking component that can account for the cause of the harm, and allowing for the targets of microaggressions to have standing to forgive (Friedlaender 2018, 15–18).¹¹ Exactly what Friedlaender takes responsibility to include is important because the components above blur the line between responsibility and blame, so much so that I argue it entails blame (in several different accounts). For example, the fact that Friedlaender seems to think that victims of microaggressions are justified in reacting with anger or resentment means that victims are justified in blaming according to most Strawsonian and

emotional accounts of blame (Strawson 1962; Wallace et al. 2011; Shoemaker 2018). For Strawson and those who defend emotional views of blame, experiencing these reactive attitudes constitutes blame. So, if victims are justified in responding to microaggressions with the reactive attitudes (as Friedlaender argues), then they are justified in blaming microaggressors.

Friedlaender's allowance for standing to forgive also seems to implicate blameworthiness. Most scholars of forgiveness take blame and blameworthiness to be necessary for standing to forgive (Hieronymi 2001; Murphy 2003; Allais 2008)—a point I will later use to motivate my broadly blame-inclusive view. When the victim forgives the wrongdoer, they are ceasing to blame. To consistently allow victims of microaggressions to forgive, something an ideal account of microaggressor accountability would include, it seems we must conceive of microaggressors as blameworthy and the appropriate target blame. Therefore, because Friedlaender includes standing to forgive in their responsibility model, we have another reason to suspect it implies blame. It is problematic that their account of responsibility entails blame because their motivation for the responsibility framework in the first place was that blame does not seem to work “because not all individuals who contribute to the cumulative harm are blameworthy” (Friedlaender 2018, 10). In other words, because of all the elements they include in their concept of responsibility, all microaggressors they consider to be responsible would also be blameworthy.¹²

One move to make here would be to rescind the claim that microagressees have standing to forgive because most microaggressors are not in fact blameworthy. While this would perhaps help to not entail blame, we would be losing what an ideal account of microaggressor accountability would include. Standing to forgive is important because the ability to deny or give forgiveness has the potential to benefit both the forgiver and the forgiven. For one, it allows the forgiver to “absorb” the damage in a way that allows them to repair the relationship and no longer feel threatened that the offender thinks what they did was acceptable (Hieronymi 2001). The ability to “move on” and repair relationships is especially important with microaggressions because of how ubiquitous they are. Without the ability to forgive microaggressors, it seems many would be left with a mess of irreparable, or at least, unresolved relationships.

Forgiveness also has the potential to benefit the wrongdoer, or specifically in our case, the microaggressor, by facilitating the release of targeted hard feelings (Hughes and Warmke 2022).¹³ Imagine that I asked a person at the coffee shop whom I took to be Asian-American: “No, where are you *really* from?” after they had just reported that they are from Chicago. Imagine I genuinely did not know this was a harmful microaggression. I would feel bad, as I think many would, after the harm was brought to my attention. If, however, we think the Chicagoan to be without standing to blame, then I have no chance of being forgiven. Now, instead of being able to apologize, adjust my future behavior, and most likely be forgiven, I now have to sit with the hard feelings that accompany the unresolved incident (Hughes and Warmke 2022). The fact that blame qualifies us to forgive is motivation for a theory of microaggression accountability to broadly include blame so that both victim and perpetrator can reap the benefits of forgiveness.

In response to my criticism, one has the option to reject any account of blame or forgiveness where blame would be entailed by what Friedlaender takes responsibility to be. While I think one would be hard-pressed to find an alternative view of blame that accommodates this potential move while also being generally attractive, I think there would still be some important unanswered questions. Most pressing is the matter of why responsibility of this type is immune to the ought-implies-can problem that blame is charged with having. If one is in a genuinely ignorant epistemic state and

therefore, according to Friedlaender, could not have avoided microaggressing, why does this not pose the same problem for responsibility? If we cannot hold people blameworthy for things they could not have avoided doing, it seems strange to think we can hold them accountable, require them to change, have standing to give or deny forgiveness, and be justified in reacting angrily or resentfully towards them. Either this needs to be explained and argued for or, as I suggest, we recognize the aforementioned list entails blameworthiness and as previously argued, is not made unjustified by ought-implies-can violations.

A final concern for the responsibility model is that, by making it so difficult to justifiably hold microaggressors blameworthy, it is not appropriately risk sensitive. By this I mean that it errs on the side of caution more for the transgressor than the transgressed. This is an oddity not just regarding Friedlaender's account, but the blame literature at large. It seems that, in much of our discussion on blame, we are more cautious about blaming the non-blameworthy as opposed to being more careful to justify the blame of the victim.¹⁴ In other words, it often looks to be the case that we take it to be more risky to hold blameworthy and blame when unjustified, than it is risky to not blame when blame is justified. While this may make sense in certain contexts, perhaps when to blame necessarily involves some sort of intense punishment (e.g., blaming someone for murder), in other contexts it is much less reasonable. I think one such context is microaggressions. Typically, when one commits a microaggression there is no threat of great punishment like prison time or other high-cost punishment. Rather, the consequences of being blamed for committing a microaggression seem to be very similar to what taking responsibility means for Friedlaender. One would need to hold themselves accountable for the harm they caused, commit to not repeating the action, feel some remorse, apologize, and perhaps ask what sort of aftercare the target of the microaggression needs. While not costless, I do not think these consequences even nearly match how costly it is for victims of microaggressions to not blame/be made to think their blaming a microaggressor is unjustified when it in fact is. Furthermore, because microaggressions necessarily deal with an imbalance in power dynamics—dominant vs. marginalized—the individual with greater risk is the individual with the relevant marginalized identity.

A factor that compounds the risk is that, if the individual with the relevant dominant identity (the microaggressor) is mistakenly blamed, they have institutional power to aid in overcoming the consequences, whereas if the individual with the relevant marginalized identity (the target of the microaggression) is mistakenly deemed unjustified in blaming, they do not have institutional power to help overcome the consequences.¹⁵ For example, let us take it that our aforementioned store clerk is a white cis-man. If he were to be mistakenly blamed for microaggressing, due to his situation in intersecting privilege, he is likely to have his testimony of innocence believed. Whereas, if Shota, the nonbinary traveler, is mistakenly deemed as being unjustified in blaming, due to their marginalization, their testimony of the clerk's guilt will likely receive a lower credibility assessment than the clerk's testimony of innocence.

Depending on the account of blame one works with, the risk for the target of the microaggression can be greater. For example, if one takes having a reactive attitude to constitute blame such as resentment or anger, then we risk the already marginalized individual being gaslit into thinking their reaction (like anger) toward the microaggressor is unjustified.¹⁶ If one takes a Scanlonian approach to blame, there is even more at stake. One would not be considered justified in changing the relationship with the transgressor or in not wishing them well in their projects even though it would be

appropriate to do both. There are many potential dangerous consequences if this mistake is made. For example, the lack of blame would result in unchallenged transgression, signaling that this sort of treatment is acceptable when it is in fact not (Hieronymi 2001). To account for this danger, an ideal model for microaggression accountability would be more cautious of the victim, something largely blame-exclusive models seem to struggle with.

How we ought to hold microaggressors accountable

What an ideal account looks like

So far we have learned that an ideal theory of microaggressor accountability would have the following virtues: it would (1) account for cumulative harm; (2) consistently allow for standing to forgive; and (3) be risk sensitive to the microaggressed. My suggestion to meet these desiderata is to adopt an account of blame that broadly allows for victims of microaggressions to be justified in holding microaggressors blameworthy and in blaming them. I think a relationship-based, attributionist view similar to Scanlon's or Hieronymi's would accomplish this. Take the following as the criteria for blameworthiness and blame:

- A. X is blameworthy when, due to a judgment-sensitive attitude, they fail to meet a moral standard we all have reason to highly regard.¹⁷
- B. S blames X when they issue the judgment that X has shown disrespect and modifies their relationship with X accordingly.¹⁸

This picture of blame sets the bar for blameworthiness and blame relatively low. While it is possible that not *all* microaggressors are blameworthy, this account includes what I imagine to be most cases of microaggressions and significantly more cases than what Friedlaender argues. While this account of blame needs to be spelled out in more detail, it requires more attention than this paper will allow for and will be explored in future additions to the project. I will instead use the next section to explain how the account achieves the aforementioned virtues.

How this account meets the desiderata

Cumulative harm

As mentioned earlier, we can capture the microaggressor's contribution to cumulative harm by holding them *more* blameworthy for transgressing in a way that contributes to a broader pattern of harm. Here "more" means more blameworthy than if they committed the same act, but in a context where doing so would not contribute to cumulative harm. We can further account for cumulative harm by including in our blame the assessment of this contribution. Let me pause to briefly say more on what I take cumulative harm to mean. I see cumulative harm to have two main parts: First, the contribution to the systemic injustices that target that particular group; and second, the disproportionate negative effect a microaggression has due to their ubiquity. I believe the suggested account's conceptualization of blameworthiness accounts for the first element of cumulative harm and blame accounts for the latter element of cumulative harm.

I return to the Shota case to illustrate how microaggressors are accountable for cumulative harm in this account. When the clerk misgenders Shota, he meets the criteria for A, making him blameworthy. Properly gendering individuals is a moral

standard we all have reason to highly regard, we must pay extra care to not contribute to the systematic misgendering of a particular group (like transgender and nonbinary folks). To misgender someone is to disrespect their identity, and in the case of the clerk (because Shota is non-cisgender), it additionally contributes to the systematized misgendering of nonbinary individuals. It is in this way that A accounts for how microaggressors are in part blameworthy for their contribution to cumulative harm. When an individual microaggresses and therefore contributes to a broader pattern of injustice, it necessarily includes failing a moral standard in a way that particularly contributes to inequity. It may help to contrast this to what happens when a cisgender individual is misgendered—the transgressor still did something wrong, but they did not microaggress. They did not contribute to cumulative harm. Their blameworthiness would reflect this as, although they failed a moral standard, they did not do so in a way that contributed to inequity.¹⁹

We can capture the second element of cumulative harm in our blaming of microaggressors by including in our assessment their contribution to cumulative harm.²⁰ When Shota issues the judgment that the clerk showed disrespect and alters their relationship accordingly, their relationship is likely to reflect more impairment than if the clerk's act did not contribute to a pattern of disrespect shown to Shota. The experience of disproportionate harm is reflected in the way that microaggressed individuals are more likely to alter their relationship with the microaggressor and more likely to alter it more severely. For example, they may be more likely to avoid future interactions or be more motivated to take steps to ensure that individual does not microaggress again.²¹ By adjusting relationships in accordance with the experience of cumulative harm, we blame in a way that includes assessment of the microaggressor's contribution to cumulative harm.

Allow for standing to forgive

The third virtue an account of microaggressor accountability should have is to allow for the standing to forgive. Because microaggressors generally satisfy the criteria for A, nearly all microaggressors are blameworthy. This means that we can grant that the targets of microaggressions have standing to forgive without causing friction between the account and the brunt of the forgiveness literature. This is because forgiveness is predominantly thought to require that the wrongdoer be blameworthy (Hieronymi 2001; Murphy 2003; Allais 2008). This is helpful because it expands the cases where there is standing to forgive. The fact that there is still blame means that the target of the microaggression still has “something to forgive” (Allais 2008, 1). It is important that our conceptualization of microaggressor accountability allows for standing to forgive because it benefits both the microaggressor and the microaggressed. When forgiveness is issued, the microaggressor is released from “hard feelings” and the microaggressed individual benefits from the reparation of a previously impaired relationship (Hieronymi 2001; Hughes and Warmke 2022).

Appropriately risk sensitive

The minimal requirements to satisfy A and B make it so microaggressors are generally blameworthy and justifiably subject to blame. Setting the bar lower for blameworthiness and blame achieves the previously stated virtue of being more risk sensitive to marginalized individuals. While views that make blame hard to come by prioritize not holding blameworthy or blaming innocent individuals, this broadly inclusive view prioritizes not mistakenly disqualifying blameworthiness and blame when it is, in fact, justified. This results in being more risk sensitive to victims of microaggressions, rather than microaggressors. And when the microaggressor has so little at stake (perhaps the charge

to make an apology) and the microaggressed has so much (being gaslit, decrease in testimonial credit, etc.), this is exactly how our sensitivity to risk should be calibrated.

Response to objections: justified and excused microaggressions

There may be a concern that while this view's broad inclusiveness of blame has some virtue, it may be too inclusive, resulting in justifying blame when inappropriate. Are there no instances of innocent microaggressions? In other words, is it possible to commit a microaggression and not be blameworthy? In the sections that follow I will give an example of a *justified* case of microaggressing—where one appears to act morally wrong in X-ing, but where in fact their doing X is permissible—and an *excusing* case of microaggression—where one's doing X is impermissible, but they are not blameworthy. The case that I use to display an instance of justification involves misgendering a friend who is not “out.” I then use a case regarding an individual with a medical condition that results in an instance of excuse. Finally, I will explore the idea that there may be unjustified, excused cases where one may think the microaggressor not blameworthy, but where blame is justified all the same.

Justified microaggression

Though I imagine they are rare, there can be instances of justified microaggressions, or in other words, a situation where an apparent microaggression is not morally wrong. For example, imagine you are at a gathering and you notice your classmate referring to someone you know to use she/her pronouns with he/him pronouns. After the gathering you approach your classmate who had misgendered the woman. Your classmate informs you, however, that the woman is not “out” to the others who were at the gathering and had asked that your classmate use he/him when necessary to avoid outing her. In this case, the classmate is still misgendering and likely still causes harm. Even when transgender and non-binary individuals need to remain “not out” in contexts for pragmatic reasons, this does not change the fact that being misgendered is unpleasant (at the least) and possibly severely painful (due to causing dysphoria for example). Though they misgender and likely cause harm, they are not blameworthy as they have not done something morally wrong. Had they chosen to ignore the woman's request they would have done something wrong and caused much more harm. Instead, they respected their friend's request, privacy, and safety, resulting in a case where the classmate is not blameworthy nor to be blamed. They have not failed a moral standard and the woman did not issue a judgment of disrespect that altered their relationship—therefore not meeting the requirements for A or B.

Excused microaggression

A transgressor is considered to be excused when they are not blameworthy for a morally wrong action they performed (Hughes and Warmke 2022). Take the following as an example of an excused microaggressor. Imagine an individual with a verbal tic that results in the individual's uncontrollable use of he/him pronouns. Imagine further that this does not happen as a result of identifying everyone as a male, but is completely unprompted. When the locution occurs in the presence of a person like Shota for example, the person with the tick microaggresses. Unlike the justified case above, this person *has* done something morally wrong, despite their lack of control.²² But while they have

done wrong, their condition excuses them, making them non-blameworthy. One may wonder why this individual is excused while the epistemically ignorant are not, especially as neither could avoid microaggressing. However, the individual with a tic's lack of ability to avoid is not the excusing factor. There are a variety of other reasons that would excuse them instead, for example, lacking relevant control.²³ Another way to understand their excuse is, in attributionist terms, that the act cannot be attributed to them. The individual's transgression was the result of a non-judgment-sensitive attitude; the action did not represent the individual's judgment (Scanlon 1998, 22). Compare this to the genuinely epistemically ignorant microaggressor with no such medical condition. Like the individual in the case above, the merely ignorant microaggressor fails a moral standard. Unlike the individual with the tic, their microaggressing reflects a judgment-sensitive attitude (for example, the judgment that people who wear dresses must be women) that is therefore attributable to them regardless of their ignorance.²⁴

Excuse with justified blame

One may wonder if there are, however rare, cases of excused microaggressions unlike the case of the individual with the tic. In the tic case, no matter how the microaggressed individual responds, the individual with the tic will continue to behave the same. Therefore, not much hangs on the question of how to respond to them. To put it in the vocabulary of Regina Rini, there are reasons of neither desert nor tactical reasons to hold the microaggressor with a tic accountable in some way (Rini 2018).²⁵ Much more is at stake if there are special cases of excused microaggressions where responding to the microaggression in some way *could* play a role in reducing future microaggressions and, perhaps more critically, where *not* responding in a certain way makes the situation worse. Although I cannot think of such a case, one may be able to come up with a situation where ignorance is excusing, not because of an ought-implies-can violation, but for some other reason.²⁶ Perhaps the best way of moving forward here would be to avoid blaming the microaggressor, and merely hold them responsible as Friedlaender suggests. This, however, would run into the same problem of finding a way to conceptualize responsibility robust enough to make a difference without simply entailing blame. I suggest, instead, that we need not avoid blame in the first place. I suspect that, even if one were to find the kind of "innocent" microaggressor discussed in this paragraph, we would likely still be justified in blaming them. In what follows I will gesture to an explanation of how, in situations like these, blameworthiness and blame can come apart.

Because microaggressions are a kind of transgression that necessarily stems from systematic oppression, there is reason to think that how we go about justifying blame may be different from how we do so for transgressions in alternative contexts. For example, in "Responsibility and reproach," Cheshire Calhoun argues that, when in a specific kind of moral context, we are justified in blaming individuals even when they are not blameworthy. Calhoun explains how, because oppressive behaviors operate in an *abnormal moral context* or a context where we do not share a moral language and moral ignorance is the norm, ignorance is not an excuse (1989, 396). Abnormal moral contexts are directly contrasted to *normal moral contexts* where we share a moral language and the norm is one where we are generally epistemically aware of what is right and wrong (1989, 396). While ignorance can appear in both contexts, we can appeal to ignorance as disqualifying for blame in normal moral contexts, but not in abnormal moral contexts. Calhoun lays out the relevant differences of ignorance in abnormal moral contexts versus normal moral contexts: "First, it occurs at a social rather than individual level; and second, it

occurs in individuals with generally good moral reasoning skills” (1989, 394). Calhoun explains how, in the abnormal moral context, it does not work to excuse transgressors from blame because it (1) ignores the transgressor’s participation in the sustainment of society’s ignorance and (2) to excuse in this context would have the effect of sanctioning the act, or making the act seem permissible (1989, 401).

Microaggressions are a paradigmatic manifestation of transgressions in an abnormal moral context. The ignorance of both the factual and moral concepts relevant to microaggressions occurs at the social level due to systematized marginalization of the knowledge.²⁷ This opacity prevents us from sharing a moral language, something we would share if microaggressions operated in the normal moral context. Furthermore, microaggressions are largely committed by individuals that have satisfactory moral reasoning ability. Evidence for this can be found in the pervasive, now classic defense when being called out for microaggressing: “He can’t be (racist, homophobic, xenophobic, etc.); he is such a nice guy!” Part of what makes microaggression accountability as interesting and difficult as it is precisely because “nice guys” with generally good moral reasoning skills commit them.

When not met with moral reproach, microaggressions are subject to Calhoun’s previously mentioned worries. As microaggressions fall into an abnormal moral context, we risk ignoring the microaggressor’s perpetuation of society’s ignorance as well as risking the sanctioning of the microaggression. For these reasons, we can be justified in blaming microaggressors even when they are not blameworthy.²⁸ We can paint this picture of blame using the account just given. If we imagine a case where the microaggressor has not met the conditions for A, then the microaggressor is not blameworthy. This can happen of course while the conditions for B are met, constituting blame. What justify B in the absence of A are the practical reasons discussed above. Regardless of the ignorance that excuses X from blameworthiness, X’s microaggressing perpetuates societal ignorance and signals that similar behavior is acceptable. These serve as reasons for S to judge X as being disrespectful and modifying their relationship with X accordingly. For example, regardless of the factual ignorance of the clerk, Shota could justifiably respond to the aforementioned reasons and modify their relationship with the clerk. By responding to even non-blameworthy microaggressors with blame we can hold them accountable in a way that prioritizes those who are victims rather than perpetrators while avoiding the worries of sanctioning microaggressive acts.

Microaggressees taken seriously

Microaggressions are a widespread phenomenon that cause a significant amount of harm. It has been argued by Friedlaender that, as microaggressors are often the result of genuine epistemic ignorance and contribute to cumulative harm, they are generally non-blameworthy and not justified targets of blame. Friedlaender’s concerns are overcome once we anchor cases of microaggressions in any of the several theories of blame that do not require ought-implies-can. I have argued that, due to the way they construe responsibility, blame is entailed in each instance Friedlaender finds responsibility applicable (which for them is all cases of microaggressions). My disagreement with Friedlaender is therefore a subtle one: I agree that microaggressors should be held responsible for their actions, but I argue that microaggressors are generally blameworthy. I have suggested an account of blameworthiness and blame that accounts for cumulative harm, allows for standing to forgive, and is appropriately risk sensitive. I hope that in so conceiving of the blameworthiness and blaming of microaggressors, we are better

equipped to take seriously the harm caused by microaggressions and center the well-being of the survivors of microaggressions.

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Notes

- 1 In the text they particularly reference “an” ought-implies-can principle which implies they may be working with a non-standard use of ought-implies-can principle (Friedlaender 2018, 11).
- 2 Friedlaender also argues that “group blaming” is too tricky to parse out due to the need to track the intentionality of the group (Friedlaender 2018, 10).
- 3 The model according to Friedlaender involves “(1) the focus of responsibility is the cumulative harm of actions rather than the single actions of individuals; (2) the wrongness of an action is determined by the morally laden background conditions (that is, the functions of structural oppression); (3) the model allows a backward-looking component in order to explain how the cumulative harm generally came about; (4) individuals share responsibility for the outcomes; and (5) responsibility is discharged through collective action” (2018, 10).
- 4 By non-environmental microaggressions, Friedlaender is referring to “individually performed microaggressions” such as micro-invalidations (Friedlaender 2018, 18).
- 5 For accounts like these see Hieronymi 2008; Fischer and Ravizza 1998.
- 6 For a defense of how much of the ignorance that is thought to be genuine is actually “affected” ignorance and therefore is not exculpating, see Moody-Adams 1994. Moody-Adams argues that culture cannot excuse on the grounds that it limits moral agency because cultures persist in virtue of the persistence of actions done by its morally responsible participants (Moody-Adams 1994, 293–94).
- 7 Even if one remains skeptical about the blameworthiness of genuinely epistemically ignorant microaggressors, I will discuss later in the paper how we may still be justified in *blaming* them (Calhoun 1989).
- 8 One way to think about how our blame differs in these cases is that the *force* of blame is greater in cases of cumulative harm (Hieronymi 2004).
- 9 I recognize that there may be significant asymmetries between blame and praise (Nelkin 2011), but I think we can rely on praise-intuitions here as the particular problem of disaggregating cumulative effects to mere individual contributions seems to be the same in both cases.
- 10 In the chapter on blame in his book *Moral dimensions*, Scanlon lays out an account of how we can blame group entities (Scanlon 2008, 162). This account may be helpful in explaining how we can blame the dominant group as well as the individual. The background for this argument, however, would be too much for this paper and will hopefully be explored in the future.
- 11 While Friedlaender does not directly say this, they mention that “we need not assume that a lack of blame requires us to forgive the harm,” which implies that we have standing to forgive in the first place (Friedlaender 2018, 14).
- 12 Note that my point is not that Friedlaender’s responsibility necessarily *collapses* into blame. Rather, it seems to entail it. Their responsibility model might involve blame and more.
- 13 These may be self-directed hard feelings or the hard feelings that arise from self-blame. While that makes one eligible for self-forgiveness, I predict it to be difficult to assuage those hard feelings without the forgiveness of the injured party.
- 14 This also includes justifying the victim to hold the transgressor blameworthy.
- 15 While I believe it is possible for microaggressors to have the relevant marginalized identity(s) of the microaggressed, I bracket those instances in this paper. I do this for two reasons: (1) this possibility does not contradict the fact that microaggressions are only made possible due to power imbalance, and (2) because I take the paradigmatic case of microaggressing to be where the microaggressor holds the relevant dominant/privileged identities.

16 Gaslighting occurs when “the gaslighter tries (consciously or not) to induce in someone the sense that her reactions, perceptions, memories, and beliefs are not just mistaken, but utterly without grounds—paradigmatically, so unfounded as to qualify as crazy” (Abramson 2014, 2).

17 I use judgment-sensitive attitude in the way Hieronymi uses “commitment-constituted attitude” which she conceptualizes as a “subject’s take on some object, the subject’s answer to some question(s)” (Hieronymi 2008, 362).

18 One may worry about what the centralizing of relationship means for stranger-stranger microaggressions. For a well-developed account of how this might work, see Scanlon 2008. Though we do not have the kind of rich relationship we have with friends or family, stranger-stranger is a relation and that relation can be impaired. Think about the difference in relation you have to the stranger who cuts you off on the highway and the respectably distanced driver. In stranger-stranger microaggressions the microaggressed might adopt a hope to never see that person again, or try to forget them altogether. Either of these attitudinal changes act as holding the relationship as impaired.

19 There might be a case where a cis person could be misgendered consistently, and so misgendering them would contribute to cumulative harm. If they are consistently being misgendered due to a marginalized identity they hold, this would then count as a microaggression.

20 See Browne 1992 for more on how our blaming actions should view a transgressor’s actions as “contributions” to what has happened, even in cases without certain kinds of control (Browne 1992, 353). Thank you to a referee from this journal for this suggestion.

21 This latter alteration may be, for example, when a group of friends continually microaggresses someone in their friend group. When the microaggressed friend feels the disproportionate effects of the fifth microaggression, they are likely going to be more inclined to alter their relationship in a way where they take an educational role, or perhaps put the relationship on pause until the friend learns how to not microaggress on their own.

22 For work on excuse, see Fischer and Ravizza 1998. For work on excuse and mental disorders, see King and May 2018.

23 See Wallace 1994 and King and May 2018 for how this lack of control precludes blameworthiness. The central idea is that an agent does not have the required control when they lack the ability to act in a way that recognizes and responds to the “relevant reasons” (King and May 2018, 7). This makes acts that are compulsive, like the verbal tic, not eligible for blameworthiness.

24 We get the same result with other similar accounts of blame. For example, in Hieronymi’s terms, the actions done by the individual with the tic, unlike the ignorant individual, are not reflective of her “moral personality” (Hieronymi 2008).

25 One may be able to build a case where there are tactical reasons to react in some blame-like way to the individual with a tic, perhaps to educate others present. For the case in mind, however, we can take it that the two individuals are alone and there are no such reasons.

26 One way of thinking about this would be to adopt a Quality-of-Will account of blame. Accounts like these typically find that while ignorance of moral knowledge (right or wrongness) are not excusing (see Harman 2011; Arpaly 2003), ignorance of facts is (Harman 2011; Arpaly 2015). While there is some disagreement about the latter claim, a quality-of-will theorist may say that microaggressions that occur out of lack of *factual* awareness (like the clerk in the Shota case who does not know what nonbinary is) would not be subject to blameworthiness.

27 A point acknowledged by Friedlaender when they claim genuine epistemic ignorance is a necessary product of hermeneutical injustice (Friedlaender 2018, 11).

28 A similar argument for the separation of blameworthiness and blame is made by Regina Rini (2018). Rini argues that even when there is a lack of blameworthiness or desert, there can be tactical reasons for or against holding reactive attitudes like anger (338).

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