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# Microaggression and Moral Cultures

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## Abstract

Campus activists and others might refer to slights of one's ethnicity or other cultural characteristics as "microaggressions," and they might use various forums to publicize them. Here we examine this phenomenon by drawing from Donald Black's theories of conflict and from cross-cultural studies of conflict and morality. We argue that this behavior resembles other conflict tactics in which the aggrieved actively seek the support of third parties as well as those that focus on oppression. We identify the social conditions associated with each feature, and we discuss how the rise of these conditions has led to large-scale moral change such as the emergence of a *victimhood culture* that is distinct from the *honor cultures* and *dignity cultures* of the past.

## Keywords

microaggression – social control – morality – honor – dignity – victimhood

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## Introduction

Conflict occurs when someone defines another's behavior as deviant – as immoral or otherwise objectionable. People might object to assaults, robberies, lies, insults, heresy, non-payments of debt, or any number of things, and they might react in a number of ways, from arguing to calling the police to fighting a duel. Drawing from the work of sociologist Donald Black (1998:4), we refer to the handling of conflict as *social control*.<sup>1</sup> Conflict and social control are both ubiquitous and diverse, as the issues that spark grievances and ways of handling them vary enormously across social settings. Here we address changing patterns of conflict in modern societies by focusing on a new species of social control that is increasingly common at American colleges and universities: the publicizing of microaggressions.

*Microaggressions*, as defined by Derald Wing Sue, a counseling psychologist and diversity training specialist, are “the 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). The term dates to the 1970s, but it has become more popular recently, mainly due to the efforts of academics and activists wishing to call attention to what they see as the “subtle ways that racial, ethnic, gender and other stereotypes can play out painfully in an increasingly diverse culture” (Vega 2014). Offhand remarks and questions might be microaggressions, such as, in an example Sue gives, when people ask him where he was born and then are unsatisfied when he tells them Portland. “The underlying message here,” says Sue, “is that I am a perpetual alien in my own country” (quoted in Martin 2014). Here are some other actions identified by Sue or others as microaggressions:

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1 This conception of social control is broad and does not refer only to society- or group-enacted punishment such as law. Since it includes any response to deviant behavior, even behaviors that are themselves deviant might also be social control and can be explained as such. A number of scholars have therefore begun to examine deviant behaviors such as crime (Black 1998: Chapter 2), genocide (Campbell 2009; 2010; 2011; 2013), suicide (Manning 2012; 2014; forthcoming a) forthcoming b), interpersonal violence (Cooney 1998; Jacques and Wright 2011; Phillips 2003), lynching (Senechal de la Roche 1996; 2001), terrorism (Black 2004; Hawdon and Ryan 2009), and employee theft (Tucker 1989) as social control. The publicizing of microaggressions is similarly a form of social control – a reaction to the deviant behavior of others – as well as a form of deviant behavior – a behavior that many others condemn.

- Saying “You are a credit to your race” or “You are so articulate” to an African American (Sue et al. 2008:331).
- Telling an Asian American that he or she speaks English well (Sue et al. 2008:331).
- Clutching one’s purse when an African American walks onto an elevator (Nadal et al. 2013:190).
- Staring at lesbians or gays expressing affection in public (Boysen 2012:123).
- Correcting a student’s use of “Indigenous” in a paper by changing it from upper- to lowercase (Flaherty 2013).

Increasingly, perceived slights such as these are documented on websites that encourage users to submit posts describing their own grievances, many involving purportedly offensive things said by the posters’ co-workers, friends, or family members. For example, at *The Microaggressions Project*, a blog founded by two Columbia University students, one person describes a mother (the poster’s sister) telling her son to “stop crying and acting like a little girl” (*Microaggressions* 2013a). Another tells of a lesbian who says, “I don’t date bisexuals. They’re never faithful” (*Microaggressions* 2013b). The website *Oberlin Microaggressions* likewise encourages submissions from “students who have been marginalized at Oberlin [College].” One anonymous Hispanic student calls attention to a white teammate’s microaggressions, which included using the Spanish word “*futbol*.” “Keep my heritage language out of your mouth,” writes the poster, who vows never to play soccer with whites again (“Futbol, and White People” 2013). Following the example of Oberlin Microaggressions, a growing number of websites are dedicated to documenting offensive conduct at particular educational institutions, including Brown University, Carleton College, Dartmouth College, Harvard University, St. Olaf College, Swarthmore College, and Willamette University in the United States, as well as McGill University in Canada, the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom, and the University of Sydney in Australia.<sup>2</sup>

As these sites have proliferated, so have academic studies, news articles, and opinion pieces about microaggressions (e.g., Boysen 2012; Etzioni 2014; Martin 2014; McCabe 2009; McWhorter 2014; Nadal et al. 2013; Nigatu 2013; 2014; Torres 2014; Vega 2014). The concept has entered into mainstream discourse, though not without controversy. Sociologist and communitarian Amitai Etzioni, for

2 The websites for Harvard, Oxford, and Sydney feature individuals posting photos of themselves holding written messages, most of which address offensive things the poster has heard from others – such as one Australian poster whose sign reads “You’re not like the other aboriginals’” followed by “But you ARE like the other RACISTS!” (*I Too Am Sydney* 2014).

example, has suggested we instead “focus on acts of aggression that are far from micro,” and linguist and political commentator John McWhorter cautions against using the concept in a way that is “just bullying disguised as progressive thought” (Etzioni 2014; McWhorter 2014). The documenting of microaggressions is controversial because it represents an approach to morality that is relatively new to the modern West and is by no means universally shared. Whatever our moral stance, though, it is a phenomenon that the sociology of conflict can help us to better understand.<sup>3</sup>

Here we seek to explain the practice of documenting microaggressions in terms of a general theory of social control. We do so much in the spirit of seventeenth-century Dutch biologist Jan Swammerdam, who once said, “Here I bring you proof of God’s providence in the anatomy of a louse” (quoted in Weber 1958:142). In this case it is the anatomy of microaggression that has broader implications – revealing much about the patterning of moral conflict and about the nature of ongoing moral change within contemporary societies as well as moral differences between societies. As we dissect this phenomenon, then, we first address how it fits into a larger class of conflict tactics in which the aggrieved seek to attract and mobilize the support of third parties. We note that these tactics sometimes involve building a case for action by documenting, exaggerating, or even falsifying offenses. We address the social logic by which such tactics operate and the social conditions likely to produce them – those that encourage aggrieved individuals to rely on third parties to manage their conflicts, but make obtaining third party support problematic. We then turn to the content of the grievances expressed in microaggression complaints and related forms of social control, which focus on inequality and emphasize the dominance of offenders and the oppression of the aggrieved. We argue that the social conditions that promote complaints of oppression and victimization overlap with those that promote case-building attempts to attract third parties. When such social conditions are all present in high degrees, the result is a culture of victimhood in which individuals and groups display high sensitivity to slight, have a tendency to handle conflicts through complaints to third parties, and seek to cultivate an image of being victims who deserve assistance. We contrast the culture of victimhood with cultures of honor and cultures of dignity.

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3 So far nearly all the discourse on microaggressions has been moralistic – either taking part in the documenting of microaggressions or reacting against it. What we offer – a social scientific analysis of the phenomenon – is different. Social science cannot tell us what position to take in the debate about microaggressions (Campbell 2014). What it can do, though, is help us explain the phenomenon and contextualize the debate.

### Dependence on Third Parties

Those who deem someone's conduct deviant or offensive might react in many ways. They could use direct aggression, verbally berating or physically assaulting the offender. They could exercise covert avoidance, quietly cutting off relations with the offender without any confrontation or overt complaint. Or they could conceptualize the problem as a disruption to their relationship and seek only to restore harmony without passing judgment. In any case much of the social control that occurs in day-to-day life involves only the aggrieved and the offender. Microaggression websites are different. As a form of social control, perhaps the most notable feature of microaggression websites is that they publicly air grievances, inviting and encouraging users to broadcast their knowledge of offensive conduct to readers who would be otherwise unaware of the incident. Creating and contributing to such websites thus belongs to a larger class of conflict tactics that seek to attract the attention, sympathy, and intervention of third parties.

#### *Gossip, Protest, and Complaint*

Of the many ways people bring their grievances to the attention of third parties, perhaps the most common is to complain privately to family, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances. This is called *gossip* – “evaluative talk about a person who is not present” (Eder and Enke 1991:494; cf. Black 1995:855, n. 129; Hannerz 1967:36; Merry 1985:275). Gossip is ubiquitous, and as anthropologist Max Gluckman points out, “for a large part of each day, most of us are engaged in gossip” (1963:308). Much gossip involves complaints against particular individuals known to both gossipers, but those with collective grievances (such as political grievances or complaints on behalf of an ethnic group) also commonly seek the attention and sympathy of third parties. One way of doing so is through various types of protest. Rallies, strikes, marches, and even terrorist acts may express grievances and punish adversaries directly, but they may also help communicate information to third parties (Gibbs 1989:332, n. 4; Reiss 2007:2–3). And both individualized and collective conflicts might be brought to the attention of authority figures asked to punish the offender or otherwise handle the case. Small children often bring their complaints to adults, for example, while adults might bring their complaints to the legal system (e.g., Baumgartner 1992). Explaining the rise of microaggression complaints, then, requires that we explain the conditions that lead individuals to bring their problems before third parties. We suggest that the same factors that increase reliance on third parties in general encourage the public documenting of grievances in particular.

### *The Structural Logic of Moral Dependence*

There are several circumstances that make individuals more likely to rely on third parties rather than their own devices. One factor is law. Historically, the growth of law has undermined various forms of unilateral social control. In times and places with little or no legal authority to protect property, settle disputes, or punish wrongdoers, people frequently handle such problems on their own through violent aggression – a phenomenon that students of law and social control refer to as “self-help” because it involves the aggrieved taking matters into their own hands rather than relying on the legal system (Black 1998). One of the most dramatic manifestations of self-help is vengeance killing, which may spark a cycle of retaliatory killings in the form of a blood feud. Violent self-help of this kind is more common in stateless societies, such as those in which autonomous bands or homesteads interact without any overarching authority system (Erickson and Horton 1992; Cooney 1998:50–56). The growth or external imposition of state authority involves a “pacification process” in which the ruling authorities come to increasingly forbid and supplant violent self-help, at least in its most extreme manifestations (Cooney 2009:7–10; Pinker 2011:31–36). In medieval England, as in other locations, the growing state began by outlawing private vengeance, using the threat of punishment to compel aggrieved individuals or families to handle offenses – including homicide – through peaceful negotiation and compensation. But gradually the state moved beyond encouraging and ratifying such private justice to handling all sufficiently severe cases itself, deciding the right and wrong of the issue and levying punishments and other sanctions (Cooney 2009:8–9). Thus the state increasingly dominated the handling of conflict, and the growth of law led to a decline in violent self-help throughout most segments of state-dominated societies, helping produce a historical decline in homicide and other severe violence (Black 1998; Cooney 1998:45–66; Pinker 2011:59–116).

The growth of legal authority, and the increasing involvement of law in everyday disputes, does not necessarily end with the elimination of feuding. Legal authority can potentially supplant other mechanisms of social control, from milder forms of self-help to negotiated compromise and mediation. Insofar as people come to depend on law alone, their willingness or ability to use other forms of conflict management may atrophy, leading to a condition Black refers to as “legal overdependency” (1989:77). The highest degrees of legal overdependency occur in totalitarian societies, where “the rank and file members of society . . . can and do use the state freely for the settlement of private disputes” (Gross 1984:67). The result is that “to bring a grievance to anyone but a government official can be dangerous, particularly if it is expressed directly to the offender, which might lead to a retaliatory complaint. . . . Hence, the

choice is often between bringing an official complaint and doing nothing at all" (Black 1989:79). But lesser degrees can still occur in democratic societies, where state officials may effectively confiscate conflicts from those who would otherwise handle them privately (Christie 1977).

People may also become dependent on other kinds of authorities. Resorting to police and courts is only a special case of relying on a social superior to settle the conflict (Black and Baumgartner 1983). Settlement is generally more likely when disputants have access to a third party who is at least somewhat higher in status, and people everywhere bring their complaints to social superiors, from tribal villagers who bring their case before a respected elder to modern employees who report a coworker's misconduct to their supervisor (Baumgartner 1984; Black 1998:85–88). Similarly, a college or university administration might handle conflicts among students and faculty. Educational institutions not only police such academic misconduct as cheating and plagiarism, but increasingly enact codes forbidding interpersonal offenses, such as Fordham University's ban on using email to insult another person, or New York University's prohibition of mocking others (Lukianoff 2012:41). When two students at Dartmouth College were insulted by a third student who "verbally harassed them by speaking gibberish that was perceived to be mock Chinese," they reacted not by confronting the offender but by reporting the incident to the College's Office of Pluralism and Leadership, leading both the school's Department of Safety and Security and its Bias Incident Response Team to launch an investigation into the identity of the offender, who might face such sanctions as a fine, compulsory sensitivity training, or expulsion (Owens 2013). In other social settings, the same offense might have met with an aggressive response, whether a direct complaint to the offender, a retaliatory insult, or physical violence. But in a setting where a powerful organization metes out justice, the aggrieved relied on complaint rather than action. In sum, the availability of social superiors – especially hierarchical superiors such as legal or private administrators – is conducive to reliance on third parties.

But note that reliance on third parties extends beyond reliance on authorities. Even if no authoritative action is taken, gossip and public shaming can be powerful sanctions. And even those who ultimately seek authoritative action might have to mobilize the support of additional third parties to convince authorities to act. Indeed, the core of much modern activism, from protest rallies to leaflet campaigns to publicizing offenses on websites, appears to be concerned with rallying enough public support to convince authorities to act. But why do either authorities or the public need convincing? Why broadcast grievances to a wide audience, and why go through the trouble of documenting a whole series of seemingly unrelated offenses?

### Campaigning for Support

A second notable feature of microaggression websites is that they do not merely call attention to a single offense, but seek to document a series of offenses that, taken together, are more severe than any individual incident. As the term “micro” implies, the slights and insults are acts that many would consider to be only minor offenses and that others might not deem offensive at all. Thus those who support and contribute to these projects state that their aim is to call attention to numerous offenses in order to demonstrate the existence of a larger pattern of inequality. As noted on the *Oberlin Microaggressions* site, for example, its purpose is to show that acts of “racist, heterosexist/homophobic, anti-Semitic, classist, ableists, sexist/cissexist speech etc.” are “not simply isolated incidents, but rather part of structural inequalities” (*Oberlin Microaggressions* 2013). These sites hope to mobilize and sustain support for a moral crusade against such injustice by showing that the injustices are more severe than observers might realize – that posters are not, as some critics charge, merely being oversensitive because, as another microaggression website puts it, the “slow accumulation” of such offenses “during a childhood and over a lifetime is in part what defines a marginalized experience” (Microaggressions Project 2014). The offenses in question are not individual offenses, but a repeated pattern of oppression said to contribute to the marginalization of entire collectivities. Thus these websites publicize grievances, informing third parties of offensive conduct, and they present the grievances as a serious problem affecting large numbers of victims, making the case that the offenses merit a serious response. In this manner the microaggression websites resemble other campaigns to convince reluctant third parties to take sides and take action, from the evidence presented in courts of law to the propaganda of political parties.

Those who seek the assistance of third parties to handle a conflict do not necessarily always go to the trouble of building a case in this manner. In many tribal and village societies, for instance, aggrieved individuals can count on the nearly automatic support of their close kin in any conflict (Black 1998:128–131; Cooney 1998:79).<sup>4</sup> They might have to inform these allies of the conflict, if it is not already known, but they have little or no need of widely publicizing their

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4 Among the foraging !Kung people, for instance, fights between individuals quickly escalate into camp-wide brawls as people rush to intervene on behalf of their closest relatives (Lee 1979:372). In other societies, solidary clusters of male kin are so willing to offer strong support that conflict between families frequently escalates into a blood feud (Cooney 1998:67–89; Senechal de la Roche 2001; Thoden van Velzen and van Wetering 1960).



grievances or building a case by accumulating a list of offensive acts and identifying many separate victims. The conditions that undermine such quick action increase the likelihood that aggrieved individuals will accumulate, shape, and create evidence to bolster their case. Thus to understand why such campaigns occur, as well as why they succeed or fail, one must understand the social conditions that encourage or hamper partisanship.

### *The Structural Logic of Partisanship*

Black's theory of partisanship identifies two conditions that make support from third parties more likely. First, third parties are more likely to act as partisans when they are socially closer to one side of the conflict than to the other, as they take the side of the socially closer disputant (Black 1998:126). They may be relationally closer to, or more intimate with, one side, or they may be culturally closer, meaning they share social characteristics such as religion, ethnicity, or language. Any social tie or social similarity a third party shares with one disputant but not the other increases the chance of partisanship. Second, third parties are more likely to act as partisans when one side of a conflict is higher in status than the other, as they take the side of the higher-status disputant (Black 1998:126). Thus those with grievances against a social superior are less likely to attract strong and uncompromising support, though they potentially have the most to gain from it.

We propose that active campaigns to convince third parties for support – that is, to convince them that the cause is just or the offensive behavior severe – are most likely to arise in a structural location conducive to slow and weak partisanship. Efforts to produce and shape evidence operate most frequently and effectively in conflicts where third parties are willing to take a side, but are not in a social location that makes their support quick or certain.

For example, Black's theory tells us that those pursuing complaints against a social superior are less likely to attract strong support from third parties, even though attracting a sufficient degree of support might be their best chance for success against a more powerful opponent (Black 1998:127; Baumgartner 1984). Thus those who wish to attract such support might go to great lengths to sway public opinion. This could include the accumulating and promulgating of evidence against the adversary – the “consciousness raising” efforts that often occur alongside campaigns of public protest. Like most protest campaigns, microaggression complaints typically have an upward direction, expressing grievances on behalf of a lower-status group (such as African Americans) toward those with higher aggregate status (such as American whites).

But note that these campaigns for support do not necessarily emanate from the lowest reaches of society – that they are not primarily stocked or led by

those who are completely lacking in property, respectability, education, or other forms of social status. Rather, such forms as microaggression complaints and protest demonstrations appear to flourish among the relatively educated and affluent populations of American colleges and universities. The socially down and out are so inferior to third parties that they are unlikely to campaign for their support, just as they are unlikely to receive it. Slaves might occasionally rebel, but they do not protest or document their complaints. For that matter, slave-owners do not engage in consciousness-raising to convince their peers to help put down rebellions or punish runaways. Campaigns for support emerge not where the structure of partisanship favors only strong allies or strong enemies, but somewhere in between, where third parties offer only weak or potential support.

Reliance on authorities encourages such campaigns partly because authoritative settlement occurs in a weakly partisan structure. When social superiors handle a conflict between their subordinates, they usually take on the role of a neutral third party that hears the case and then renders a judgment. But while friendly peacemakers or mediators remain neutral throughout, more authoritative settlement agents – such as the judges in modern criminal courts – eventually declare one side right and the other wrong (Black and Baumgartner 1983; Black 1998:146). Thus Black (1998:139) argues that modern legal settlement is effectively “slow partisanship.” It is a structure in which third parties are distant from both disputants and would tend toward “cold non-partisanship” – nonintervention and indifference (Black 1998:134). But if these parties can be convinced that an adversary is sufficiently offensive, they will intervene in a partisan manner. Thus the presence of such authorities not only deters aggrieved individuals from using aggression or other unilateral forms of social control, but also encourages the use of tactics geared toward attracting attention and winning support.<sup>5</sup>

Another factor that undermines strong partisanship is social atomization – the lesser involvement of people in stable and solidary groups (Senechal de la Roche 2001). Western industrial societies increasingly lack the kind of highly solidary and interdependent kin groups that provide individuals in tribal and traditional settings with an ever-present source of relatively strong partisan

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5 Black predicts that authoritativeness of settlement tends to increase with the superiority of the settlement agent to the alleged deviant (Black 1998:145–149). Thus large, centralized organizations are more likely to apply formal rules, pick sides, and inflict punishments. This applies not only to the modern bureaucratic state, but also to the administrative apparatus of large business corporations or modern colleges and universities.

support. Even stable, non-familial groups – such as fraternal organizations and mutual aid societies – have declined (Putnam 2000). Thus we might expect mass campaigns for public support to increasingly replace action by a core group of die-hard supporters.

These campaigns for support can take many forms besides the public documentation of offenses, and people in weakly partisan structures may sometimes go to much greater lengths to convert potential partisanship into actual support. For example, in many patriarchal societies various factors mitigate the willingness of a woman's kin to act as her partisan during marital disputes. Her social inferiority to her husband, military alliances between the husband and his male in-laws, or a lack of physical proximity to the marital homestead might all reduce their willingness or ability to provide support (Baumgartner 1993). They will still do so if the conflict becomes sufficiently severe, but this may require drastic action on her part, perhaps even attempting or committing suicide. Given her suicide, the relatives who were once reluctant to defend her will demand compensation and perhaps even take vengeance upon her husband. Thus in many patriarchal societies, such as various parts of New Guinea and rural China, local women recognize that self-destructive measures are an effective way of mobilizing partisans who would otherwise be slow to react (Brown 1986; Counts 1980, 1987; Liu 2002; see also Manning forthcoming a). Modern political protestors, campaigning against a superior adversary on behalf of a less powerful collectivity, might likewise turn to self-destructive extremes to convince others to support their cause. Many instances in which activists publicly burn themselves to death are aimed explicitly at attracting the support of third parties (Kim 2008). For example, when Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc committed self-immolation in 1963 to protest the Vietnamese government's oppression of Buddhists, his fellow monks ensured that Western journalists would be present at the event and, as he prepared to light the fire, distributed leaflets written in English that explained the nature of their cause. They thus hoped to sway opinion in the United States so that the U.S. government would withdraw its support of the oppressive regime – and they succeeded (LePoer 1989:61–64; Biggs 2005).

### *Partisanship and Conflict Severity*

If social structure predicts who will take sides in a conflict, why is it possible for campaigns for support to have an effect? And why might tactics such as documenting a list of offenses be effective? Black's more recent theory of conflict tells us that structure alone is not enough to explain how a conflict is handled: The nature of the underlying conflict also matters. Some offenses are more serious than others, and third parties are more likely to intervene in the

case of a more serious offense. This is obvious enough, but it is not obvious what makes some offenses more serious. Black's (2013) theory tells us, though, that social changes cause conflict. Someone's status rises or falls, a relationship begins or ends, or someone accepts or rejects a new idea. All moral offenses, then, involve some social change – a change in intimacy, stratification, or culture – and the greatest offenses involve the greatest changes. Peeping Toms and rapists are both deviant because they increase intimacy, then, but a rapist is more deviant because he increases intimacy more. Concerning partisanship, this means the victims of rape receive more support than the victims of Peeping Toms. That is, third parties are more likely to act as partisans when the offense underlying a conflict is more serious – when it involves a greater social change.

Insults lower the status of the recipient and so are seen as deviant, but they generally result in much smaller losses of status than, say, a major theft, a severe assault, or enslavement. Because the change in status is smaller, the conflict is less severe and is less likely to attract the attention and intervention of third parties. Black notes, however, that social changes can be cumulative, and the severity of the conflict might reflect the cumulative effect of many smaller incidents. Thus a history of thefts and insults is more severe than a single incident. This means that aggrieved individuals can, by accumulating or documenting a variety of grievances, make third parties aware of a larger degree of loss, increasing the apparent severity of the conflict and the likelihood that third parties will intervene.

The degree of social change, and thus the severity of the conflict, also varies with the number of people affected. If a million people suffer a loss in status, it is a greater change than if only one person does. Thus Black's theory helps explain why conflicts over culture are apt to be treated as more severe and to attract partisan support on one or both sides (Black 2011:108, 121). Cultural characteristics are shared with others, so any offense against an ethnicity, language, or religion – blasphemy, ridicule, discrimination, ethnic cleansing, or genocide – is an offense against all who identify with that ethnicity, speak that language, or practice that religion. And so third parties are more likely to act as partisans toward culturally close victims when the underlying conflict involves an attack on the victim's culture. One implication of this is that any offense that can be construed as an offense against a distinct cultural group will attract more third party intervention. This helps explain why slights against widely shared characteristics like ethnicity and religion are more likely to attract attention and interest in the form of websites and other campaigns. And it implies that those who wish to combat offensive behavior can effectively campaign for support by drawing attention to the collective nature of the offense.

Other strategies for swaying third parties have the same core logic: They increase intervention by magnifying the actual or apparent severity of the conflict. While some aggrieved individuals increase the apparent severity by documenting a larger pattern of offense, in other cases the manipulation of information is more extreme: Not content merely to publicize the offensive behavior of their adversaries, the aggrieved might exaggerate its extent or even make it up whole cloth. In interpersonal disputes someone might make a false accusation against an adversary, as when a woman who is spurned by a man falsely accuses him of rape or when someone falsely accuses an ex-spouse of child abuse (Kanin 1994; Faller and DeVoe 1995). Some might frame an interpersonal dispute as being an intercollective one, claiming that an offense was motivated by cultural factors such as race and ethnicity even if it was not.<sup>6</sup> In other cases a real intercollective conflict can breed false accusations. For example, in hate crime hoaxes people falsely claim that someone – apparently a member of the enemy group – has victimized them because of their cultural identity. For example, in 2011 Jonathan Perkins, a law student at the University of Virginia, published a letter to the editor in the law school's student newspaper, *Virginia Law Weekly*, in which he described being the victim of mistreatment by two white police officers. Perkins, who is black, claimed the officers pulled him over as he was walking home to an apartment near campus, saying he “fit the description of someone we're looking for.” They asked for his identification, laughed when he told them he was a law student, frisked and searched him, and then followed him home. “I hope that sharing this experience,” he concluded, “will provide this community with some much needed awareness of the lives that many of their black classmates are forced to lead” (Perkins 2011). Later Perkins acknowledged that “the events in the article did not occur” and that he had made up the story “to bring attention to the topic of police misconduct” (quoted in Jaschik 2011).<sup>7</sup>

In still other cases, activists who campaign for support against injustice might change not the apparent severity of the conflict but its actual severity.

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6 Any conflict that crosses the boundaries between different groups has a greater potential to be framed as an intercollective conflict (Brubaker 2004:16–17, 111; Campbell 2013:471). And so any intercultural conflict, whether the underlying offense was cultural or not, has a greater potential to collectivize.

7 Like microaggression complaints, hate crime hoaxes are common on college campuses, which some see as a breeding ground (Pellegrini 2008:97) or “petri dish” (Zamichow and Silverstein 2004) for this type of behavior (see also Campbell 2014:450, n. 70; Gose 1999; Leo 2000; Parmar 2004; Sanders 1998; “When a Hate Crime Isn’t A Hate Crime” 1998–1999; Wilcox 1996:31).

Suicide, for instance, is a drastic social change that commonly provokes strong reactions, and so by committing suicide an aggrieved individual can quickly escalate the severity of a conflict. In the patriarchal settings discussed above, a woman's kin are unwilling to intervene on her behalf when her husband subjects her to "mere" beatings, but if she kills herself, her loss is a sufficiently large change that they may react much the same way as if her husband had killed her with his own hands. Suicide, whether in a personal or political conflict, can attract the attention and partisanship of third parties because it magnifies the social consequences, and thus the severity, of the conflict. Other varieties of self-destructive protest tactics follow the same principle. Prisoners protesting their living conditions, for example, might mutilate themselves (such as by slashing an Achilles' tendon) to win support for their cause (Baumgartner 1984:330; Beto and Claghorn 1968:25). Or they might go on a "hunger strike," refusing to eat, as hundreds of California inmates did recently to protest being held in solitary confinement (St. John 2013; see also Baumgartner 1984:317).

Though tactics such as hunger strikes, hate crime hoaxes, and protest suicides might seem very different from microaggression websites, we argue that they all share fundamental similarities. Flourishing where social conditions undermine self-help and in conflict structures that breed only latent or weak partisanship, these forms of social control implicitly rely on the relationship between conflict severity and partisanship to attract the attention and sympathy of third parties. Another similarity shared by these behaviors is their concern with a particular kind of grievance: the domination of one social group by another.

### **Domination as Deviance**

A third notable feature of microaggression complaints is that the grievances focus on inequality and oppression – especially inequality and oppression based on cultural characteristics such as gender or ethnicity. Conduct is offensive because it perpetuates or increases the domination of some persons and groups by others. Contemporary readers may take it for granted that the domination of one group by another, or for that matter any substantial kind of intergroup inequality, is an injustice to be condemned and remedied. But people might have grievances about many other kinds of issues. For instance, they might condemn others for vices such as drunkenness, sloth, and gluttony. They might criticize or punish people for illicit sexual acts such as sodomy, incest, or bestiality. And cross-culturally and historically, people might harshly judge and persecute religious, ethnic, and other cultural minorities merely

for being different. Such grievances are largely absent from microaggression complaints, and those who promulgate such complaints would surely consider criticism of cultural minorities and unconventional sexual practices to be examples of the very oppression they seek to expose and eradicate. The phenomenon thus illustrates a particular type of morality that is especially concerned with equality and diversity and sees any act that perpetuates inequality or decreases diversity as a cause for serious moral condemnation.

### *Microaggression as Overstratification*

According to Black (2011), as noted above, changes in stratification, intimacy, and diversity cause conflict. Microaggression complaints are largely about changes in stratification. They document actions said to increase the level of inequality in a social relationship – actions Black refers to as “overstratification.” Overstratification offenses occur whenever anyone rises above or falls below others in status. They include any attempts to bring about such changes, too, such as insults, slights, or any attempt to disparage or dominate another. Such incidents are often deemed offensive, but the seriousness of the offense varies across social settings. Black (2011:139) proposes that *overstratification conflict varies inversely with stratification*. In other words, a morality that privileges equality and condemns oppression is most likely to arise precisely in settings that already have relatively high degrees of equality. In rigidly hierarchical settings or relationships, even subordinates might take dominance and subordination for granted. In some highly patriarchal societies, for example, women as well as men accept the right of a man to beat his wife for misbehavior (Counts 1980; Hindin 2003; Rani, Bonu, and Diop-Sidibe 2004). The higher status of men is largely taken for granted, and even macroaggressions are not necessarily considered deviant. Similar patterns exist in societies with rigid class or caste systems, such as the division between nobles and commoners. Moral codes in such settings emphasize duty, loyalty, and knowing one’s station (Leung and Cohen 2011). Egalitarian hunter-gatherers, however, are quick to censure or ridicule anyone who claims any kind of status superiority, and they will ostracize anyone they deem aggressive or domineering (Boehm 1999).

In modern Western societies, egalitarian ethics have developed alongside actual political and economic equality. As women moved into the workforce in large numbers, became increasingly educated, made inroads into highly paid professions such as law and medicine, and became increasingly prominent in local, state, and national politics, sexism became increasingly deviant. Similarly, the success of the US civil rights movement in dismantling the Southern racial caste system and the increased representation of African Americans in professional and public life has been associated with the

transformation of racism into a highly stigmatized behavior. The taboo has grown so strong that making racist statements, even in private, might jeopardize the careers of celebrities or the assets of businessmen (e.g., Fenno, Christensen, and Rainey 2014; Lynch 2013).

### *Microaggression as Underdiversity*

Microaggression offenses also tend to involve what Black calls “underdiversity” – the rejection of a culture. Large acts of underdiversity include things like genocide or political oppression, while smaller acts include ethnic jokes or insults. The publicizers of microaggressions are concerned with the latter, as well as more subtle, perhaps inadvertent, cultural slights. They do not label all incidents of underdiversity as microaggression, though, but only those that increase stratification by lowering the status of inferiors or equals – in other words, underdiversity combined with overstratification. They are concerned with offenses against minority or otherwise less powerful cultures, not offenses against historically dominant ethnic groups such as whites or historically dominant religious groups such as Christians. Still, the cultural nature of these offenses helps us further specify the context in which they are seen as offensive. Just as overstratification conflict varies inversely with stratification, *underdiversity conflict varies directly with diversity* (Black 2011:139). Attempts to increase stratification, we saw, are more deviant where stratification is at a minimum; likewise, attempts to decrease diversity are more deviant where diversity is at a maximum. In modern Western societies, an ethic of cultural tolerance – and often incompatibly, intolerance of intolerance – has developed in tandem with increasing diversity. Since microaggression offenses normally involve overstratification and underdiversity, intense concern about such offenses occurs at the intersection of the social conditions conducive to the seriousness of each. It is in egalitarian and diverse settings – such as at modern American universities – that equality and diversity are most valued, and it is in these settings that perceived offenses against these values are most deviant.

### **Victimhood as Virtue**

When the victims publicize microaggressions they call attention to what they see as the deviant behavior of the offenders. In doing so they also call attention to their own victimization. Indeed, many ways of attracting the attention and sympathy of third parties emphasize or exacerbate the low status of the aggrieved. People portray themselves as oppressed by the powerful – as damaged, disadvantaged, and needy. This is especially evident with various forms



of self-harm, such as protest suicides and hunger strikes. Other such gestures include the ancient Roman practice of “squalor,” where the aggrieved party would let his hair grow out, wear shabby clothes, and follow his adversary through the streets, and the Indian practice of “sitting dharna,” where he would sit at his adversary’s door (Baumgartner 1984:317–318; Bondurant 1965:118; Lintott 1968:16). But why emphasize one’s victimization?

Certainly the distinction between offender and victim always has moral significance, lowering the offender’s moral status. In the settings such as those that generate microaggression catalogs, though, where offenders are oppressors and victims are the oppressed, it also raises the moral status of the victims. This only increases the incentive to publicize grievances, and it means aggrieved parties are especially likely to highlight their identity as victims, emphasizing their own suffering and innocence. Their adversaries are privileged and blameworthy, but they themselves are pitiable and blameless.<sup>8</sup> To the extent that others take their side, they accept this characterization of the conflict, but their adversaries and *their* partisans might portray the conflict in the opposite terms. This can give rise to what is called “competitive victimhood,” with both sides arguing that it is they and not their adversaries who have suffered the most and are most deserving of help or most justified in retribution (Noor et al. 2012; Sullivan et al. 2012).<sup>9</sup>

But note that the moral status conferred by victimhood varies across social settings and from one conflict to another. In other words, victimhood is not always a virtue. Even those calling attention to their adversaries’ wrongdoing

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8 The moral status conferred by victimhood is evident in how social scientists describe and explain those they view as victims, leading them to engage in a kind of “blame analysis” in which they reject any theories that “blame” designated victims by attributing to them any causal role in their predicament (Felson 1991). They might reject cultural explanations of poverty as blaming the poor, for example. Or they might reject the concept of victim-precipitated violence as way of understanding violence directed toward women, such as violence by men against their wives, even while accepting it as a way of understanding violence toward men, such as violence by women against their husbands (Felson 1991:11–12, 15–16).

9 Competitive victimhood is a kind of moral polarization that increases with the social distance between the disputants (Andrighetto et al. 2012, see also Black 1998:144–156). It also increases with partisanship: For example, respondents who described themselves as victims of Northern Ireland’s “Troubles” were more likely to place the blame for the conflict entirely on the opposing faction rather than assigning blame to both (Brewer and Hayes 2011). Sometimes adversaries in a conflict agree about the victim status of third parties, and in these cases they may each claim or compete for the victims’ support. In debates about U.S. human rights policy toward China in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, for example, both sides viewed Chinese dissidents as having “moral authority” and argued about who accurately represented their position (Chan 2011: Chapter 4).

might wish to downplay how much they are affected by it. They might still portray their adversaries as evil or dangerous, but avoid portraying themselves as weak or oppressed. In warfare, for example, as in many other conflicts, it is common for each side to circulate stories of the other's "atrocities" (Collins 2012:2–10). Atrocity stories are a staple of wartime propaganda, but note that while such stories necessarily acknowledge some degree of victimization, the focus is on the enemy's wrongdoing rather than the nation's weakness or neediness. Rather, state propagandists tend to portray their own side as strong and able to win. For example, during World War II German propagandists saw their primary task as "spreading good news . . . and setting an example of indomitable confidence in final victory" (Bytwerk 2010:100). Thus "public media were understandably cautious in printing information on damage done by Allied bombing" and propagandists rushed to combat exaggerated (or sometimes accurate) accounts of casualties (Bytwerk 2010:108–109). Imperial Japan likewise maintained a policy that "the public was not to be informed of defeats or damage on the Japanese side. Only victories and damage imposed on the Allies were to be announced" (Sasaki 1999:178). They hid defeats and announced victories to captured enemy soldiers, too, attempting to convince them Japan was winning. They even invented "stories of Allied losses and ridiculously implausible Japanese feats," such as on one occasion when they told a group of POWs that Japan's military "had shot Abraham Lincoln and torpedoed Washington D.C." (Hillenbrand 2010:204–205).

Appeals that emphasize the victimhood status of the aggrieved appear to arise in situations where people rely on authorities to handle their conflicts. Even relatively wealthy or powerful litigants might approach the court by presenting themselves as victims in need of assistance against a bullying adversary (see, e.g., Bryen 2013:Chapter 4). Most state propaganda, on the other hand, is not aimed at superiors or equals, but at subordinates. It seeks to inspire not sympathy, but loyalty, fear, and respect. This is also largely true of the communications between states, particularly those of similar size and military power. Warring states have no central authority to which they might appeal to handle their conflict or deter violence, and so they handle their conflicts directly through aggression and negotiation. In this respect states resemble individuals living in settings where legal authority is weak or absent.

### **The Social Structure of Microaggression**

In sum, microaggression catalogs are a form of social control in which the aggrieved collect and publicize accounts of intercollective offenses, making the case that relatively minor slights are part of a larger pattern of injustice

and that those who suffer them are socially marginalized and deserving of sympathy. The phenomenon is sociologically similar to other forms of social control that involve airing grievances to authority figures or the public as a whole, that actively manage social information in a campaign to convince others to intervene, and that emphasize the dominance of the adversary and the victimization of the aggrieved. Insofar as these forms are sociologically similar, they should tend to arise under similar social conditions. These conditions include a social setting with cultural diversity and relatively high levels of equality, though with the presence of strongly superior third parties such as legal officials and organizational administrators. Furthermore, both social superiors and other third parties are in social locations – such as being distant from both disputants – that facilitate only latent or slow partisanship. Under these conditions, individuals are likely to express grievances about oppression, and aggrieved individuals are likely to depend on the aid of third parties, to cast a wide net in their attempt to find supporters, and to campaign for support by emphasizing their own need against a bullying adversary.

Such conditions can be found to a greater or lesser extent in many social settings. But the advent of the microaggression phenomenon suggests that these conditions have increased in recent years, particularly in the social location inhabited by college and university students – a social group that is also prone to protest demonstrations, hate crime hoaxes, and various campaigns to raise awareness of injustice.

Several social trends encourage the growth of these forms of social control, particularly in the United States. Since the rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, racial, sexual, and other forms of intercollective inequality have declined, resulting in a more egalitarian society in which members are much more sensitive to those inequalities that remain. The last few decades have seen the continued growth of legal and administrative authority, including growth in the size and scope of university administrations and in the salaries of top administrators and the creation of specialized agencies of social control, such as offices whose sole purpose to increase “social justice” by combatting racial, ethnic, or other intercollective offenses (Lukianoff 2012:69–73). Social atomization has increased, undermining the solidary networks that once encouraged confrontational modes of social control and provided individuals with strong partisans, while at the same time modern technology has allowed for mass communication to a virtual sea of weak partisans.

This last trend has been especially dramatic during the past decade, with the result that aggrieved individuals can potentially appeal to millions of third parties. In our experience with media services such as Twitter and Facebook, we have noticed that many use these forums to publicly vent grievances and

to solicit sympathetic responses not only from friends but also from distant acquaintances and total strangers. Sometimes such grievances “go viral” as they are spread and endorsed by millions of sympathetic parties. For instance, in reaction to the kidnapping and enslavement of hundreds of Nigerian girls by the Islamist militant group Boko Haram, numerous celebrities, politicians, and private individuals expressed their condemnation of the militants and support for their victims through a series of Twitter posts dubbed the “Bring Back Our Girls” campaign (Mackey 2014). Such Twitter campaigns – sometimes referred to as “hashtag activism” – are effectively episodes of mass gossip in which hundreds, thousands, or perhaps millions of third parties discuss deviant behavior and express support for one side against another. Like gossip in the small town or village, such public complaining may be the sole way of handling the conflict or it might eventually lead to further action against the deviant, such as dismissal by supervisors or investigation by legal authorities. As social media becomes ever more ubiquitous, the ready availability of the court of public opinion may make public disclosure of offenses an increasingly likely course of action.<sup>10</sup> As advertising one’s victimization becomes an increasingly reliable way to attract attention and support, modern conditions may even lead to the emergence of a new moral culture.

### The Evolution of Moral Culture

Different forms of conflict and social control may be more or less prevalent in a given social setting. Sometimes observers will characterize an entire society or segment of society according to which forms of moral life are most prominent – what we might refer to as its “moral culture.” For example, social scientists have long recognized a distinction between societies with a “culture of honor” and those with a “culture of dignity” (Berger 1970; see also Aslani et al. 2012;

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10 The creation of this massive audience of potential partisans is the culmination of a process that has altered the third-party structure of conflicts throughout the past century. For example, the proliferation of print media in the twentieth century allowed those with grievances against the powerful, such as corporations or state agencies, to publicly disclose their wrongdoing in a phenomenon popularly known as “whistle-blowing” (e.g., Westin, Kurtz, and Robbins 1981). The iconic photograph of Buddhist monk Thich Quang Duc’ self-immolation in 1963 was seen by millions around the world, and the continued growth of media can help explain why self-immolation has become an increasingly common tactic of political protest (Biggs 2005).

Ayers 1984:Chapter 1; Cooney 1998:Chapter 5; Leung and Cohen 2011).<sup>11</sup> The moral evolution of modern Western society can be understood as a transition between these two cultures.

### *A Culture of Honor*

Honor is a kind of status attached to physical bravery and the unwillingness to be dominated by anyone. Honor in this sense is a status that depends on the evaluations of others, and members of honor societies are expected to display their bravery by engaging in violent retaliation against those who offend them (Cooney 1998:108–109; Leung and Cohen 2011). Accordingly, those who engage in such violence often say that the opinions of others left them no choice at all. For example, after an exchange of insults between two men in 1830 Greece led to a knife fight, legal officials asked the victorious fighter, Theodoros, why he cut the other man's face. Theodoros said that “no man would call his wife and daughters whores and get away with it. His reputation would not allow it” (Gallant 2000:359). Certain kinds of insults might require violence by the one insulted, as in that case, but it is also true that someone who has insulted another might have to accept a challenge to fight. Alexander Hamilton, killed in a duel by United States Vice President Aaron Burr in 1804, wrote a letter before the duel explaining why he believed he had to accept Burr's challenge. Like Theodoros, he referred to the necessity of protecting his reputation, writing that “the ability to be in [the] future useful . . . would probably be inseparable from a conformity with public prejudice in this particular” (quoted in Seitz 1929:100–101).

In honor cultures, it is one's *reputation* that makes one honorable or not, and one must respond aggressively to insults, aggressions, and challenges or lose honor. Not to fight back is itself a kind of moral failing, such that “in honor cultures, people are shunned or criticized not for exacting vengeance but for failing to do so” (Cooney 1998:110). Honorable people must guard their reputations, so they are highly sensitive to insult, often responding aggressively to what might seem to outsiders as minor slights (Cohen et al. 1996; Cooney 1998:115–119; Leung and Cohen 2011). It might seem that knowing people would respond this way would lead to people to “walk on eggshells” so as to avoid offending others, but this would be a sign of cowardice. So because insulting others helps establish one's reputation for bravery, honorable people are verbally aggressive and quick to insult others (Leung and Cohen 2011). The result

11 It can be misleading to talk about moral cultures if it leads us to gloss over the moral variation within a society, but otherwise it can be a useful simplification. And the prevailing moral ideas often draw in even those who would rather reject them.

is a high frequency of violent conflict as participants in the culture aggressively compete for respect (e.g., Anderson 1999:Chapter 2).

Cultures of honor tend to arise in places where legal authority is weak or nonexistent and where a reputation for toughness is perhaps the only effective deterrent against predation or attack (Cooney 1998:122; Leung and Cohen 2011:510). Because of their belief in the value of personal bravery and capability, people socialized into a culture of honor will often shun reliance on law or any other authority even when it is available, refusing to lower their standing by depending on another to handle their affairs (Cooney 1998:122–129). But historically, as state authority has expanded and reliance on the law has increased, honor culture has given way to something else: a culture of dignity.

### *A Culture of Dignity*

Honor has not disappeared – it is still prevalent throughout the Arab world, and enclaves of honor exist in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other Western nations, including among street gangs and other groups of poor young men. Still, the prevailing culture in the modern West is one whose moral code is nearly the exact opposite of that of an honor culture. Rather than honor, a status based primarily on public opinion, people are said to have dignity, a kind of inherent worth that cannot be alienated by others (Berger 1970; see also Leung and Cohen 2011). Dignity exists independently of what others think, so a culture of dignity is one in which public reputation is less important. Insults might provoke offense, but they no longer have the same importance as a way of establishing or destroying a reputation for bravery. It is even commendable to have “thick skin” that allows one to shrug off slights and even serious insults, and in a dignity-based society parents might teach children some version of “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” – an idea that would be alien in a culture of honor (Leung and Cohen 2011:509). People are to avoid insulting others, too, whether intentionally or not, and in general an ethic of self-restraint prevails (Elias [1939] 1982:230–286).

When intolerable conflicts do arise, dignity cultures prescribe direct but non-violent actions, such as negotiated compromise geared toward solving the problem (Aslani et al. 2012). Failing this, or if the offense is sufficiently severe, people are to go to the police or appeal to the courts. Unlike the honorable, the dignified approve of appeals to third parties and condemn those who “take the law into their own hands.” For offenses like theft, assault, or breach of contract, people in a dignity culture will use law without shame. But in keeping with their ethic of restraint and toleration, it is not necessarily their first resort, and they might condemn many uses of the authorities as frivolous. People might even be expected to tolerate serious but accidental personal injuries.

In “Sander County,” Illinois, for example, legal scholar David M. Engel (1984) found that personal injury litigation was rare and that longtime residents stigmatized those few who did use courts to try to get compensation in such cases. The ideal in dignity cultures is thus to use the courts as quickly, quietly, and rarely as possible.

The growth of law, order, and commerce in the modern world facilitated the rise of the culture of dignity, which largely supplanted the culture of honor among the middle and upper classes of the West. The culture of dignity existed in perhaps its purest form among respectable people in the homogeneous towns of mid-twentieth century America, where the presence of a stable and powerful legal system discouraged the aggressiveness and hostility toward settlement seen in honor cultures, while social closeness – ties of culture and intimacy – encouraged an ethic of toleration or peaceful confrontation. Social relations in late-twentieth century suburbs were often similar, though without the ties of intimacy, and here a variant of dignity culture prevailed, an avoidance culture where toleration is also common but negotiation less so (Baumgartner 1988). But the rise of microaggression complaints suggests a new direction in the evolution of moral culture.

### *A Culture of Victimhood*

Microaggression complaints have characteristics that put them at odds with both honor and dignity cultures. Honorable people are sensitive to insult, and so they would understand that microaggressions, even if unintentional, are severe offenses that demand a serious response. But honor cultures value unilateral aggression and disparage appeals for help. Public complaints that advertise or even exaggerate one's own victimization and need for sympathy would be anathema to a person of honor – tantamount to showing that one had no honor at all.<sup>12</sup> Members of a dignity culture, on the other hand, would see no shame in appealing to third parties, but they would not approve of such appeals for minor and merely verbal offenses. Instead they would likely

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12 Members of honor cultures might call attention to offenses against themselves, but only as a way of pressuring the offender to agree to a violent confrontation. In the antebellum American South, for instance, aggrieved parties might take out advertisements in newspapers calling attention to insults. One such advertisement read, “Sir – I am informed you applied to me on the day of the election the epithet ‘puppy.’ If so, I shall expect that satisfaction which is due from one gentleman to another for such an indignity” (quoted in Williams 1980:22–23). Again, touchiness goes hand in hand with verbal aggression in such settings, and so honorable Southerners might also use newspapers to insult others. In 1809, for instance, the Savannah *Republican* printed this: “I hold Francis H. Welman a Liar, Coward, and Poltroon. John Moorhead” (quoted in Williams 1980:22).

counsel either confronting the offender directly to discuss the issue, or better yet, ignoring the remarks altogether.

A culture of victimhood is one characterized by concern with status and sensitivity to slight combined with a heavy reliance on third parties. People are intolerant of insults, even if unintentional, and react by bringing them to the attention of authorities or to the public at large. Domination is the main form of deviance, and victimization a way of attracting sympathy, so rather than emphasize either their strength or inner worth, the aggrieved emphasize their oppression and social marginalization. This culture shares some characteristics and conditions with the culture of dignity out of which it evolved, and it may even be viewed as a variant of this culture. It emerges in contemporary settings, such as college campuses, that increasingly lack the intimacy and cultural homogeneity that once characterized towns and suburbs, but in which organized authority and public opinion remain as powerful sanctions. Under such conditions complaint to third parties has supplanted both toleration and negotiation. People increasingly demand help from others, and advertise their oppression as evidence that they deserve respect and assistance. Thus we might call this moral culture a culture of victimhood because the moral status of the victim, at its nadir in honor cultures, has risen to new heights.

The culture of victimhood is currently most entrenched on college campuses, where microaggression complaints are most prevalent. Other ways of campaigning for support from third parties and emphasizing one's own oppression – from protest demonstrations to the invented victimization of hate-crime hoaxes – are prevalent in this setting as well. That victimhood culture is so evident among campus activists might lead the reader to believe this is entirely a phenomenon of the political left, and indeed, the narrative of oppression and victimization is especially congenial to the leftist worldview (Haidt 2012:296; Kling 2013; Smith 2003:82). But insofar as they share a social environment, the same conditions that lead the aggrieved to use a tactic against their adversaries encourage their adversaries to use that tactic as well. For instance, hate crime hoaxes do not all come from the left. In 2007, for example, a Princeton University student who belonged to the Anscombe Society, a socially conservative campus group, scratched and bruised his own face before claiming two men in ski caps beat him because of his political views (Hu 2007). Naturally, whenever victimhood (or honor, or anything else) confers status, all sorts of people will want to claim it. As clinical psychologist David J. Ley notes, the response of those labeled as oppressors is frequently to “assert that they are a victim as well.” Thus, “men criticized as sexist for challenging radical feminism defend themselves as victims of reverse sexism, [and] people criticized as being unsympathetic proclaim their own history of victimization”



(Ley 2014). An example of the latter can be seen in an essay in *The Princeton Tory* by student Tal Fortgang, who, responding to the phrase “check your privilege,”<sup>13</sup> which he says “floats around college campuses,” recounts his own family’s many victimizations – a grandfather who did hard labor in Siberia, a grandmother who survived a death march through Poland, and others shot in an open grave (Fortgang 2014). Examples such as these suggest that, at least in some settings, the culture of dignity has given way to a culture of victimhood.

### Conclusions

If it is true that the phenomenon of microaggression complaints heralds a new stage in the evolution of conflict and social control, we should be aware that changing a moral culture also reshapes social life beyond the realm of conflict. Moral ideas orient one’s entire life. In an honor culture, for example, they affect people’s leisure and self-presentation: Ever concerned with appearing brave and strong, the honorable often gamble, drink heavily, and openly boast about their exploits (Cooney 1998:Chapter 5). Contrast these behaviors with the socialization toward restraint found in dignity cultures, which do not value reckless behavior and abhor boasting in most contexts (Elias [1939] 1982:230–286; Pinker 2011:59–116). The emerging victimhood culture appears to share dignity’s disdain for risk, but it does condone calling attention to oneself as long as one is calling attention to one’s own hardships – to weaknesses rather than strengths and to exploitation rather than exploits. For example, students writing personal statements as part of their applications for colleges and graduate schools often write not of their academic achievements but instead – with the encouragement of the universities – about overcoming adversity such as a parent’s job loss or having to shop at thrift stores (Lieber 2014).<sup>14</sup> And in a setting where people increasingly eschew toleration and publicly air complaints to compel official action, personal discomfort looms large in official policy. For example, consider recent calls for “trigger warnings” in college classes or on

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- 13 Just as cowardice is the opposite of honor, “privilege” is the opposite of victimhood. Interestingly, then, admonitions to “check your privilege” are ways of shaming the “privileged” within a victimhood culture, just as cowards might be shamed in an honor culture.
- 14 Gender studies scholar Hugo Schwyzer (2006), in an essay critical of this phenomenon, complains that “too many of my students insist on writing essays that I can only describe as ‘narratives of suffering.’” As he puts it, possibly exaggerating in describing the logic of the students’ letters, “If your parents are immigrants, mention it. If one of your parents drinks, or is in prison, don’t hide it – wallow in it! If you moved around a lot, if you grew up surrounded by drugs or violence – share, share, share!” (Schwyzer 2006).

course syllabuses to forewarn students they are about to be exposed to topics that cause them distress, such as when a guide for faculty at Oberlin College (later withdrawn after faculty complaints) suggested that the novel *Things Fall Apart*, because it takes place in colonial Nigeria, could “trigger students who have experienced racism, colonialism, religious persecution, violence, suicide, and more” (quoted in Medina 2014). Similarly, at Rutgers University an article in the student newspaper suggested that an appropriate trigger warning for *The Great Gatsby* would notify students that it depicted suicide, domestic abuse, and graphic violence (Wythe 2014; see also Jarvie 2014).

Another inevitable consequence of cultural change is conflict – in this case, the clash between competing moral systems. As we noted at the beginning of this article, the practice of publicizing microaggressions has attracted controversy and criticism even from within the academic communities that generate it. So too have various social media campaigns and pushes for trigger warnings (e.g., Schmidt 2014). These controversies extend beyond U.S. universities to any place where these techniques of social control are exported. For instance, in 2012 an American-Japanese columnist published an article in *The Japan Times* complaining that native Japanese frequently subject him to such microaggressions as being surprised by his ability to use chopsticks or speak fluent Japanese (Arudou 2012). The article produced a flood of responses from Americans, Europeans, and Australians who have lived in Japan. Many of these agreed with the author that such microaggressions were a major problem, but others viewed his complaint as a form of deviant behavior in its own right. One disapproving commenter stated that he would “never let [such microaggressions] get to me” (Von Jettmar 2012), while another explains that “When Japanese compliment my chopstick use, I tell them thank you, and then politely let them know that some non-Japanese might not take it as a compliment. . . . I’d say this is much more effective than . . . bitterly complaining . . . to other non-Japanese” (Ben 2012).

What we are seeing in these controversies is the clash between dignity and victimhood, much as in earlier times there was a clash between honor and dignity. Looking at those clashes, we know that when contradictory moral ideals exist alongside one another people may be unsure how to act, not confident of whether others will praise or condemn them. Believing his public reputation would otherwise suffer, Alexander Hamilton felt compelled to fight a duel even though he wrote that his “moral and religious principles are strongly opposed to the practice of dueling” (quoted in Seitz 1929:98). Yet after Hamilton was killed the public vilified his opponent Aaron Burr as a murderer and denounced the practice of dueling – certainly not the reaction either man would have expected. Today among the poor in inner cities and in other environments where honor lives on, conflict and confusion about honor and

dignity continue. Outsiders who enter such settings might misunderstand the local standards of provocation to their own detriment, while insiders who seek success in mainstream society might find their reaction to slights viewed as a sign of immaturity and low self-control.<sup>15</sup> Interactions between honor-oriented Middle Easterners and dignity-oriented Westerners often run afoul of these differences as well (Aslani et al. 2011). At universities and many other environments within modern America and, increasingly, other Western nations, the clash between dignity and victimhood engenders a similar kind of moral confusion: One person's standard provokes another's grievance, acts of social control themselves are treated as deviant, and unintentional offenses abound.

And the conflict will continue. As it does each side will make its case, attracting supporters and winning or losing various battles. But remember that the moral concepts each side invokes are not free-floating ideas; they are reflections of social organization. Microaggression complaints and other specimens of victimhood occur in atomized and diverse settings that are fairly egalitarian except for the presence of strong and stable authority. In these settings behaviors that jeopardize equality or demean minority cultures are rare and those that occur mostly minor, but in this context even minor offenses – or perceived offenses – cause much anguish. And while the authorities and others might be sympathetic, their support is not automatic. Add to this mix modern communication technologies that make it easy to publicize grievances, and the result, as we have seen, is the rise of a victimhood culture. This culture arose because of the rise of social conditions conducive to it, and if it prevails it will be because those conditions have prevailed.

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15 In these settings, individuals who can successfully "code-switch" between moral systems can achieve success both on the streets and in mainstream society (Anderson 1999: 93–96). And it might be the case that the ability to code-switch between dignity and victimhood will become increasingly important to the success of university students.

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