

Microaggressions as Violence

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ABSTRACT

The most common critique levelled against the concept of microaggressions is that it involves a dangerous exaggeration, treating simple mistakes or miscommunications as acts of violence. I argue in this essay that microaggressions should be defined as patterns of interaction that perpetuate a certain kind of structural violence (namely, oppression), and as such are rightly considered a form of violence in themselves. I suggest, too, that microaggressions are a form of violence for which we stand responsible, despite the fact that they are often committed unintentionally. I first offer a brief history of the concept of microaggressions and a response to two of its most famous critics, then I work to redefine microaggressions within the context of a theory of structural violence and a theology of structural sin.

In the fall of 2015, some students at the University of California Los Angeles decided to throw a “Kanye Western” theme party. You can imagine what happened. A large group of mostly white teenagers padded the back of their pants, parodied characters from West’s music videos, assembled their own exaggerated versions of West’s fashion line, and predictably, donned blackface. The campus erupted. The case was reported in the Los Angeles Times and the Huffington Post. Students occupied the Chancellor’s office and demanded redress. The sponsoring fraternity was temporarily suspended, and some suggested that the university become much more active in policing student parties on campus. National magazines published melodramatic think pieces about the death of free speech.

The premise of the student protests was that the white students’ parody of black culture was harmful to the black students on campus. It constituted what has become known as a “microaggression”—a term that in its most common usage simply refers to everyday words or actions that demean someone else

on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, or physical ability. The language of microaggressions has a long prehistory among psychologists, but it has only recently become commonplace because of protests like this one at UCLA. A number of activists, mostly online and on college campuses, have used the concept to call attention to the subtle ways that their conversation partners, colleagues, classmates, or teachers marginalized or excluded them.

The very idea of microaggressions has become the subject of intense debate in the popular media over the past five years. The term implies that the white students who participated in the party were guilty of a kind of violence against their black peers. Is that a fair accusation? Or would it be better to think of their actions in different terms—inconsiderate and ill-informed, maybe, but at worst a childish expression of fun? This is an ethical question at root, but curiously, ethicists have had little to say about it.¹

In this essay, I defend the idea of microaggressions as a critical part of a Christian ethics of violence. My main argument is a definitional one: that microaggressions should be understood as patterns of interaction that perpetuate a particular kind of structural violence (namely, oppression), and as such are properly understood as a kind of violence themselves. Moreover, I will suggest that microaggressions are a kind of violence *for which we stand responsible*, even though they are often unintentional—which is to say, in theological terms, microaggressions are a kind of sin.

To make that case, I will first sketch the history of the concept, then respond to the critique that calling microaggressions a kind of violence is a dangerous exaggeration, then finally situate microaggressions within a thicker account of structural violence and structural sin than earlier articulations have provided. In some ways, this argument just prepares the ground for more important practical questions—and perhaps even heightens them. I will try to sketch, in conclusion, some of the practical consequences of my redefinition of microaggressions, but it will only be a sketch. I think it is important to do the definitional work first, both because recent debates are constantly equivocating on the meaning of the word, and because the idea itself offers some important theoretical insight into how violence works.

THE HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT

It is only over the last five years or so that it has irrupted into public consciousness, but the idea of microaggressions has circulated among psychologists for decades. The term was coined in 1970 by Chester Pierce, then professor of education and psychiatry at Harvard, in his work on the way that black people experience racism. Over the course of the late 1960s, he had come to recognize the need for “a sweeping new theoretical concept”² in order to understand the changing operations of racism in the United States. In an essay entitled “Offensive Mechanisms,” Pierce wrote:

Most offensive actions are not gross and crippling. They are subtle and stunning. The enormity of the complications they cause can be appreciated only when one considers that these subtle blows are delivered incessantly. Even though any single negotiation of offense can in justice be considered of itself to be relatively innocuous, the cumulative effect to the victim and to the victimizer is of an unimaginable magnitude. Hence, the therapist

is obliged to pose the idea that offensive mechanisms are usually a *micro-aggression*, as opposed to a gross, dramatic, obvious *macro-aggression* such as lynching.³

Pierce was writing in the wake of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968, as some of the last vestiges of what Charles Mills calls *de iure* white supremacy—in which antiblack racism was explicitly codified and enforced as law—were crumbling.⁴ We can understand Pierce as working to understand the mechanics of racism's *de facto* perpetuation despite the formal declaration of racial equality in U.S. law. Racism, he suggests, is the cumulative product of countless microaggressions. It is built on ingrained interactional patterns between white people and black people, so deeply internalized by everyone in this society as to be automatic. Microaggressions “assure that the person in the inferior status is ignored, tyrannized, terrorized, and minimized,”⁵ thus supporting ongoing systematic inequalities and patterns of violence. Seeing the consequences of these microaggressions and sensing the connections between these “relatively innocuous” acts and the perpetuation of systemic injustices, “it is difficult, if not impossible, for a black to understand how a white, particularly a privileged white, can exhibit offensive micro-aggressions without considering him a murderer.”⁶ As insignificant as the offense may appear on its own, it is experienced and judged as violence in view of the larger pattern.

Pierce gives a number of examples, but fittingly, given his concern with *patterns* of behavior, he is less interested in unpacking individual microaggressions than he is in understanding how those microaggressions combine to reinforce white supremacy.⁷ He attempts to sketch the overarching offensive strategy by which white people assert and maintain dominance over black people—starting with tokenizing expressions of admiration for certain black people and culminating in outright declarations of white superiority. The apparently-kind gestures and the blatantly-cruel gestures cannot be understood apart from each other.

There are things to criticize in Pierce's analysis, certainly. I will argue, in fact, that we are still dealing with some of the problems he introduces. He sometimes gives too much priority to individual perception of an offense, and he tends to treat structural injustices as mere aggregates of personal interactions.⁸ But Pierce's basic idea is penetrating and profound: “microaggressions” name those offenses that appear minor individually but are devastating in repetition, and by their repetition and combination underwrite ongoing patterns of injustice and violence.

Pierce's idea percolated quietly for a long time without much comment, but slowly psychologists and sociologists began producing studies on the impact of these “stunning and subtle” offenses. Many recognized a similar offensive mechanisms in other patterns of marginalization, too, and began to speak not only of racial microaggressions but also of microaggressions concerning gender, sexuality, physical and mental ability, and so on. Pierce had already recognized in his early essays that his analysis could cover more than just racism.⁹ But as the concept was extended to cover more and more cases, it was also thinned out and abstracted from particular social realities. A newer definition, and probably now the most frequently cited, comes from Derald Wing Sue, professor of counseling psychology at Columbia:

Microaggressions are the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate

hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group.¹⁰

Or, more briefly: “Microaggressions are brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership.”¹¹

One of Pierce’s key ideas is still visible in Sue’s treatment: that microaggressions are individually benign but cumulatively destructive. But Sue largely severs the connection with systemic violence that was so important to Pierce (and that I will argue is a *sine qua non* of a useful definition of microaggressions), and gives very little attention to the way microaggressions combine. Instead, he explains the destructiveness of microaggressions in entirely psychological terms.¹² The problem with microaggressions, for Sue, is that they encode “hidden messages” that reduce individuals to members of a social group, and demean or marginalized the group *en masse*. If people of color are asked repeatedly where they are “really from,” what is communicated is that only white people are “really from” here. If white people constantly cross the street or get off the elevator or lock their car doors when they notice a black man coming towards them, what is communicated to the black man is that he is intrinsically dangerous. If all bathrooms are designated as for “men” or “women,” what is communicated to intersex or gender nonconforming folks is that they do not have a place in the world. Microaggressions are destructive because these “slights and insults,” over time, add up to serious personal harm. Sue compares them to stress injuries—slight traumas that slowly wearing down the health of the target over time.¹³ One of his signal contributions, in fact, is to collate significant data correlating the onslaught of these microaggressions with the long-term psychological and physical health of their targets.

As I see it, Sue develops Pierce’s earlier analysis in three main ways. First, he makes a plausible case that small offenses have a measurable effect on individuals over time. Pierce hinted in this direction, but focused on interactional patterns rather than on consequences for the mental and physical health of individuals. Second, he contributes a focus on the hidden messages encoded verbal and behavioral patterns. These messages are often unintended by and even unknown to the sender, but recognized by the target. The constant work of decoding these messages is part of the psychic burden that, over time, causes harm. Third, Sue provides a detailed taxonomy of such hidden messages that adds a lot of helpful specificity to the kinds of mechanisms Pierce is calling attention to.¹⁴

All of these are important points, but they reflect Sue’s almost exclusive focus on the *psychological* dimension of microaggressions. The psychological impact mattered deeply to Pierce, too, of course; as a clinician, one of his main goals was to provide black people with language and framework for describing and resisting the subtle operations of racism. But Sue locates the *entire harm* of microaggressions in individual perception of hidden messages. Pierce oversimplifies things by treating interactional patterns as prior to and the basis for systemic violence, but Sue reduces systemic injustice almost completely to the slow accumulation of individual offenses. In a word, Sue *individualizes* microaggressions. They still have wider social consequences, certainly, but Sue’s microaggressions have mainly to do with perceived implicit slights. Again, I think it is important to affirm the real harm that perceived implicit slights can

have over time. But defining microaggressions in this narrower way undercuts the real weight of Pierce's initial analysis. What recommends Pierce's original concept is precisely that it functions as a kind of hinge concept connecting individual actions with systemic realities.

For this reason, I think, activists have begun subtly to flip the script on received academic definitions of microaggressions.¹⁵ Recently, the term has migrated out of the academy and into activist circles, particularly online and on college campuses. It has become part of the vocabulary of organizers working on a huge variety of issues: rape culture on college campuses, racist images and tactics that have become part of the public landscape, casually heteronormative habits of speech, and much more. As these organizers have been using the term, however, the harmfulness of microaggressions is less about their impact on individuals (though that certainly remains important) than it is about their role in maintaining wider structures of oppression. Microaggressions are actions that "have the impact of furthering the marginalization or oppression of those around us."¹⁶

As Arthur Chu put it on Twitter, "Microaggressions exist bc of macroaggressions. Macroaggressions = shooting a kid. Microaggression = acting like its no big deal he was shot."¹⁷ Instead of thinking about microaggressions as the "slights and insults" that eventually add up to real harm, Chu is defining microaggressions in light of already-existing forms of structural violence. He directly echoes Pierce's connection between microaggressions and macroaggressions (what I am calling structural violence), but reverses the order of identification and definition. It is wrong to name a football name "the Redskins" not primarily because of the psychological impact on indigenous Americans, for example, but because of the way it plays into a pattern of trivialization that is integral to their material impoverishment and political marginalization. It is wrong to use the word "gay" as an insult not primarily because of the direct psychological harm it causes a gay person in the room, but because it reinforces a hierarchical and exclusionary relationship between "straight" and "gay" people at a structural level.

The challenge is to formulate a definition of microaggressions that takes this whole conversational history seriously. Pierce gives us a focus on antagonistic patterns of interaction that prepare the ground for systematic marginalization and violence. Sue gives us a focus on the accumulated individual harm of minor offenses. Student and online activists, even more strongly than Pierce, give us a focus on actions that support, perpetuate, or distract from wider patterns of violence. My own definition gives priority to the activists' inversion: microaggressions ought to be defined in light of "macroaggressions," not vice versa. Microaggressions refer to individual actions that support or contribute to systemic patterns of violence, even though on their own those actions might appear insignificant or benign. Those wider patterns of violence cannot be *reduced* to the accumulation of microaggressions, as Pierce and especially Sue sometimes seem to suggest, but as I will argue shortly, those wider patterns of violence cannot be understood without reference to these supporting actions. Microaggressions support or contribute to wider patterns of violence by training people in oppressive relational patterns (a la Pierce), by causing direct harm (a la Sue), and in many other ways besides. What matters for the definition is simply that these actions play a part in the wider drama of oppression.

A DESTRUCTIVE EXAGGERATION?

Before I try to unpack the theoretical significance of the concept of microaggressions, I want to acknowledge and respond to one of the most important objections to the idea. The term “microaggressions” claims to be naming a kind of violence. But many of the actions that Pierce, Sue, and recent activists describe under that heading do not immediately appear violent. Some of them—like white people’s vocal admiration of black celebrities that Pierce mentions, or the vocal admiration of a black woman’s hair—might even appear (to the perpetrators, at least) as kind or generous. Describing dismissive rhetoric or backhanded compliments or naive questions as violence might seem to dilute the idea of violence beyond recognition. Virtually all of the many criticisms of microaggressions ultimately come back to this point: that the basic idea is a massive and destructive exaggeration.

The anxiety is a legitimate one. I do think it would be wrong to redefine every “commonplace indignity” as an act of violence. If it is right to call microaggressions a kind of violence—and I think that it is—we need to better define the scope of the term.

One of the most prominent and cogent critiques of microaggressions has come from Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, first in a widely-read cover story for *The Atlantic* and later in a book with the same title: *The Coddling of the American Mind*.¹⁸ As they explain in their original article, Lukianoff and Haidt view the language of microaggressions as part of “a movement [...] undirected and driven largely by students, to scrub campuses clean of words, ideas, and subjects that might cause discomfort or give offense.”¹⁹ The goal of that movement is to protect students from psychological harm, which Lukianoff and Haidt accept as laudable. But the movement assumes and reinforces “an extraordinary fragility of the college psyche.” It is “infantilizing” and “anti-intellectual.”²⁰

It has become common to critique the concern with microaggressions as a kind of censorship, or as evidence of an unraveling commitment to free speech. At its best, this critique stems from a recognition that giving institutions explicit power to discipline subtle speech or behavioral patterns is a dangerous game that might well backfire.²¹ Usually, though, free speech arguments are something of a red herring. They tend simply to ignore the basic claim implied by the idea of microaggressions—that people are being harmed by these apparently innocent words or actions—in order to advocate free speech as a broader public good. They shift the field of conversation: instead of talking about the harm caused by microaggressions themselves, they want to talk about the public harm caused by *policing* microaggressions.²² What makes Lukianoff and Haidt’s argument so interesting is that they meet proponents of the language of microaggressions more nearly on their own terms. Censoring microaggressions does not only harm society in the abstract, they argue; it directly harms the people it is meant to protect.

In their book, Lukianoff and Haidt situate their critique of microaggressions within a wider critique of what they call “the untruth of emotional reasoning”: the idea that our feelings are always trustworthy.²³ The language of microaggressions, they think, gives people license to believe that *feeling offended* is proof of an *actual offense*, and to respond on that basis. If a black student feels attacked by something a teacher said, that is often taken to be proof enough that a microaggression has been committed—even if the teacher has an alternative explanation.

But of course, our initial perceptions and reactions are often wrong. They recommend the practice of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) as a way of thinking critically about our emotional responses to a particular interaction. Where the language of microaggressions equips people to “magnify” and “catastrophize” unintentional slights, cognitive behavioral therapists would encourage exactly the opposite: in the face of a perceived offense, a person should try to give the offense its most charitable possible interpretation, considering it in context and in light of the person’s likely intention. By offering language and license for doing otherwise, people who promote the idea of microaggressions are making it more difficult for students to learn good coping mechanisms.²⁴

The language of microaggressions, in other words, encourages what Frank Furedi calls “the weaponisation of emotions”²⁵ and what Jason Manning and Bradley Campbell describe as a “moral culture of victimhood,”²⁶ which are not only bad for society more broadly, but bad for the people ostensibly being protected. In deploying the language of microaggressions, we are told that we are building a culture in which claims to have been harmed are *ipso facto* valid and true, and in which people in positions of authority are obligated to intervene. There is no more space here for free speech, for critical thinking, for “innocent until proven guilty,” and there is no space for learning to respond constructively to someone who offends you. To reframe their argument in terms of my question in this essay, Lukianoff and Haidt believe that microaggressions are wrongly counted as a kind of violence. “A faux pas does not make someone an evil person or an aggressor.”²⁷ The language of “aggression” exaggerates the harmfulness of the act, and miscategorizes the perpetrator. The term “microaggressions” itself catastrophizes what is probably at worst a hurtful gesture, and more often is just a slip of the tongue, a mistake born of cultural limitations, or a simple misunderstanding.

It is surprising—given that Haidt is a social psychologist, and given that their entire argument is structured around an appeal to the saving powers of CBT—that neither the article nor the book makes reference to the history of psychological studies demonstrating the long-term effects of microaggressions on the mental and physical health of their targets. Surely the first and simplest argument in favor of calling microaggressions a form of violence is that they do measurable harm.

As I mentioned earlier, Derald Wing Sue has done especially good work collecting and collating the data demonstrating the long-term harm of microaggressions.²⁸ As Sue explains it, microaggressions are stressors with concrete biological, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences. The experience of microaggressions over time is positively correlated with higher health risks (raising blood pressure and reducing immune function), depression, cognitive disruption, social alienation, feelings of fatigue and hopelessness, feelings of rage, and more.²⁹ In a widely-circulated essay for *The New York Times*, Lisa Feldman Barrett makes the argument explicitly: “If words can cause stress, and if prolonged stress can cause physical harm, then it seems that speech—at least certain types of speech—can be a form of violence.”³⁰

But there are some important problems with defending the violence of microaggressions by appealing to the personal harm they cause. For one thing, it is exceedingly difficult to measure. As Scott Lilienfeld has recently argued, the idea of microaggressions that has circulated among psychologists has been far too vaguely and subjectively defined to make strong claims about their direct causal connection to adverse mental health outcomes.³¹ Although Lilienfeld admits that subtle manifestations of prejudice do occur and

deserve more scrutiny, he doubts that the “microaggression research program” that Sue and his followers have pursued is empirically rigorous enough to establish what it has set out to accomplish.

And even if we allow that microaggressions cause personal harm, it would be possible to argue that *perceived* offenses are capable of causing harm while still denying that the actions were properly understood as offensive. This seems like the implication of Lukianoff and Haidt’s argument that CBT should replace the language of microaggressions: the perception of violence is a cognitive distortion. Even if real harm comes from the misperceptions of violence, that is the fault of the misperceptions, not the fault of the supposed “aggressor.” It is wrong to call this harm violence, they might argue, because this is not a case of person harming another person, but the harmful consequence of a pathological worldview.

It is certainly possible to be mistaken, and to be hurt by our own mistakes. Systematic misperception is certainly possible, too—I would even say it is common. Take “impostor syndrome”: there are plenty of us in the academy, maybe most of us, who suffer under the persistent anxiety that we are markedly inferior to our peers, and that they are either humoring us out of pity or they have not yet discovered the depths of our inferiority. We find tiny bits of “evidence” all over the place, including in minor gestures from our colleagues and mentors, that reinforce our insecurity. Of course, it is *prima facie* impossible that we *all* be inferior to our peers. It is a systematic misperception. And that systematic misperception is harmful. It is definitely not good for one’s mental health to carry around that kind of anxiety. But it would be wrong to pin that harm on our peers and colleagues, even though we sometimes find confirmation of our insecurities in their actions. Instead, we need to work to readjust our read of reality by focusing on other cues, other bits of evidence. CBT is a powerful tool for helping people overcome this kind of challenge.³² But it dramatically underestimates the sophistication of the language of microaggressions, not mention the subtlety of oppression itself, to argue that the kinds of actions identified as microaggressions are all misperceptions of this kind.

An important part of the problem lies in the examples that Lukianoff and Haidt choose to highlight. In their original article, they describe a white student who was found guilty of racial harassment for reading *Notre Dame vs. the Klan*, a book celebrating resistance to the KKK. They describe a professor publicly condemned by students for editing the word “indigenous” in a paper to use a lowercase rather than capital I. They describe another professor suspended by administrators for posting a picture of his daughter wearing a Game of Thrones t-shirt that read, “I will take what is mine with fire & blood,” charging that the picture was a veiled threat. None of these are microaggressions. The first and third are indeed cases of misperception based in ignorance, and the second is a debate about the implicit politics of academic English style. I would agree, in these cases, that no violence has been done.

But there are better examples. Take Joe Biden’s comment about the emergence of then-Senator Barack Obama as a front-runner in the 2008 Democratic primaries: “I mean, you’ve got the first sort of mainstream African American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice looking guy. I mean, that’s a storybook, man.”³³ Biden undoubtedly meant to be complimenting Obama, but the implication—that most African Americans are *not* articulate or bright or clean—is not hard to decipher. Or take Donald Trump’s infamous comment in the announcement speech of his presidential campaign: “When Mexico send its people, they’re not sending their best... They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing

those problems with us [sic]. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people."³⁴

But these kinds of indirect insults are not the best examples, either. As Pierce noted from the beginning, patterns of interaction are more important. I have already mentioned the way that white folks routinely respond in fear to black men—locking the car door, crossing the street, moving to the corner of the elevator. We could also talk about the way men routinely address women on the basis of appearance or relationship status—telling a woman to smile, commenting on her dress or makeup, asking why she is single.

To give a more personal example, a colleague and I recently wrote a piece on John Howard Yoder's history of violence against women for a popular venue.³⁵ In summarizing the history of Yoder's case, we failed to mention the work of Ruth Krall, a psychologist and victims' advocate who has been working for justice for Yoder's victims since the 1980s, and who produced a multi-volume book on clergy abuse, including a volume dedicated to Yoder's case.³⁶ For us, it was a humiliating oversight. For Krall, it was a continuation of a decades-long pattern of having her work marginalized and ignored—particularly by male theologians writing about Yoder.³⁷ In this case, the microaggression was not a comment but a failure to comment. Our silence reinforced the invisibility of Krall's work on behalf of Yoder's victims. More broadly, it was a quiet continuation of a pattern of under-citation that is essential to the marginalization of women in the academy.

The violence of microaggressions is intuitively clearer, it seems to me, in these examples. It is clearer partly because the direct offense is more obvious and more substantive than the offenses (if they can even be considered such) that Lukianoff and Haidt report. But more importantly, the violence of these examples is clearer because *we are able to recognize, at some level, the patterns of violence to which they belong*. To take just the first example: comments like Donald Trump's, repeated over time, have the cumulative effect of criminalizing Mexican immigrants as a group. That presumed criminality exposes Mexican immigrants to higher rates of police action and police violence, and encourages a widespread suspicion that makes it more difficult for them to find work. Sue would add that individual Mexican immigrants, forced to cope daily with these stressors, are likely to face much higher rates of psychological and physical harm. If you disagree that Trump's comment was a microaggression, it is likely at least in part because you disagree that Mexican immigrants are subject to this kind of systematic violence.

If we define microaggressions only as masked insults that take a psychological toll on those who perceive them—as Sue sometimes does—Lukianoff and Haidt's critique does not entirely miss its mark. Sue does locate microaggressions and their harm almost completely within the perception of the target.³⁸ It is not hard to understand why Lukianoff and Haidt would see the equation of perceived insults with violence as an exaggeration (though they still fail to reckon seriously with the idea of microaggressions as *patterns*, not isolated incidents), and it is not hard to understand why they would be worried about a disciplinary category determined only by a victim's perception of an event.

The violence of microaggressions, however, consists not just in the *personal* harm that they may cause, but in the *systematic* harm that they perpetuate. The language of microaggressions, I want to suggest, is first and foremost a way of thematizing individual complicity in structural violence. As I showed in the first section, this connection between individual actions and society patterns of harm has been central to the idea of microaggressions since Chester Pierce coined the term in 1970. It is even more central

to contemporary activist discourse. Yet it is entirely absent from the analysis provided by Lukianoff and Haidt. The concern with patterns of behavior and structures, of inequality, in fact, is absent from every critique of microaggressions I have encountered.

By omitting this central dimension of what the language of microaggressions is trying to name, critics not only misrepresent their targets; they also imply that the structural violence that Pierce, Sue, and the student activists are trying to diagnose is a mirage. They are implicitly denying the reality of white supremacy, of rape culture, of nationalism, and so on. By replacing the language of microaggressions (which Pierce intended as a therapeutic concept) with cognitive behavioral therapy, Lukianoff and Haidt suggest that what activists have identified as the subtle operations of racism are little more than tricks of an aggrieved and unhealthy mind. They have no concept of structural violence, and no sense of how such a thing might operate.

MICROAGGRESSIONS IN LIGHT OF STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE

The idea of structural violence (and the closely related theological idea of structural sin) is well-established in academic ethics by now, even if we do not always invoke it with much precision. One classic formulation comes from Johan Galtung—a Norwegian sociologist who helped to found the interdisciplinary field of peace and conflict studies—in his 1969 article “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research.”³⁹ Structural violence, Galtung argues, is *indirect* violence. It is violence without an agent. Instead of being perpetrated by one person against another—which he calls direct or personal violence—structural violence is mediated through laws, through resource distribution, through power imbalances, through cultural norms, and so on. “If people are starving when this is objectively avoidable,” he writes, “then violence is committed, regardless of whether there is a clear subject-action-object relation.”⁴⁰

I hold to Galtung’s explanation with only one clarification: the harm under consideration must not only be humanly avoidable, but also *humanly produced*. We can imagine, for example, that two nearby coastal towns are hit by a big storm. The storm wipes out the food supply for one, and some of its population begin to starve. The other town is relatively unaffected. I would want to argue that the town that has enough food has a moral obligation to help the town that does not. But if they do not, I would not want to call their failure “violence,” even though the starvation that follows is “objectively avoidable.” Not every injustice is a case of violence. The town that has food did not *cause* the other town to starve; they did not *violate* their neighbors.⁴¹ If, however, the town without much food organizes itself in such a way that a particular part of the population monopolizes what remains of the supply, leaving the others to starve more quickly, then we have an instance of structural violence.

One of the challenges with structural violence is that, unlike direct violence, it can be very hard to see. Direct violence, Galtung explains, is an event. It announces itself loudly and disrupts the usual flow of things. Structural violence, however, *is* the usual flow of things. It appears as natural and normal.⁴² It enlists the language of the society it marks to rationalize, justify, and mask itself—a process Galtung refers to in a later essay as “cultural violence.”⁴³ And as Cynthia Moe-Lobeda notes, structural violence is especially hard to see for those who benefit from it.⁴⁴

Structural violence can take a wide variety of forms. It can exist at any level of organization: a family

that denies daughters the opportunities offered to sons, a business that makes it impossible for an employee to report cases of harassment, a criminal justice system that disproportionately penalizes certain crimes, an intergovernmental body that imposes unequal economic burdens on different members. And it can be mediated in any number of different ways: written laws, economic incentives, city planning, cultural norms. There is no single template for how structural violence works. We can begin to recognize and name structural violence as such only by noticing *patterns of harm* that persist over time, and noticing that they are humanly produced, unjust, and avoidable. We have to work to understand how those patterns are constructed and maintained. We have to work to understand the intersecting human processes,⁴⁵ often complicated and subtle and cloaked in benevolent rhetoric, that sustain those patterns.

One of the forms that structural violence takes is *oppression*. Oppression, according to the definition of philosopher Marilyn Frye, is “a system of interrelated barriers and forces which reduce, immobilize, and mold people who belong to a certain group, and effect their subordination to another group.”⁴⁶ When people in a given society are systematically classified as “white” or “black,” for example, and expected to behave in recognizably white or black ways, and receive certain advantages and disadvantages because they are classified in one way rather than another (whether *de iure* or *de facto*), we are dealing with a case of oppression. Oppression thus understood is clearly a case of structural violence, because it names a set of human processes that construct and perpetuate patterns of harm.

I am appealing to the definitions of structural violence and of oppression that I have found most useful; other ethicists might prefer to determine these concepts in a different way. To name one example: practical theologian Cody Sanders has broached the same issue in the language of Judith Butler, suggesting that our patterns of speech are themselves partially constitutive of a person’s sense of self and relation to others.⁴⁷ But the general idea—that violence is sometimes mediated through social structures (whether material or linguistic), and that one example of such violence is the systematic subjection of one social group to another—is part of a broad consensus. Understanding these ideas, I want to suggest, is crucial to understanding why microaggressions are legitimately considered a kind of violence.

In the first section, I argued that the connection between individual actions and social patterns was fundamental to the idea of microaggressions as it has developed since 1970. Now, in light of this wider background, I want to suggest that we make that connection an explicit part of the definition: microaggressions should be understood as *the patterns of personal interaction that perpetuate oppression*.

To identify any kind of structural violence *as violence*, we have to understand the human processes that create, perpetuate, and mask it. That takes hard analytical work. Once we have noticed a pattern of harm, we have to think about what caused that pattern to emerge and what causes it to persist.

The causes that create and sustain patterns of harm will be of various kinds. There might be laws in place that enable violence. Resources might be distributed in such a way that makes it difficult to seek redress. Deep-seated philosophical or theological commitments might make the harm appear inevitable or deserved. But among the causes we will invariably find concrete actions of individual human beings. Structures of violence cannot operate without our routine participation.

Marilyn Frye’s analysis of oppression, particularly in the context of sexism, helps us notice one particular sort of individual action that is required to sustain the wider structure. Sexism, she says, is not

in the first instance a matter of making too much of gender, or of thinking bad thoughts about women, or even of acting on those bad thoughts in harmful ways. Sexism is in the first instance a matter of the *systematically interrelated habits of interaction* by which we separate human beings into two groups (men and women) and subordinate one to the other.

Most of these habits are not brazenly demeaning; they are minor and mundane. We distinguish between men and women in the greetings we use, the nicknames we give, the tone of voice we adopt when addressing someone—and much more obviously in the haircuts, the clothing, the demeanor we expect and demand from each other. But we make these distinctions obsessively. “Elaborate, systematic, ubiquitous and redundant marking of a distinction between two sexes of humans and most animals,” Frye writes, “is customary and obligatory.”⁴⁸ In isolation, many of these habits seem innocuous, and in isolation they probably are.

But they do not exist in isolation. Instead, when we look closely at the particular forms these habits take, we can see that they systematically *press* those we have classified as women into a subordinate role. It remains the case, as Frye says, that being marked as a man tends to accrue to one’s benefit (in terms of physical safety, expectation of competence, and so on) while being marked as a woman tends to be a liability, if not a form of outright harm. Even “the details of sex-announcing behaviors...contribute to the reduction of women and the elevation of men”⁴⁹—men offering a firm handshake to other men, for example, but not to women. We live in a culture that has learned to recognize many of these habits as problematic, and that in least in some quarters is working hard to fashion new habits. But they have not gone away, and on Frye’s account, they are far more important than we realize to the reproduction of gender injustices further up the structural ladder.

The parallels between Frye’s analysis of sex-marking and Pierce’s analysis of racial microaggressions are fairly obvious. Both are naming and describing the patterns of interpersonal interaction that underwrite the organization of society into superiors and subordinates. Frye does not appeal to the language of violence, and Pierce does not appeal to the language of oppression, but the idea of structural violence helps us connect the two. “Structural violence” is simply a more precise way of naming what Pierce calls “macroaggressions.” And Frye’s understanding of oppression is a particular kind of macroaggression, a kind of structural violence.

Structural violence taken in the abstract is difficult to see because many of its causes are not actions that we take, but features of the built environment that shape and direct the actions we take. But the built environment requires upkeep. Identifying the actions that maintain those systems help to make structural violence concretely visible. Those individual actions are both the symptoms and the causes of structural violence. It is not simply by analogy or exaggeration that we call those individual actions violent; we call them violent because they are constitutive elements of a violent structure. That is why microaggressions are rightly considered a form of violence.

If microaggressions are taken to refer to any hurtful comment or action whatsoever, where the only measure of harm is a person’s subjective reaction, then I agree with critics that the term is an exaggeration. Not every insult (“you’re stupid”) is a microaggression. Not every *group* insult (“people like you are all stupid”) is a microaggression. Not every experience of pain (“you made me feel stupid”) is the result and

proof of a microaggression. If the term is to be useful, it needs to have a more specific and concrete reference. On my definition, it does. I am still willing to give some primacy to subjective reaction in thinking about microaggressions, since the testimony of people directly affected by structural violence has prima facie plausibility. But establishing something as a microaggression requires more than just a claim to have been harmed; it requires real social analysis, with empirical referents and rigorous explanation. So it is not true, at least on my definition, that “unlike conventional acts of aggression, which are visible, there is little evidence of microaggression, other than the subjective reaction to it.”⁵⁰ Microaggressions are something we can argue about. Structural violence is a social-ethical category, not an emotive or perceptual one.

MICROAGGRESSIONS IN LIGHT OF STRUCTURAL SIN

One helpful function of the language of microaggressions, then, is that it helps render structural violence visible *as violence*, as humanly-produced, instead of allowing it to masquerade (as it often does) as “just the way things are.” But another function is equally important: the language of microaggressions gives us a way of talking about *individual responsibility* for structural violence, instead of bowing fatalistically to its otherness. Critics often portray the concept as a tool for evading responsibility—a way of claiming victim status and appealing to some external authority to solve the problem.⁵¹ They miss that it is used too to accept responsibility.⁵² It helps us see at least one way in which my everyday actions contribute to patterns of mass incarceration, rape, or impoverishment.

To talk about responsibility, it is helpful to turn from the language of structural violence to the explicitly theological language of structural *sin*. Calling structural violence a kind of sin is a way of insisting that these patterns of harm, even if they initially appear mysterious and anonymous, are something for which we stand accountable before God. But how exactly to talk about our responsibility for these broad patterns of harm has proven difficult to explain. In *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, for example, John Paul II worried that the language of social sin “leads more or less unconsciously to the watering down and almost the abolition of personal sin, with the recognition only of social guilt and responsibilities.”⁵³ Blame for social sin is “placed not so much on the moral conscience of the individual, but rather on some vague entity or anonymous collectivity such as the situation, the system, society, structures, or institutions.”⁵⁴ In this letter, he even goes so far as to say that “a situation—or likewise an institution, structure, society itself—is not in itself the subject of moral acts. Hence a situation cannot in itself be good or bad.”⁵⁵ Later, though, in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, he tempered his judgment, and admitted that “it is not out of place to speak of ‘structures of sin’” so long as we recognize that it is “rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove.”⁵⁶

John Paul II’s main anxiety is that the language of structural sin not be allowed to undermine our sense of responsibility for whatever evil is under discussion, by shifting the blame to some invisible and intangible other. Certainly, just at the level of basic moral psychology, calling attention to these patterns of harm can sometimes have the effect of paralyzing moral thinking, whether by depersonalizing a problem or making it seem too big to handle.

Galtung himself separates structural violence from individual responsibility, confirming John Paul's worry at the theoretical level, too. As I explained earlier, Galtung defines structural violence as violence without an agent. He adds further that questions of responsibility have been associated within the Jewish and Christian traditions with intention, "whereas the present definition of violence is entirely located on the consequence side."⁵⁷ "Ethical systems directed against *intended* violence," he thinks, "will easily fail to capture structural violence in their nets—and may hence be catching the small fry and letting the big fish loose."⁵⁸ John Paul was not wrong to worry that the language of social or structural sin might be in some ways at odds with the language of responsibility.

But as John Paul himself recognized, it is still crucial to notice that societies are marked by patterns of harm, and that these patterns are often perpetuated more or less independently of direct acts of violence. They are perpetuated, in fact, regardless of the intention or even the virtuousness of that society's members. The violence of US slavocracy, for example, cannot be reduced to the lash; it marked the institution even when white slavers lived out their own benevolent self-perception. The lash was a symptom of a deeper violence embedded in the structure of US society that, at the levels of moral imagination and of social organization, positioned black people as tools to be manipulated by white people. It was a symptom of a more basic set of oppressive habits. The question is how to understand this deeper, structural violence in a way that simultaneously recognizes its relative autonomy from individual actions without relinquishing the ability to talk about our responsibility for those structures.

In his excellent discussion of how to define a "sinful social structure," Daniel Finn gives part of an answer: "only persons are conscious agents," he says, "but social structures have causal impact on the decisions of agents by means of the restrictions, enablements, and incentives which are built into the relationships among social positions that constitute those structures."⁵⁹ That is, one of the most fundamental things that a social structure does is to provide a kind of template for roles and relationships in a given situation. When I walk into a classroom at Florida Southern, I am the professor and those are my students, and there are different things expected of each of us. I did not create those expectations; they precede me and shape both the way I act and the way I am perceived. They do not force me to do anything, of course; I am in principle free to disregard those expectations. But following them is usually rewarded and breaking them is usually punished. Those expectations are not the only causal factor in the way I act, but they are *a* causal factor. We can think of those social structures themselves as sinful when the roles and relationships they encourage are sinful.

Finn's explanation gives us a way of talking about how a social structure itself bears a kind of moral responsibility for violence or injustice without letting individual participants off the hook. Although we are shaped and constrained by sinful social structures, we remain free to resist them—and we should.⁶⁰

But Finn leaves open the question of how those sinful structures came to be in the first place, and how they are perpetuated.⁶¹ That is the question that the language of microaggressions helps to answer. Microaggressions, on my definition, name actions that constitute our active participation in the construction of systems of oppression at the level of our mundane patterns of interpersonal interaction. When I failed to cite Krall in my article about Yoder, even though I did not mean to do it, I contributed to and reinforced a pattern of invisibility essential to the marginalization of women in the academy. I became responsible in

some measure for the system itself

It is certainly important to recognize that no one person can undo the reality of structural violence. As Cynthia Moe-Lobeda says, “social sin transcends individual moral agency”⁶² in the sense that white supremacy, for example, will carry on even if I renounce it. And there are some forms of structural violence—such as that perpetrated by global capitalism against the earth itself—in which some measure of complicity has become almost impossible to avoid. These realities should push us to think more deeply about *collective* moral responsibility than Christian ethics has often done, as well as individual responsibility to engage in collective action. But the reality of social sin should not become license for fatalism or an excuse for denying individual responsibility. The concept of microaggressions thematizes the individual actions that sustain a certain kind of structural violence. Not only does it render structural violence itself more visible; it renders individual responsibility for structural violence more visible.⁶³ It makes structural violence more visible *as sin*.

Tying microaggressions to structural violence helps make it clearer, I hope, why the intention of the agent loses its usual place of prominence in thinking about microaggressions. Although calling out a microaggression does target a particular action and a particular person, it does so only as part of a much wider analysis of a complex set of causes that sustain a pattern of harm in society. It is possible to perpetuate a pattern of harm without knowing it, and despite best intentions to the contrary. The language of microaggressions is just one way of expressing our awareness that sometimes our actions have consequences that we do not intend, or are even opposite of our intention, or belong to complex interactions we do not fully understand. It is a way of insisting that we still have some responsibility for those consequences and those complex interactions. It is a way of confessing just how deep our sinfulness runs.

I recognize that the real worry for many people concerned with the way that idea of microaggressions ignores intention is a practical one: they think it is wrong to punish someone for something they did not mean to do. They do not want to get fired for misspeaking. That is a fair worry. I do not want anyone to get fired for misspeaking, either. We need to remember, first of all, that a moral judgment does not translate directly into a legal or institutional one; there are quite a few more things we would need to consider before we could decide how to punish microaggressions, if they should be punishable at all. Critics too often assume, largely out of fear (only occasionally justified), that admitting that microaggressions are a real form of violence would automatically mean supporting a severe punishment for them. It would take another essay entirely to think through the question of punishment, so let it suffice for now to say that I do think intention remains a critically important category for assessing liability at a legal or institutional level—meaning that punishment should not be the first recourse, or even the second or third recourse, in the case of microaggressions committed in ignorance. At the same time, we already have legal categories for recklessness and non-punitive repertoires for dealing with offenses where intention is in some way compromised, so it is not as if this is a brand new problem.

Important as those questions are, however, they are secondary to the moral ones. And for the Christian tradition, certainly, as important as the category of intention has been, moral responsibility has never been reducible to what agents intend. When Frank Furedi mentions dismissively that the language of

microaggressions reflects a kind of secularized doctrine of original sin,⁶⁴ he makes a more important point than he realizes. The doctrine of original sin is obviously complex and contested, but I think I can safely say that it means at least this: that our participation in sin exceeds our intention to sin, and that we are always already embroiled in the sins of others. As John Paul II puts it in describing the fundamental meaning of social sin, “by virtue of human solidarity which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concrete, each individual’s sin in some way affects others.”⁶⁵ I do not know whether other appeals to microaggressions imply a secularized doctrine of original sin, but I do think the language of microaggressions, with its recognition that our participation in violence and injustice goes beyond what we intend or understand, fits comfortably in a Christian understanding of the moral life.

CONCLUSION

My main concern in this essay has been to define the concept of microaggressions more precisely than we usually do, and to define it in a way that makes clear why it is reasonable to consider microaggressions a form of violence. A microaggression is not, on my definition, any comment or action whatsoever that denigrates another person on the basis of their membership in some group. Still less is a microaggression any comment or action whatsoever that is *perceived* as derogatory. Rather, microaggressions are patterns of interpersonal interaction that are integral to the perpetuation of systems of oppression. Because it is right to call a system of oppression violent, it is also right to call the quotidian actions that constitute that system violent.

It is worth naming two of the most immediate practical consequences of this redefinition, even though I cannot deal with them systematically here. For one, in light of Lukianoff and Haidt’s worry that microaggressions are the products of “emotional reasoning,” it is possible using my definition to have reasonable disagreements about what constitutes a microaggression. Structures of oppression like racism or homophobia are incredibly complex operations, and it requires serious and disciplined work to understand how they are maintained and perpetuated. Naming a particular pattern of interaction as microaggressive requires showing how it contributes to the systematic subjection of a certain class of human beings. In some cases—the use of “gay” as a slur, for example—the connection is fairly obvious. In other cases—like Pierce’s example of white people glomming on to a black speaker after a talk—the case will need to be made more carefully and explicitly. But there does exist a shared frame of reference within which to argue. We ought to encourage more such arguments. The urge to dismiss the language of microaggressions as “political correctness” stems at least in part from a sense that the specific microaggressions being named are purely arbitrary.

A second practical consequence of this redefinition might be that we ought to educate people about microaggressions differently. If macroaggressions precede microaggressions, we should teach the macroaggression first. Instead of developing a massive list of problematic varieties of speech or action (men, don’t tell women to smile more; white people, don’t touch black women’s hair), we should be working to teach people to notice and think critically about the structural reproduction of oppression itself. Although I would expect to see strong family resemblances, microaggressions will not be the same everywhere. The

concrete ways that women are marginalized in my classroom will probably be different from the ways that they are marginalized on the campus as a whole, or in their sorority, or at church, or at home. We need to develop ways to teach people to pay attention to the mechanisms of separation and subjugation at work within their own communities.

The language of microaggressions is still fairly new. It remains to be seen whether the word itself still stick in the public consciousness, or if it is already too reviled to be usable. The fierce response we have seen from across the political spectrum—Jack Halberstam bemoaning “the triggered generation”⁶⁶; William Deresiewicz inveighing against “the religion of political correctness”⁶⁷; Roxane Gay warning students against the illusion of safety⁶⁸—might point to the latter. If so, that is okay. I have no particular attachment to the word, and in fact, as I have argued, its academic articulation has sometimes been individualized and psychologized in a way critics are right to condemn. But I do want to insist that the term points to a profoundly important social-ethical idea. Identifying and uprooting microaggressions is not about coddling students. It is about showing how structural violence reinforces and replicates itself at the level of everyday existence. Microaggressions should be understood and developed as a central dimension of structural sin—the linchpin that connects apparently abstract patterns of harm with individual action and responsibility.

NOTES

1 The only theologians who have written on the topic, to my knowledge, are Cody J. Sanders and Angela Yarber: Cody J. Sanders, “Preaching Messages We Never Intended: LGBTIQ-Based Microaggressions in Classroom and Pulpit,” *Theology & Sexuality* 19, no. 1 (January 2013): 21–35; and Cody J. Sanders and Angela Yarber, *Microaggressions in Ministry: Confronting the Hidden Violence of Everyday Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015). My thanks to one of the anonymous reviews with *Practical Matters* for these helpful references, which I had missed in earlier drafts. I also know of only two recent essays by philosophers. See Emily McTernan, “Microaggressions, Equality, and Social Practices,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no. 3 (September 1, 2018): 261–81; and Regina A Rini, “How to Take Offense: Responding to Microaggression,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 4, no. 3 (September 1, 2018): 332–51.

2 Chester Pierce, “Is Bigotry the Basis of the Medical Problem of the Ghetto?,” in *Medicine in the Ghetto*, ed. John C. Norman (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1969), 308.

3 Chester Pierce, “Offensive Mechanisms,” in *The Black Seventies*, ed. Floyd B. Barbour (Boston: P. Sargent, 1970), 265–66.

4 Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 62–81.

5 Pierce, “Offensive Mechanisms,” 267.

6 Pierce, 268.

7 Pierce, 272–78.

8 For example, Pierce writes: “Our society does not stand in need of new plays or innovative plans as much as it stands in need of eliminating offensive maneuvers from any process of interaction which involves majority and minority citizens” (ibid., 266).

9 Pierce, 265.

10 Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2010), 5.

11 Sue, 24.

12 Some of Sue’s interpreters have done a better job than Sue himself does, on my reading, of maintaining the connection between individual microaggressions and wider patterns of social harm. In their 2015 book, for example, Cody Sanders and Angela Yarber describe microaggressions as a way of “citing” an oppressive social discourse (*Microaggressions in Ministry*, 29–30). In an earlier essay, Sanders draws on Judith Butler to sketch an account of the “constitutive” and “interpellative” power of language to describe how speech-acts can have the power to shape social worlds (“Preaching Messages We Never Intended,” 28–29).

13 Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, chap. 5.

14 Sue, chap. 2.

15 It is impossible to pin down activist usage of this term, which is widespread and varied. For illustrative examples of its use, see “Microaggressions: Power, Privilege, and Everyday Life,” accessed May 31, 2017, <http://www.microaggressions.com>, and “I, Too, Am Harvard,” accessed October 28, 2010, <http://itooamharvard.tumblr.com/>.

16 Jamie Utt, “Intent vs. Impact: Why Your Intentions Don’t Really Matter,” *Everyday Feminism*, July 30, 2013, <https://everydayfeminism.com/2013/07/intentions-dont-really-matter/>.

17 Arthur Chu, Twitter Post, September 15, 2015, 11:57pm, http://twitter.com/arthur_affect/.

18 Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, “The Coddling of the American Mind,” *The Atlantic*, September 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/>; Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (New York City: Penguin Books, 2019).

19 The other major facet of this “movement” that Lukianoff and Haidt treat in this article is the advocacy of trigger warnings—statements from a teacher, verbally or on a syllabus, that students should expect to encounter emotionally difficult material. Although they are often treated together, microaggressions and trigger warnings raise very different ethical questions, in my view, so I will not discuss trigger warnings here. Microaggressions have to do with violence and complicity; trigger warnings have to do with the emotional dynamics of learning.

20 Lukianoff and Haidt, “The Coddling of the American Mind.”

21 Conor Friedersdorf, “Words Which by Their Very Utterance Inflict Injury,” *The Atlantic*, April 19, 2017, <https://>

www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/04/words-which-by-their-very-utterance-inflict-injury/523344/.

22 What makes these arguments red herrings is not that the risks of policing microaggressions are irrelevant, but that somehow these critics never seem to circle back to the harm that the language of microaggressions is trying to call attention to.

23 Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 2019, chap. 2.

24 This is to put their criticism in its mildest form. Sometimes they go much further, suggesting in their original essay, for example, that “the new protectiveness may be teaching students to think pathologically” (Lukianoff and Haidt, “The Coddling of the American Mind,” September 2015).

25 Frank Furedi, *What’s Happened To The University?: A Sociological Exploration of Its Infantilisation* (New York: Routledge, 2016), chap. 1.

26 Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, “Microaggression and Moral Cultures,” *Comparative Sociology* 13, no. 6 (January 30, 2014): 692–726.

27 Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 2019, 44.

28 Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, chap. 5.

29 Sue, 96–106. Sue and others have even argued that microaggressions can be “worse than blatant racism,” because in addition to the offense itself, implicit racist microaggressions burden the victim with the impossible task of trying to discern the motivations or implications of the act. See Tracy Robinson-Wood et al., “Worse Than Blatant Racism: A Phenomenological Investigation of Microaggressions Among Black Women,” *Journal of Ethnographic & Qualitative Research* 9, no. 3 (Spring 2015): 221–36. But for a counterpoint, see Roxanne A. Donovan et al., “Impact of Racial Macro- and Microaggressions in Black Women’s Lives: A Preliminary Analysis,” *Journal of Black Psychology* 39, no. 2 (April 1, 2013): 185–96., who found that while perceived implicit and explicit racism both predicted depressive and anxious symptoms, explicit racism contributed more strongly.

30 Lisa Feldman Barrett, “When Is Speech Violence?,” *The New York Times*, July 14, 2017, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/14/opinion/sunday/when-is-speech-violence.html>.

31 Scott O. Lilienfeld, “Microaggressions: Strong Claims, Inadequate Evidence,” *Perspectives On Psychological Science* 12, no. 1 (January 2017): 159–60.

32 My critique of Lukianoff and Haidt should not be taken as a critique of CBT. I fully expect, in fact, that CBT might be useful for some people struggling under the weight of microaggressions—though my impression (formed from far outside the field) is that there are other therapeutic paradigms, like the resistance theory developed by Tracy Robinson and Janie Victoria Ward, more attuned to the realities of structural oppression. See Tracy Robinson and Janie Victoria Ward, “‘A Belief in Self Far Greater Than Anyone’s Disbelief’: Cultivating Resistance Among African American Female Adolescents,” in *Women, Girls & Psychotherapy*, ed. Carol Gilligan and Annie G. Rogers (New York: Routledge, 2013), 87–104. My critique has to do, rather, with advocating CBT as a *comprehensive* solution to

the realities identified by the language of microaggressions.

33 Xuan Thai and Ted Barrett, “Biden’s Description of Obama Draws Scrutiny,” CNN.com, February 9, 7AD, <http://www.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/01/31/biden.obama/>.

34 “Full Text: Donald Trump Announces a Presidential Bid,” Washington Post, June 16, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/06/16/full-text-donald-trump-announces-a-presidential-bid/>.

35 Kyle Lambelet and Brian Hamilton, “Engage Survivors More, and Yoder Less,” *National Catholic Reporter*, February 29, 2016, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/engage-survivors-more-and-yoder-less>.

36 Ruth Elizabeth Krall, *The Elephant in God’s Living Room, v. 3: The Mennonite Church and John Howard Yoder: Collected Essays*, 2013, <https://ruthkrall.com/downloadable-books/volume-three-the-mennonite-church-and-john-howard-yoder-collected-essays/>.

37 Ruth Elizabeth Krall, “A Considered Response to Lambelet and Hamilton,” *Enduring Space* (blog), March 6, 2016, <https://ruthkrall.com/jhy-biblio/a-considered-response-to-lambelet-and-hamilton/>.

38 This “eye of the beholder” aspect of the definition is central to Scott Lilienfeld’s critique of the microaggression research program. Jonathan Haidt homes in on this part of Sue’s definition, too, in his response to Lilienfeld. See Lilienfeld, “Microaggressions” and; Jonathan Haidt, “The Unwisest Idea on Campus: Commentary on Lilienfeld (2017),” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 12, no. 1 (January 2017): 176–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691616667050>.

39 Johan Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (January 1, 1969): 167–91. In the distinction between structural and personal violence is only one small part of a larger typology that Galtung develops in this essay, but it is the idea that made far and away the biggest impact.

40 Galtung, 171.

41 Kyle Fedler has rightly pressed me to make a clearer distinction between injustice and violence, so that we do not quietly allow the concept of violence to cover any injustice whatsoever. I hope to return to that distinction more fully in the future, but here is the core of my intuition: violence is a species of injustice that names the *concrete and actual violation* of another’s well-being.

42 In different language, Martin Luther King Jr. refers to this distinction between direct and indirect violence in the famous passage from his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” where he chastises the white moderate “who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice” (*Why We Can’t Wait* [Penguin, 2000], 73).

43 Johan Galtung, “Cultural Violence,” *Journal of Peace Research* 27, no. 3 (August 1, 1990): 291–305.

44 Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), chap. 3.

45 Galtung writes that “direct violence is an *event*; structural violence is a *process* with ups and downs” (Galtung,

“Cultural Violence,” 294.).

46 Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Berkeley, Cal.: Crossing Press, 1983), 33.

47 Sanders, “Preaching Messages We Never Intended,” 28–29.

48 Frye, *Politics of Reality*, 19.

49 Frye, 32.

50 Furedi, *What’s Happened To The University?*, 108.

51 A prominent example of this kind of analysis is Campbell and Manning, “Microaggression and Moral Cultures.”

52 Both Cody Sanders and Angela Yarber claim in the introduction to *Microaggressions in Ministry* that the desire to take responsibility for their own microaggressive speech and behavior was a crucial reason for writing the book.

53 John Paul II, “Reconciliatio et Paenitentia,” 1984, para. 16, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html.

54 John Paul II, para. 16.

55 John Paul II, para. 16.

56 John Paul II, “Sollicitudo Rei Socialis,” 1987, para. 36, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html.

57 Galtung, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,” 171–72.

58 Galtung, 172.

59 Daniel K. Finn, “What Is a Sinful Social Structure?,” *Theological Studies* 77, no. 1 (2016): 154.

60 In relying exclusively on Daniel Finn’s work here, I am glossing over many significant questions about personal responsibility for social sin that other ethicists have begun to take up in earnest, and that I hope to take up in more detail myself in the near future. Finn offers just one currently influential way of thinking about social structures and moral agency, derived from the “critical realism” school of sociology. See also Daniel Finn, ed., *Distant Markets, Distant Harms: Economic Complicity And Christian Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); and even more to the point, Daniel K. Finn, ed., *Moral Agency within Social Structures and Culture: A Primer on Critical Realism for Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2020). But other important frameworks also exist, or are being developed. To name just two other important examples from the last decade, Julie Hanlon Rubio has worked to develop Catholic manualist language of “cooperation with evil” in terms of feminist and womanist accounts of resistance to evil, and Ryan Darr has proposed new ways of thinking about the social constitution of sinful agency in conversation with philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre and Stephen Darwall. See Julie Hanlon Rubio, “Moral Cooperation with Evil and Social Ethics,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31, no. 1 (2011): 103–22; Julie Hanlon Rubio, “Cooperation with Evil Reconsidered: The Moral Duty of Resistance,” *Theological Studies* 78,

no. 1 (March 2017): 96–120; and Ryan Darr, “Social Sin and Social Wrongs: Moral Responsibility in a Structurally Disordered World,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 37, no. 2 (2017): 21–37.

61 Finn says, and I agree, that “social structures emerge from the actions of individuals and require the participation of individuals for their continued existence” (Finn, 151). But since he is mainly interested in that essay about the causal power of social structures, he does not specify further what kinds of action give rise to them or maintain them.

62 Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*.

63 Moe-Lobeda puts this point in positive form when she says, “Structural sin, while it cannot be dismantled by individual actions, cannot be dismantled without them” (62).

64 Furedi, *What’s Happened To The University?*, 108.

65 John Paul II, “Reconciliatio et Paenitentia,” para. 16.

66 Jack Halberstam, “You Are Triggering Me!: The Neo-Liberal Rhetoric of Harm, Danger and Trauma,” *Bully Bloggers* (blog), July 5, 2014, <https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2014/07/05/you-are-triggering-me-the-neo-liberal-rhetoric-of-harm-danger-and-trauma/>.

67 William Deresiewicz, “On Political Correctness: Power, Class, and the New Campus Religion,” *The American Scholar*, March 6, 2017, <https://theamericanscholar.org/on-political-correctness/>.

68 Roxane Gay, “The Illusion of Safety/The Safety of Illusion,” in *Bad Feminist: Essays* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), 147–53.