

14

On the Edge of Knowing

Microaggression and Epistemic Uncertainty as a Woman of Color

Saba Fatima

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Did It Really Happen the Way I Saw It?

Something—which was, perhaps, nothing—happened a long time ago. I was a graduate teaching assistant and I had just come out of a meeting with the professor for the class. He went over the final exam with all 12 TAs. Downstairs, in the library, I saw a student from my section preparing for the finals with a friend of hers who was not in my section. The student and I smiled at each other as our eyes met, and I wished her good luck. She said something about freaking out about the exam, and I said to her in an encouraging tone, "I just saw the exam, it's not that bad." At this moment, we were still at a considerable distance from each other. Her friend's eyes lit up and she called over, "Hey! . . . Come here."

I realize that this may be considered a strange incident to recount. I know this, because I can read my words as written. Her friend's statement seems benign on the surface. But in that moment, I felt humiliated.

It was a terse command. I remember my body heating up, possibly with anger or perhaps with embarrassment, I am not certain which. I am medium built, brown, and have visible markers of being an immigrant woman. Perhaps she thought I was a janitor and had inadvertently seen the exam. I have no idea who she mistook me for. Perhaps, she didn't mistake me for anyone. My student hurriedly said, "That's my TA." The friend had a slight change of expression. My slightly embarrassed student then quickly said goodbye to me as I walked away. Since I began working on this project, countless people (all White) have told me that the friend must have mistaken me for another student. This may be possible since at the time I was only one year out of my undergraduate studies. But each time someone offers that explanation, I am reminded of the sense of inarticulation I felt then, of being unable to explain to others (again, mostly Whites) why I felt insulted—all the while, thinking that perhaps I had no reason to feel that way, that perhaps I was being paranoid.

Knowing/Not Knowing

The sorts of experiences I am interested in examining are *not* the ones that can be easily classified as racist—or even those that are clearly *not*. In many cases, I *know* that racism, sexism, or prejudice is at play, for example, when campus police arbitrarily stops and harasses Black faculty or students, or when the dean keeps speaking only to the White male members of your department while barely making eye contact with the sole woman of color.

I am more interested in several different sorts of encounters where women of color (WOC) cannot tell the motivation of the other or where we may experience attributional ambiguity. Attributional ambiguity is when members of groups that experience social stigma find it challenging to determine whether the feedback they receive is based upon their personal deservingness or if it is discrimination against them because of their social identity (Crocker and Major 2003).

I am also interested in experiences where we *know* that racism and sexism were in play, but we either become unsure of that and lose epistemic ground with each passing moment often because no one around us saw it the same way, or because we don't quite know how to quantify in words why it was, indeed, an instance of microaggression. Microaggression is characterized as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, and sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue 2010, 5). I am interested in exploring the social conditions around the epistemic border of thinking of oneself as paranoid and of being secure in one's perception of reality. The sorts of experiences I have in mind are:

- Having criteria that are applied stringently to you ("we are simply following the rules"), while discretionary goodwill is bestowed on your White male counterparts ("this is within the spirit of the rule").
- Being told by your well-meaning, White freshman student how to conduct your classroom, in order to make it more organized, intellectual, or just better, or whatever it is he or she thinks it needs to be.
- Despite having more publications than your White counterpart at the time of being hired or evaluated, still not knowing if you are at the table because you are a "diversity hire."
- The anxiety and unsureness of being a WOC at an academic conference. Often at conferences, WOC experience a heightened sense of anxiety. Being at a conference is not simply about presenting and receiving feedback on one's paper, but also part of the experience is also about talking with people in between sessions, having lunch or dinner with them, and so forth. At such an event, for some of us, our privileges afford us and our scholarship some degree of positive visibility. I am not simply referring to skin color or socioeconomic privilege, though that matters quite a bit, but other things as well, such as our appointment status: being at an R1 institution versus at a small unknown college. And because privilege *does* play a role, it is sometimes very unclear exactly when it is doing its work (Does my work suck, or do other people just carry more privilege around?).

Advice on How to Deal with Paranoia

As a WOC, I am continually aware of the small percentage of non-Whites within my discipline, Philosophy in particular, and how this impacts WOC's ability to speak about their experiences with an expectation of being understood by our White and male counterparts. Sometimes, when undergoing an experience, it is difficult to recognize certain patterns of disrespect motivated by racism, sexism, and xenophobia. The recognition itself can help us in responding more appropriately (emotionally and otherwise). As these sorts of incidents began to pile up through graduate school and my career, I began to notice two competing narratives on how WOCs should process their experiences. Both narratives appealed in varying degrees to my intellect and emotions.

Be Rational

The first set of advice I received appeared quite sensible, mostly because it was an appeal to rationality. White colleagues were often quick to ask me to consider *all* the possibilities of what a particular incident might have meant, gather the evidence, and pick the interpretation that appears most "reasonable." I have been told many times that to assume prejudice in cases of microaggression is irrational. Many suggest that I need to be more open and objective in assessing my experiences.

Of course, one of the ways that one confirms one's own perception of reality and assesses one's own doubtful experiences is through validation by one's peers, and for WOC, those peers are generally

very differently socially located, that is, they are mostly White males. For example, the number of women being awarded Ph.D. in the discipline of Philosophy in the United States has stayed at a steady 27% for the past 30 years. And as of 2011, fewer than 125 out of 11,000 members of the American Philosophical Association are Black, with fewer than 30 Black women (Gines 2011). Thus, the appeal to rationality is often an attempt to reframe the incident to fit the worldview of the majority, such that the person making the appeal can remain blind to uncomfortable truths.

Be Strong

If I hadn't met other philosophers of color, or other feminist philosophers, I would have probably left the discipline of Philosophy long time ago. This is because very few of the visible voices reaffirmed how I experienced my reality. It was not only very alienating, but also often it fueled imposter syndrome, that is, I had a difficult time internalizing my own achievements, and often thought of myself as incompetent to do philosophy even in the face of contrary evidence.

When I did happen to meet senior women and people of color in the field (very seldom from the latter category early in my career), and on the slim chance that we talked about anything deeper than the session we had just attended, I almost always received reaffirmation of how I had felt my reality. But more importantly, other WOC emphasized that when I do think that I am being subjected to microaggression, I should never doubt myself. *Being unintelligible to one own self is not epistemologically sustainable long term, and we as WOC need to be able to retain our knowledges in the face of gaslighting.*

Push to the Edge of Knowing

Early in my career, a student athlete in one of my introductory level classes kept loudly referring to me by my first name, despite having corrected him on a couple of occasions ("Hey Saba, wassup?"). He regularly walked in late and slouched in his chair at the back of the class, with his legs spread as wide as possible, and occasionally passed *almost* inaudible comments to those around him during lecture. When I would ask him to refrain from talking during lecture, he would simply smile nonchalantly and say something to the effect of "just chill" or "no need to get upset, I was just saying . . ." followed by a pseudo-class-related comment. He had also once taken the trouble to explain the sport of basketball to me. He did not just simply explain the rules with the "here, *in America*" clause, but he condescendingly elaborated on unnecessary details of the game. As I look back, I am convinced his disrespect toward me was fueled, in part, because he saw me as an immigrant woman slow to understand American culture and one not worthy of respect given to a professor. At the time, though, I could not see his behavior as such because of the dismissive response I received from others. When I told a few other professors, many said, "We all get disgruntled students."

But he wasn't the sort of disrespectful student that one *just* gets. He was disrespectful to who he saw at my core, a brown immigrant woman. It wasn't a misery contest, but it mattered to me that people could not differentiate between the "regular" disgruntled student and the benignly xenophobic and sexist one. And until I related the experience to a few women at work, *I doubted myself* in how I should see his behavior. Serena Easton (2012) writes about such challenges in "On Being Special," whereby authority of WOC is constantly challenged by students in ways that it is not for our White counterparts. Easton writes,

Only I was forced to pull up statistics, photos, theories, graphs, and charts constantly as evidence that what I was saying was true . . . only I as the sole black member of the cohort had to overprepare every week for discussion sections that often made me feel as if I was being cross-examined on a the witness stand.

(153)

Not only do such experiences of challenges to intellectual authority occur more frequently for WOC (especially earlier in the semester), but they can push WOC to begin to doubt their expertise over their subject matter, instead of seeing the experiences as a function of other people's biases. There may be many reasons why WOC may doubt ourselves, and here I comment on three major ways in which one may be pushed to the edge of knowing.

Emotions and Rationality

Emotions of certain people are not only considered worthless but also, in fact, are *signifiers* of their worthlessness in academia. Alison Jaggar (1989) writes,

When unconventional emotional responses are experienced by [subordinated] isolated individuals, those concerned may be confused, unable to name their experience; they may even doubt their own sanity. Women may come to believe that are “emotionally disturbed” and that the embarrassment or fear aroused in them by male sexual innuendo is prudery or paranoia.

(160)

When my student pointed out my anger at his behavior, it was not to highlight the egregiousness of his own conduct, rather it was meant to show I was not in control of my emotions, that I was irrational or hyper-sensitive. Marilyn Frye (1983) writes in “A Note on Anger” that instead of focusing on the harm that has been committed, the perpetrator turns it into an assessment of character and sanity of the wronged woman in question, part of which is perhaps about what the perpetrator thinks the wronged is entitled to.

This question of assessment of sanity is not the case when a White, able-bodied, male in academia expresses his “justified” anger. In that situation, it is a testament to what a good person he is that he has the capacity to recognize the opportunity for moral outrage. His anger appears civil and righteous. One of my White male peers who observed another class of mine later expressed incense at an overtly racist student, and it was his outrage that served as proof, as verification, to some of my earlier testimony about that student. Furthermore, my colleague's outrage attested not to his irrationality, but rather to the fact that he was a good ally.

Frye (1983) states, “Anger implies a claim to domain” (87) and “By determining, where, with whom, about what and in what circumstances one can get angry and get uptake, one can map others' concepts of who and what one is” (94). WOC do not have the luxury to express their anger at injustices dealt out to them or to other minorities. We are subject to both micro- and macroaggressions, while simultaneously existing in an atmosphere that demands “civility” in the face of unrelenting racism/ sexism/xenophobia and so forth. This demand for civility is often “used to silence those with less social power on the grounds of both how they present what they say, and the topics which they raise” (Reiheld 2013, 74). WOC have to guard our emotions, such that we do not lose credibility in the eyes of those who hold power over our careers. This regulation of emotions is not merely externally enforced, but minorities often self-regulate as well. Kristie Dotson writes about *testimonial smothering*, a coerced truncation of one's testimony. Testimonial smothering occurs when a speaker recognizes her audience as unwilling or unable to give the appropriate uptake to her testimony and, in response, limits and shapes her testimony in order to “insure that the testimony contains only content for which one's audience demonstrates testimonial competence” (Dotson 2011, 244).

One aspect of testimonial smothering is being aware that many of our White colleagues are too keen to police the tone of our speech and to reinforce their bias of our irrational nature, while being blind to the harm that elicits those emotions in the first place in WOC. This is especially true when the harm is difficult to quantify, as in the case of microaggression. Jeanine

Schroer (2015) writes about the shift toward quantifying, what she calls, “the ‘feely’ aspects of living in raced (and other stigmatized) bodies” (91). This particular move highlights how raced bodies are heard and believed. She compares the reception of stereotype research and microaggression research. Because stereotype research can be quantified by “objective” scientific studies, it has now been deemed credible. On the other hand, uptake of research on microaggression relies on how credible target audience finds the testimony of people of color. That is to say, for WOC, our emotions are not credible indicators of actual harm without independent verification. Here, I claim that if the only way that a woman of color’s testimony is given any uptake is if dominant members of academia verify it, then we have *already discounted the epistemic credibility* of the speaker, regardless of how much of an ally one thinks of themselves to be.

One of the concerns that Schroer highlights is how “objective” verification of harm discounts the humanity of minorities. She writes,

The focus on quantifying the harm, ignores the significance of expressing the hurt. . . . It testifies to the central import of interpreting and experiencing one’s life, including the pain, through sharing it with others, not to *prove* your injury, but instead to demonstrate your humanity.

(104–105, emphasis mine)

Schroer’s point about expressing pain as a testament of our humanity really struck me at the core of partly why we relate our experience of microaggression to other WOC. When we hear about the experiences of other WOC, we empathize because we can relate to each other’s challenges. But there are many dominant members who have not had similar encounters. And so any emotions that our specific WOC bodies exhibit is seen not as a testament of our humanity but as primal and animalistic, devoid of reason that is specific to humans.

Heterogeneity of the Nature of Discrimination

I have often wondered where I belong in the academic circles. Who are my own people? Who can I vent to with an expectation that not only will they validate my experience but also feel my pain as their own, because they see me as their own? And a more painful thought is: what are some of the barriers that *do not allow me* to see the humanity in others?

When I related the incident to other WOC about my student’s friend who had called me over in the library, I had an almost instant recognition of a pattern of disrespect on their part that is unique to WOC. In the case of the student athlete, Americans (WOC or not) had a harder time seeing my reality than international faculty. “Here, in America” is almost always a code for asserting immigrants’ status as perpetual outsiders who can never understand American culture. As WOC, our experiences are far from homogenous. African Americans, Latinas, Native Americans, Asian Americans, international faculty from Africa, South America, and Asia—we all have experiences unique to our social location, and certain sorts of experiences are more easily recognizable to those closer to our social locations.

Research shows that the nature of discrimination and macroaggression varies across different racial and ethnic groups experiences (cf. Solorzano and Yosso 2000; Szalacha et al. 2003; Araújo and Borrell 2006). According to one study, “Latino/ Hispanics and Black groups reported high levels of *Assumptions of Inferiority* microaggressions. . . . The opposite, however, [was] true for Asians.” On the other hand, “Asian and Latino/Hispanic participants endorsed higher rates of experiences of *Exoticization and Assumptions of Similarity* than Blacks” (Forrest-Bank and Jenson 2015, 156–157). The authors note, “Important differences in microaggression experiences among racial and ethnic groups found in the current study suggest that interventions need to be adapted to meet the needs of young people from different backgrounds” (158).

While my immigrant body may be disrespected, it happens in ways that is very different from the discrimination attached to Black bodies. It is dangerous for me to assume that simply because I am a WOC and that I am at some axis of discrimination myself, that I can now cast judgment on WOC's experiences situated *differently* from myself. Certainly, differently situated WOC are more likely to understand each other's experiences, but if we are not careful, we can dismiss WOC testimony with far more authority and in much more damaging ways than our White counterparts. Audre Lorde (1984) writes,

Anger is loaded with information and energy. . . . The woman of Color who is not Black and who charges me with rendering her invisible by assuming that her struggles with racism are identical with my own has something to tell me that I had better learn from, lest we both waste ourselves fighting the truths between us. . . . And yes, it is very difficult to stand still and to listen to another woman's voice delineate an agony I do not share, or one to which I myself have contributed.

(127–128)

High Frequency of Microaggression

While it was the only time that a student had explained basketball to me, it was definitely not the first time a student or colleague had explained rudimentary things about American culture without being asked to do so. In fact, it has happened so many times, that I have now stopped expressing my negative views about American football, gun culture, or the “infallible” founding fathers, lest someone engages in ways to remind me of my outsider status. In fact, it is precisely because it has happened so many times that I can recognize it from a mile away. Each incident on its own, though, is difficult to explain to others differently situated.

Because of their “micro” nature, some have characterized microaggression as a case of minorities yet again being too sensitive to even the slightest of slights. This characterization furthers the feeling of paranoia, since we begin to question ourselves about becoming overly sensitive, especially if no one else recognizes the slights as insults.

Regina Rini (2015) wrote an insightful response to a widely circulated article on microaggression by Campbell and Manning (2014), in which Rini highlights how the recognition of microaggression is symbolic of the times we live in, where minority voices can be heard. So it is not that minorities have become too sensitive or steeped in victimhood as Campbell and Manning claim—but rather we are able to connect and hear other similar minority narratives. We feel *safer* to crowdsource our experiences and express solidarity with each other.

But as Rini and others note, in acts of microaggression, the damage of the singular act is very hard to explain. On its own, it often may not appear harmful. However, it fits into and perpetuates a larger framework of systemic racism. So, it is not any single act, but rather a lifelong accumulation of indignant experiences that begin to shape the marginalized experience.

One of the common responses to hearing someone tell of an incidence of microaggression is an attempt to offer either alternate explanations of what the listener thinks *actually* happened or an alternate account of the *well-meaning motivations* of the perpetrators. They may offer explanation such as ‘I don’t think he meant it like that,’ or ‘It is very possible that she was actually trying to help you.’ They may also suggest other benign possibilities such as ‘well, I know it is not common that they do this, but they are simply following the letter of the law,’ etc.

If the person from the marginalized social location is unsure about how to process the said microaggression, the listener’s explanation compounds his or her doubt. For most part, these alternate explanations are rooted in the listener’s own biases. Even when the listener knows and understands how implicit bias works and knows about the prevalence of bias, *he or she has a difficult time “seeing” the patterns of systemic institutional racism in individual cases of discrimination.* In

each individual case, the listener attempts to conjure up convoluted “explanations” of individual life choices of the perpetrator and the minority person concerned. The listener is able to rationalize generally because of the following:

1. It makes the listener feel that the system is essentially fair on this particular matter, because if it isn't, it may imply that the listener had an unfair and unearned advantage. That is to say, the listener may be a beneficiary of the very system that is keeping the other person down; thus, it is in the listener's interest to remain in willful ignorance and epistemically blind to the other person's oppression (Pohlhaus 2012; Medina 2013).
2. The listener may honestly believe that the person relaying his or her experience of microaggression has epistemically flawed beliefs. Privileged individuals have the affirmation of everyone around them. They are certain that they see the truth and that the other person has, indeed, become too sensitive and sees racism at play where it does not exist.

Some Final Thoughts

It is not only difficult to explore and explain any one particular incident of microaggression but also almost near impossible. Reconsider the following examples:

- The student who most probably didn't mean anything but whose behavior fell in line with the countless other students who dismiss intellectual authority of WOC academics.
- The tenure committee members who believe themselves to be fairly applying the rules to *everyone* but their discretionary goodwill surfaces only for other White “hardworking folks.”
- The people who advocate diversity in *solely* in abstract terms but let their bias arbitrarily find flaws in individual cases of qualified candidates all in the name of meritocracy or where they compare solely the weakest element of a WOC application to the strongest elements in a White candidate.
- The average disrespectful student who feels slightly more permissive and emboldened when the course is taught by a WOC.

Each of these incidents when examined on its own is hard to explain to those who occupy privileged social locations. The precise nature of microaggression purposely obscures the exploration of the intentionality of perpetrator and the quantification of the harm committed. The act fits neatly into a system that privileges some and validates their reality to themselves and to the rest of us. Thus, reasonable and well-meaning people often cannot see any individual case as symptomatic of the larger pattern of discrimination unless the discrimination is overt and blatant. They evaluate each particular incident of microaggression on its own “merit,” disconnected from how implicit bias functions *within their self* and disassociated from the larger patterns of discrimination.

While incidents of microaggression are hard to articulate to others, we cannot exempt ourselves from the possibility of fallibility when individual cases arise. In light of what has been discussed here, it would be helpful to keep the following in mind:

1. **Understand Experiences as Complex:** It is conscientious on our part to recognize that although we may think that we know what prejudice looks like, the way implicit bias works and how discrimination functions, we may still not be able to understand the experiences of those situated differently from across various axis of oppression.
2. **Don't Offer Alternate Explanations:** When a minority confides in you about a microaggression, especially when it involves a power hierarchy between the minority and the perpetrator, resist your first instinct to cast doubt on their testimony and to deny their sense

of perception. Don't offer an explanation of what you think happened. In that moment, recognize that there might be bias at work within you, and try to stay uncomfortable in that thought.

3. **Think Big:** It is always better to look at the larger structures of racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, xenophobia, and so forth than to figure out the intent of the perpetrator. Try and understand microaggression within a sociohistorical context that connects to cumulative chains of interactions and to larger patterns of discrimination.

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