

Nonverbal Marginalization¹

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“Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover. At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. **He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see.**”

– Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

Abstract: The nonverbal cues that accompany speech (for example, facial expressions, gestures, and eye gaze) can be as communicatively significant as the content of the speech itself. In this paper, I identify what I argue is a very common — but philosophically unexamined — phenomenon: our tendency to allocate nonverbal cues sensitive to conversational participants’ levels of respective social power such that people with more power receive comparatively more positive and affirming nonverbal cues than people with less power. I call this ‘nonverbal marginalization’ and argue that it subtly reflects and reinforces harmful social biases. In sections one and two, I introduce and empirically situate nonverbal marginalization, and in section three I argue that we can understand the harms it creates through the lens of epistemic injustice. I conclude by demonstrating how nonverbal marginalization can shed novel light on two significant bodies of literature from social psychology: imposter syndrome and performance gaps between social groups.

Key words: nonverbal communication; epistemic injustice; implicit bias; cognitive architecture; imposter syndrome

1. Introducing Nonverbal Marginalization

Contemporary philosophy, especially philosophy of language and epistemology, has undergone an observable social turn. Much of this work concerns how social and political biases are communicated by different types of speech (e.g., slurs, dog whistles, hate speech, testimonial

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injustice, silencing, and propaganda).² These literatures have almost exclusively focused on *verbal* communication as a locus of prejudice — investigating what the speaker says and how to interpret the social/political content of their speech. However, recent developments within psychology, neuroscience, and linguistics emphasize the importance of *nonverbal* communication, which includes cues like facial expression, body posture, gesturing, and parts of speech not related to content (including tone and pitch). In this paper, I'll argue that nonverbal communication is worthy of serious philosophical study and is importantly connected to issues in the philosophy of cognitive science, social philosophy, and philosophy of language. I'll be evaluating social dimensions of nonverbal communication, arguing that patterns of nonverbal behaviors can reflect and reinforce social biases, thus upholding oppressive power structures.

Consider the two cases, which I'll refer back to at various points throughout.

Technology Company: Mark and Ann, who work for a technology firm, schedule an important meeting with an outside consultant named David. During the meeting Ann notices that David seems to mostly be looking and gesturing towards Mark. Because of this, Ann feels that her presence in the conversation is being overlooked, which makes her nervous and causes her to stumble over her words. She comes away from the meeting feeling devalued.

Academic Conference: Adam, Roy, and Eric are on a panel at a conference, presenting about a topic they all work on. Adam and Roy are white, and Eric is black. During the panel, Eric notices that both Adam and Roy are mostly looking at each other and not nodding and smiling as much at him. This causes Eric to feel uncomfortable and makes it difficult for him to contribute to the conversation. He also experiences imposter syndrome, which makes him question his place as a black scholar in a white dominated field. As a result of this experience, he feels distracted for the rest of the conference and has difficulty focusing on his writing for a couple days.

To give a thoroughgoing account of the nonverbal dynamics described in the cases above, it will be helpful to sketch out a general model for nonverbal communication (see Fig. 1 below).

² Representative examples include: Jason Stanley *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton University Press, 2015; Luvel Anderson and Ernie Lepore. "Slurring words." *Noûs* 47.1 (2013): 25-48; Christopher Hom "The semantics of racial epithets." *The Journal of Philosophy* 105.8 (2008): 416-440; Jennifer Saul "Dogwhistles, political manipulation, and philosophy of language." *New Work on Speech Acts* 360 (2018): 84; Jennifer Lackey "False Confessions and Testimonial Injustice." *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology* 110 (2020): 43; Quill R. Kukla and Jennifer Lackey. "Situated Knowledge, Purity, and Moral Panic." *Applied Epistemology* (2021): 37-66; José Medina, *The Epistemology of Protest: Silencing, Epistemic Activism, and the Communicative Life of Resistance*. Oxford University Press, 2023; and Jennifer Hornsby and Rae Langton. "Free speech and illocution." *Legal Theory* 4.1 (1998): 21-37.

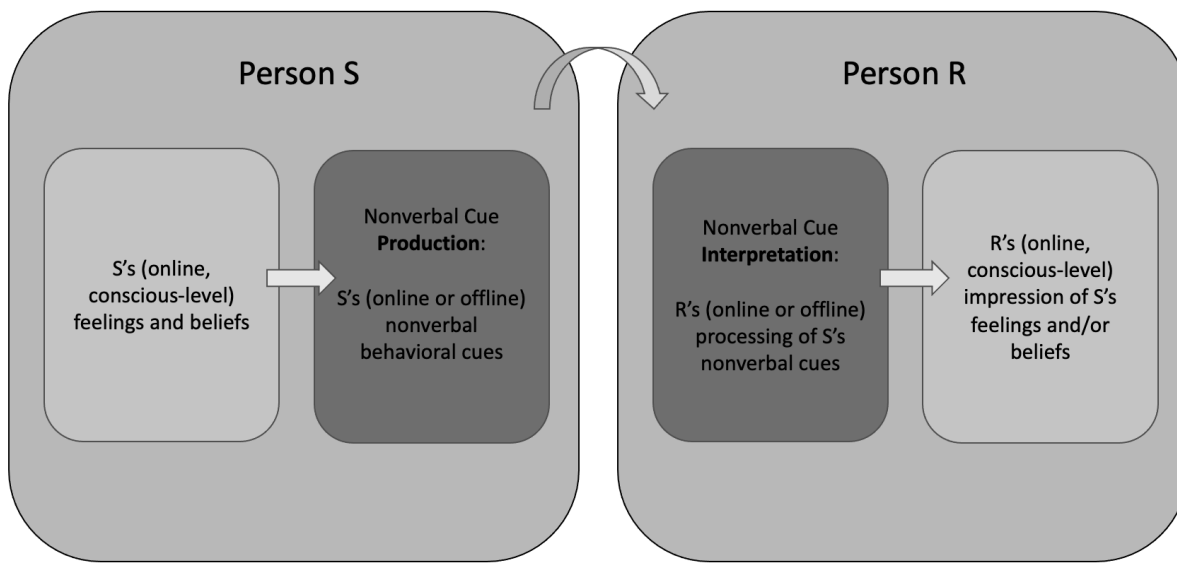


Fig. 1. In the above model Person S is **producing** nonverbal cues, which are being processed and **interpreted** by person R. S's online, conscious-level feelings and beliefs are causing a set of (either online or offline) nonverbal behaviors. R is then (online or offline) interpreting S's nonverbal cues, which causes R to form an online, conscious-level impression of S. Note however that R might not be aware that their impression of S is being formed on the basis of (potentially offline) processing S's nonverbal cues.

The process of nonverbal communication minimally involves two people — one person who produces a nonverbal cue (e.g., nodding) and the other who interprets the cue (e.g., taking the nodding as a sign of agreement). We can name these two roles in nonverbal exchanges: the **producer** of the nonverbal cue and the **interpreter** of the (producer's) nonverbal behavior. Nonverbal communication draws on tacit, implicit knowledge which associates nonverbal cues with specific meanings (e.g., associating nodding with agreement) and is acquired via some process of social learning (e.g., learning to associate nodding with agreement). It's also been argued that the meaning of some nonverbal cues is innate rather than learned.³

Nonverbal communication can be further broken down into two subcategories, characterized by distinct varieties of cognitive processing. Online nonverbal communication is characterized by deliberation and explicit awareness, while offline nonverbal communication is largely automatic, occurring without explicit awareness. We can talk about online and offline processing in the context of both the production and interpretation of nonverbal cues. The online/offline distinction is also best thought of as representing a gradient rather than a strict binary (thus, we can talk about

³ See Jessica L Tracy, Daniel Randles, and Conor M. Steckler. "The nonverbal communication of emotions." *Current opinion in behavioral sciences* 3 (2015): 25-30.

nonverbal communication as being partially online). For reasons that will become clear in a moment, nonverbal communication defaults to being largely (if not entirely) offline.⁴

1.1 Offline Nonverbal Communication

Offline nonverbal communication is the default, which means that most of the time nonverbal communication ‘flies under the radar’. And this is no accident: offline nonverbal communication tends to be more cognitively efficient. To illustrate why, consider the following case.

Breakup: Reggie is listening to his friend Stefan talk through his recent and unexpected breakup. During the exchange, Reggie’s nonverbal behaviors communicate his sympathy, which make Stefan feel supported and reassured — e.g., at points in the conversation Reggie smiles sympathetically, leans in, and touches Stefan’s arm gently. Reggie’s nonverbal cues are subtle, but make Stefan feel supported and cared for in his moment of vulnerability.

We can imagine that the nonverbal communication between Reggie and Stefan could be online or offline (or some mix of the two), depending on how Reggie’s nonverbal cues are produced and interpreted. For example, perhaps Reggie is especially aware of his nonverbal behaviors during the exchange, deliberately choosing nonverbal cues which communicate his support for Stefan (e.g., explicitly thinking ‘I should nod now’ or ‘I should touch his arm now’). If this were the case, then Reggie’s nonverbal behaviors would be online.

However, much nonverbal communication won’t be online in this way because it’s expensive from the perspective of cognitive processing.⁵ For example, if Reggie is explicitly thinking about how to moderate his tone of voice and facial expressions to maximally communicate his concern for Stefan (i.e. engaging in online nonverbal communication), he’ll have fewer online cognitive resources available to listen to what Stefan is saying. Thus, nonverbal communication typically gets relegated to the offline system so that cognitive resources can be freed up for other explicit forms of communication, like Reggie thinking about what Stefan is saying and responding appropriately.

Though offline nonverbal communication is automatic and non-deliberate, it still communicates person-level intentions and conscious mental states. Reggie is supportive of Stefan, so he engages in nonverbal signaling which conveys that support (even if he’s not aware he’s doing this). To some

⁴ As I’m framing the online/offline distinction here, the types of processing can be thought of in Marrian terms as computational-level phenomena. However, there’s reason to think that online and offline nonverbal communication are distinct at algorithmic and implementational levels as well. For example, a growing body of empirical work suggests that there’s a functional and neurological distinction between online and offline nonverbal cue processing (for example, see David B. Givens, *Nonverbal Neurology: How the Brain Encodes and Decodes Wordless Signs, Signals, and Cues*. In: Kostić, A., Chadee, D. (eds) *The Social Psychology of Nonverbal Communication*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) and Ross Buck, and C. Arthur VanLear. "Verbal and nonverbal communication: Distinguishing symbolic, spontaneous, and pseudo-spontaneous nonverbal behavior." *Journal of communication* 52.3 (2002): 522-541).

⁵ Consider, for example, the well-documented constraints on working memory discussed in Aleksandra Gruszka and Edward Necka. "Limitations of working memory capacity: The cognitive and social consequences." *European Management Journal* 35.6 (2017): 776-784 and Nelson Cowan "The magical mystery four: How is working memory capacity limited, and why?." *Current directions in psychological science* 19.1 (2010): 51-57.

degree, we're continually engaging in this type of offline nonverbal communication when we interact with others, producing nonverbal cues which communicate our feelings and intentions without our awareness or explicit deliberation. For example, on a typical morning I engage in a number of short interactions when I come into work (exchanging nods and pleasantries, assuming a cheerful demeanor, smiling, etc.). I'm not explicitly aware of my nonverbal cues in most of these interactions. Nonetheless, I'm engaging in directed offline nonverbal signaling when I spontaneously nod and smile at my coworkers, which serves to communicate my intentions.

Nonverbal cue interpretation tends to get processed offline as well. For example, it's likely that Stefan isn't deliberately focusing on Reggie's nonverbal cues — i.e., he's not consciously attending to Reggie's body language and tone of voice and from this reflectively inferring that Reggie intends to communicate his support. Rather, Stefan is automatically registering and interpreting Reggie's nonverbal cues. This offline processing results in an online output: namely, Stefan *feels* supported by Reggie. However, if interpretation of Reggie's nonverbal cues is happening offline, Stefan won't be aware that this feeling of being supported has in part been caused by his (offline) interpretation of Reggie's nonverbal behaviors.

Therefore, we can think of offline nonverbal communication as aiming to facilitate successful communication while minimizing cognitive effort, explaining why it's the default system.

1.2 Online Nonverbal Communication

Of course, nonverbal communication can be brought online. For example, we can consciously and deliberately use our nonverbal cues to communicate or obscure our feelings and intentions. Consider Stefan's breakup. While being broken up with, Stefan might try to deliberately conceal his surprise and disappointment to 'save face' and make the situation less awkward. This could involve online regulation of his nonverbal cue production, like willing himself not to cry or to look sad. Nonverbal cue interpretation can be brought online as well. Perhaps in an effort to break the news to Stefan kindly, his partner also deliberately attends to Stefan's nonverbal cues to gauge his reaction. This might include noting whether Stefan is averting his gaze or if his voice is shaking.

In online nonverbal communication cases, people will typically have a reason to justify the expenditure of limited processing resources involved in bringing nonverbal communication online. Again, this is because online nonverbal communication on both the production and interpretation side is computationally costly relative to offline nonverbal communication (which is why nonverbal communication largely defaults to being offline). And while it's rarer than the offline variety, online nonverbal cue interpretation has been robustly observed across empirical literatures and seems to

track high stakes and/or emotionally charged situations — for example, cases of suspected deception and romantic and sexual attraction.⁶

Now with a model of both online and offline nonverbal communication on the table, let's turn to the focus of this paper: a phenomenon I call 'nonverbal marginalization'. I want to draw our attention to a few aspects of the Technology Company and Academic Conference cases, which highlight key features of nonverbal marginalization.

First, both cases involve the distribution of *nonverbal* social cues — David *looking* at Mark more than Ann; Adam and Roy *nodding* and *smiling* mostly at each other and not at Eric. But there isn't any verbal hostility being directed at Ann or Eric (e.g., they aren't being *told* they are incompetent).

Second, given everything we've said about the automaticity of nonverbal communication, we should think that the emergent nonverbal dynamics probably go consciously unnoticed by all parties. On both the production and interpretation side, nonverbal communication in nonverbal marginalization cases will mostly be offline. I'll later argue this is why the phenomenon is so harmful and insidious. But why think nonverbal cue production and interpretation is offline in many nonverbal marginalization cases like these?

On the production side, David, Adam, and Roy are likely unaware that they're nonverbally engaging less positively with Ann and Eric. They think they are acting normally in the meeting. However, I'll argue in section 2 that discriminatory patterns of (mostly offline) nonverbal behaviors reflect implicit biases (keep in mind that offline nonverbal behaviors reflect genuine intentions and beliefs). Thus, I'll argue that David, Adam, and Roy's biases are reflected in their nonverbal behaviors, even though those behaviors are offline.

Nonverbal cue interpretation in these cases is also probably happening offline. In other words, Ann and Eric are not aware they are being nonverbally disregarded by their interlocutors (afterall, absent good reason, we typically don't consciously track other people's nonverbal cues). This seems especially likely given the cognitive processing demands of participating in the business meeting and academic conference. Ann and Eric have so many other things to focus on other than their interlocutors patterns of nonverbal behavior (like what's being said in the meeting and on the panel). And if Ann and Eric aren't in a position to consciously pick up on their interlocutors nonverbal cues, they won't be epistemically well positioned to explicitly identify patterns of discriminatory nonverbal behavior.

I'll argue in section 3 that picking up on this type of nonverbal discrimination is especially difficult because, owing to a deficit in the shared hermeneutical resource, victims of nonverbal

⁶ It's empirically debatable about how successful our online tracking of nonverbal behaviors are, however, even though it's something we regularly do in high-stakes situations. See Aldert Vrij, Maria Hartwig, and Pär Anders Granhag. "Reading lies: Nonverbal communication and deception." *Annual review of psychology* 70 (2019): 295-317 for a critical metaanalysis review on lying. For a review of research on non-verbal cues in human courtship, see Monica M. Moore, "Human nonverbal courtship behavior—a brief historical review." *Journal of Sex Research* 47.2-3 (2010): 171-180.

marginalization lack the relevant concept ('nonverbal marginalization') to attach to those experiences. However, I'll claim that Ann and Eric do pick up on their interlocutors' patterns of discriminatory nonverbal behaviors offline, which causes them to form impressions (and perhaps beliefs) about how David, Adam, and Roy assess them — for example, thinking David, Adam, and Roy don't professionally respect them. This affects the way Ann and Eric feel about themselves; being looked at and smiled at less causes them to feel as if they aren't valued within their professional communities.

Third, Ann and Eric's experiences impair their respective performances — Ann stumbles over her words in the meeting and Eric speaks up less on the panel. I'll argue in section 4 that these types of performance impairments reflect discriminatory environments rather than genuine ability deficits. In other words, Ann has the ability to engage in the meeting and Eric has the ability to contribute to the conference panel. However, their colleagues' nonverbally marginalizing behavior prevents them from fully manifesting their professional abilities in these hostile contexts.

Finally, Ann and Eric are harmed by their interlocutors' discriminatory nonverbal behaviors. As I've laid out, their experience of nonverbal marginalization makes them feel uncomfortable and undermines their abilities to manifest their professional competences. But this harm extends beyond discomfort in the moment. For example, Eric's distress causes him to disengage somewhat from the rest of the conference, foregoing valuable networking opportunities. Further, he is less productive following the incident because his experience of nonverbal marginalization triggers his imposter syndrome (as a black person in a white-dominated field). And while a few days of decreased productivity might not seem that significant, I'll argue that people from historically marginalized social groups (e.g., women, people of color, transgender people, and disabled people) experience this type of harm regularly. Thus, we can imagine that the *cumulative* effect of losing a couple days of confidence and productivity is more substantial if this experience occurs often.

These cases are examples of a phenomenon (likely recognizable to many readers), which I'm calling 'nonverbal marginalization':

Nonverbal Marginalization is the behavioral tendency to distribute nonverbal cues in ways that reflect and reinforce contextual power dynamics, such that higher power people receive more positive and affirming nonverbal cues (and fewer negative nonverbal cues) than lower power people.

According to this definition, for a pattern of nonverbal behavior to count as a case of nonverbal marginalization, the behavior needs to display genuine sensitivity to contextual power dynamics. We can cash out this sensitivity to power as follows: for S to nonverbally marginalize R, (1) S must be attending to relevant contextual power dynamics which position R in a (comparatively) lower power status relative to other conversational participants and (2) S's nonverbal behaviors towards R must

reflect those attended-to dynamics.⁷ I'll delve deeper into the cognitive architecture of nonverbal marginalization in the next section, but I want to further clarify two features of nonverbal marginalization as I've defined it here: how the positive and negative valence of nonverbal cues gets determined and which power dynamics are tracked by patterns of nonverbally marginalizing behavior.

1.3 Valence of Nonverbal Cues

The above definition draws upon a notion of valence, making reference to “positive and affirming” and “negative” nonverbal cues. But which nonverbal cues have positive and negative valences and how does this get determined?

I'm intending to avoid being overly committal with regards to the valence question. All the examples of nonverbal marginalization I discuss in this paper involve nonverbal cues that are unambiguously either positive or negative within the specified context. Often cited examples of “positive and affirming” nonverbal cues include smiling, nodding, using affirming gestures, and assuming an open and welcoming body posture while negative nonverbal cues include frowning, brow furrowing, and adopting closed body postures.⁸ As I'll argue in the next section, nonverbal marginalization caused by implicit bias tends to involve unequal distribution of positive and affirming nonverbal cues (e.g., looking and smiling more at high power people at the expense of low power people), while nonverbal marginalization caused by explicit bias tends to involve negative nonverbal cues (e.g., frowning or scowling at low power people).

We still might wonder how valences of nonverbal cues get determined. In many respects this is an open empirical question. However, there's reason to think that the answer likely involves some mixture of biological, contextual, and cultural factors, which affect the meanings and valences associated with nonverbal cues. For example, going back to the 1960s, psychologists have claimed that certain facial expressions and patterns of looking behavior have evolved to communicate certain information.⁹ However, more recent work suggests that features of agents' social and cultural contexts also affect how nonverbal cues are interpreted.¹⁰ For example, while a smile in one social context might be interpreted as happy (e.g., seeing an old friend), in another it could be interpreted

⁷ I take this point to be especially relevant when we consider certain types of neurodivergence, which affect patterns of nonverbal engagement. For example, people on the autism spectrum often have difficulty interpreting and producing nonverbal social cues, see Michael Alexander Pelzl et al. "Reduced impact of nonverbal cues during integration of verbal and nonverbal emotional information in adults with high-functioning autism." *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 13 (2022). However, an autistic person failing to nonverbally engage with someone (even if that person is a member of a historically marginalized group) doesn't constitute genuine nonverbal marginalization because the autistic person's nonverbal behaviors aren't reflecting an attended-to power dynamic.

⁸ For an introduction, see Mark L. Knapp, Judith A. Hall, and Terrence G. Horgan. *Nonverbal communication in human interaction* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2013).

⁹ For facial expressions see David Matsumoto and Bob Willingham. "Spontaneous facial expressions of emotion of congenitally and noncongenitally blind individuals." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 96.1 (2009): 1; for patterns of looking see Dean Pruitt, "Back-channel Communication in the Settlement of Conflict." *International Negotiation* 13.1 (2008): 37-54.

¹⁰ See Lisa Feldman Barrett for a thoroughgoing account of this: "Context reconsidered: Complex signal ensembles, relational meaning, and population thinking in psychological science." *American Psychologist* 77.8 (2022): 894.

as sarcastic (e.g., watching an especially cringe-worthy karaoke performance). Moreover, even within the same type of social context, nonverbal cues can get interpreted in radically different ways, depending on prevailing cultural norms. While standing very close to someone is considered socially inappropriate in many American and European cultural contexts, closer standing distances are often seen as friendly and welcoming in parts of Latin America and the Middle East.¹¹ We can see, then, that nonverbal cue valence is biologically and culturally complex.

1.4 Power Dynamics

Finally, the definition of nonverbal marginalization references power dynamics. But what power dynamics are being tracked? This is something I mostly want to leave open. Theoretically, nonverbal marginalization could track *any* power inequity.

Social features, including social prejudices, determine which power dynamics are reflected in our nonverbal behaviors. I'll mostly focus on prejudicial varieties of nonverbal marginalization, arguing that implicit and explicit biases can, and frequently do, determine the power dynamics we attend to. This means that in many social and professional contexts, peoples' nonverbal behaviors are reflecting their cultural biases in ways that reinforce structural oppressions — e.g., sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, ableism, etc.

However, nonverbal marginalization doesn't only track historical inequities. For example, if you were unpopular in high school, you might remember what it's like to be nonverbally disregarded at social gatherings. At these events perhaps no one explicitly said anything negative to you (or even about you), but you noticed that people tended not to look or smile in your direction. Likewise, junior academics sometimes complain that senior academics nonverbally disregard them at professional gatherings — ignoring or looking past them in exchanges, without being explicitly hostile or dismissive.

While I've mostly chosen to focus on nonverbal marginalization cases where the power dynamic being tracked reflects systemic oppression, historically privileged people (male, straight, able-bodied, cisgender, etc.) can be nonverbally marginalized as well. As I'll lay out in the next section, nonverbal marginalization ultimately just tracks power inequities — some perhaps more unjust than others.

2. Why Nonverbally Marginalize?: Motivation and Cognitive Architecture

If nonverbal marginalization reinforces oppressive social structures, why do we do it? I want to consider two versions of this question. The first involves the psychological motivation to engage in nonverbal marginalization: what motivates us to nonverbally marginalize? The second involves the

¹¹ For an overview of cultural differences, see Roger Kreuz and Richard Miller Roberts. *Getting through: The pleasures and perils of cross-cultural communication*. MIT Press, 2017.

cognitive architecture which gives rise to nonverbal marginalization: what mental representations bring about the nonverbally marginalizing behavior?

2.1 *Psychological Motivation*

Why would someone nonverbally marginalize someone else? The answer lies in the importance we place on certain kinds of social connection. Signaling affiliation with socially powerful people typically comes with social advantages. We want powerful people to like us — so they'll hire us, befriend us, date us, etc. But how do we make people like us? On one hand, signaling our own affability can be overt, like explicitly complimenting someone or offering to do them a favor. But nonverbal behaviors can positively signal affiliation as well. In fact, the empirical literature suggests that nonverbal signaling of affiliation tends to be successful: we *like* people more who look at us, smile at us, and nod at us.¹² In fact, nonverbal displays of affiliation are often more effective than overt ones precisely because nonverbal communication has this dimension of subtlety — for example, while it might seem inappropriate to endlessly praise your boss, a smile or a touch of the shoulder can make them feel closer to you and make you in turn seem more likable.

We can thus understand nonverbal marginalization as arising from this more basic tendency to signal affiliation with powerful people. Stated in this way, it's clear why we might think some forms of nonverbal marginalization aren't normatively problematic (at least in the way the Technology Company and Academic Conference cases are). Nonverbal attention is a limited resource such that we can't nonverbally attend to all people, at all times, equally in social exchanges. It's very natural, then, that we'd preferentially allocate nonverbal attention to the people we regard as the most important within the given social context. This means that the unequal allocation of nonverbal attention won't always carry the same normative baggage. For example, in the context of your friend's birthday dinner, it probably makes sense to look and smile more at them.

So, the claim isn't that nonverbal marginalization is always normatively problematic. Indeed, some types of nonverbally marginalizing behavior seem to be cognitively unavoidable. Rather, I am arguing that certain types of nonverbal marginalization *are* inherently problematic — specifically, patterns of nonverbal marginalizing behavior that are caused by implicit or explicit biases. These are the “bad” types of nonverbal marginalization, which this paper is mostly focused on. However, isolating these prejudicial varieties of nonverbal marginalization requires us to look more closely at the cognitive architecture.

2.2 *Cognitive Architecture: Implicit and Explicit Bias*

¹² Regarding looking behavior see Malia Mason, Elizabeth Tatlow, & C. Neil Macrae, “The Look of Love: Gaze Shifts and Person Perception,” *Psychological Science* 16(3), (2005): 236-239 and Raphaela Kaisler & Helmut Leder, “Combined Effects of Gaze and Orientation of Faces on Person Judgments in Social Situations,” *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 256. (2017), for smiling, Jana Nikitin & Alexandra Freund, “Who Cares? Effects of Social Approach and Avoidance Motivation on Responsiveness to Others,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 45(2), (2018): 182-195, and for nodding see Takayuki Osugi & J. Kawahara. “Effects of Head Nodding and Shaking Motions on Perceptions of Likeability and Approachability,” *Perception* 47, (2018): 16-29.

This brings us to the cognitive architecture that supports the “bad” type of nonverbal marginalization. For the rest of this paper I will drop qualifiers like “bad”, “prejudicial”, or “normatively suspect”. Hereafter when I refer to ‘nonverbal marginalization’ I will mean the “bad” type caused either by an implicit or explicit bias.

Consider explicit bias first. Explicit biases are conscious, intentional attitudes, formed through reasoned deliberation and reflection, which typically justify the mistreatment and/or exploitation of minority groups — for example, European Enlightenment thinkers formulating racist narratives to justify slavery and American conservatives claiming that LGBT people were trying to dismantle the American family with the legalization of same-sex marriage.¹³ Explicit biases straightforwardly motivate various types of marginalization against members of oppressed social groups. For example, if S is explicitly biased against R, then S won’t be likely to positively engage with R — either verbally or nonverbally.

In the nonverbal case, explicit biases are typically reflected in biased agents’ *negative* nonverbal cues. Note that all the examples of nonverbal marginalization I’ve discussed up until this point have involved the relative distribution of *positive* nonverbal cues (e.g., looking and smiling more at S than R because S is more socially powerful than R). But explicit biases often manifest in nonverbally marginalizing behavior which involves the distribution of *negative* nonverbal cues — e.g., frowning, grimacing, or aggressively posturing. As such, nonverbal marginalization brought about by explicit bias can be leveraged as a tool of control. For example, if a man holds the explicit bias that women shouldn’t work outside the home, he might refuse to look at his female coworkers in meetings or exaggeratedly roll his eyes when they speak. This type of nonverbal marginalization — manifested by his negative nonverbal cues — is communicating his disapproval (and, thus, his underlying explicit bias).

On the other hand, implicit biases are unconscious attitudes passively acquired through cultural exposure, which shape our judgments and perceptions about other people.¹⁴ Unlike explicit biases, implicit biases are not accessible through introspection and aren’t the product of conscious deliberation. Rather, they are implicitly manifested in biased patterns of behavior.¹⁵ It’s been

¹³ See Charles W. Mills, *The racial contract*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), for discussion of the rationalisations against same-sex marriage and see Rory McVeigh and D. Diaz Maria-Elena. "Voting to ban same-sex marriage: Interests, values, and communities." *American Sociological Review* 74.6 (2009): 891-915.

¹⁴ Philosophers have given a number of metaphysical accounts of implicit bias. For example, it’s been argued that implicit biases are associations (see e.g., Alex Madva "Why implicit attitudes are (probably) not beliefs." *Synthese* 193 (2016): 2659-2684; Alex Madva and Michael Brownstein. "Stereotypes, prejudice, and the taxonomy of the implicit social mind." *Noûs* 52.3 (2018): 611-644.) propositional attitudes (see e.g., Andy Egan, "Seeing and believing: Perception, belief formation and the divided mind." *Philosophical Studies* 140 (2008): 47-63; Eric Schwitzgebel "Acting contrary to our professed beliefs or the gulf between occurrent judgment and dispositional belief." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 91.4 (2010): 531-553; Eric Mandelbaum "Attitude, inference, association: On the propositional structure of implicit bias." *Noûs* 50.3 (2016): 629-658) and aliefs (see Tamar Szabó Gendler "On the epistemic costs of implicit bias." *Philosophical Studies* 156 (2011): 33-63). However, I’m wanting to remain neutral on the metaphysical issue. Everything I say about implicit bias here should be compatible with any of these metaphysical accounts.

¹⁵ For more on techniques for measuring implicit bias see Edouard Machery "De-Freuding implicit attitudes." *Implicit bias and philosophy* (2016): 104-129; Wesley Buckwalter, "Implicit attitudes and the ability argument." *Philosophical Studies* 176.11

demonstrated that people are implicitly biased against a number of historically marginalized groups, including black people, women, transgender people, elderly people, Muslims, etc.¹⁶

Much of the nonverbal marginalization people regularly experience reflects implicit (rather than explicit) bias. In the implicit cases, the nonverbal marginalizer isn't engaging in the behavior because they explicitly harbor a negative bias about the marginalized. Rather, they have some implicit bias that is shaping their patterns of nonverbal behavior without their awareness.¹⁷ Importantly, however, the behavior isn't made more benign because it's caused by an implicit bias. In fact, implicit nonverbal marginalization cases are often *more* harmful than the explicit ones in that it's often easier to identify and dismiss nonverbal marginalization from explicitly biased people (rather than implicitly biased people). For example, if a woman knows her male coworker is explicitly sexist, she won't interpret him rolling his eyes during her presentation to reveal anything deep about the content of her talk or her professional competence. She can just dismiss his nonverbally marginalizing behavior as being a manifestation of his overt sexism. However, if his nonverbal marginalization manifested more subtly — as tends to be true in implicit bias cases, which involve relative distribution of positive nonverbal cues — it would be more difficult for her to identify the bias in his pattern of nonverbal behavior, making the incident difficult to shrug off. Similar points have been made about the comparative harm of microaggressions vs. macroaggressions — e.g., it's sometimes easier to dismiss a macroaggression than a microaggression because macroaggressions unambiguously manifests the aggressor's bias.¹⁸

Thus, because it's subtle and difficult to detect, implicit nonverbal marginalization has the potential to be especially harmful. Over the next two sections I'll demonstrate the epistemic and psychological harms that can be caused by implicit (typically offline) forms of nonverbal marginalization.

3. Epistemic Harms

(2019): 2961-2990; Michael Brownstein, Alex Madva, and Bertram Gawronski. "Understanding implicit bias: Putting the criticism into perspective." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 101.2 (2020): 276-307.

¹⁶ For implicit bias against black people see Brian A. Nosek "Implicit–explicit relations." *Current directions in psychological science* 16.2 (2007): 65-69; for women see Nilanjana Dasgupta & Shaki Asgari. "Seeing is believing: Exposure to counterstereotypic women leaders and its effect on the malleability of automatic gender stereotyping." *Journal of experimental social psychology* 40.5 (2004): 642-658; for transgender people see Jordan R. Axt, et al. "Implicit transgender attitudes independently predict beliefs about gender and transgender people." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 47.2 (2021): 257-274; for the elderly see, Verena Kleissner & Georg Jahn. "Implicit and explicit measurement of work-related age attitudes and age stereotypes." *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2020): 579155; and for Muslims see, Jaihyun Park, Karla Felix, and Grace Lee. "Implicit attitudes toward Arab-Muslims and the moderating effects of social information." *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 29.1 (2007): 35-45.

¹⁷ In the implicit cases, the nonverbal marginalizer likely won't be aware they (1) have the implicit bias in the first place or (2) are engaging in nonverbally marginalizing behavior as a result of the bias.

¹⁸ For discussion, see Emily McTernan "Microaggressions, equality, and social practices." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26.3 (2018): 261-281. Regina Rini, "Taking the measure of microaggression: How to put boundaries on a nebulous concept." *Microaggressions and philosophy*. Routledge, (2020): 101-120.

Nonverbal marginalization can cause at least two kinds of epistemic harm: epistemic oppression (which I'll refer to as the "primary" epistemic harm) and hermeneutical injustice (the "secondary" epistemic harm). I'll consider both in turn.

3.1 Epistemic Oppression

Kristie Dotson defines epistemic oppression as "persistent epistemic exclusion that hinders one's contribution to knowledge production".¹⁹ She claims that epistemically oppressive exclusions involve infringements on "the epistemic agency of agents" and "produce deficiencies in social knowledge". Dotson characterizes epistemic agency as follows:

*"Epistemic agency will concern the ability to utilize persuasively shared epistemic resources within a given epistemic community in order to participate in knowledge production and, if required, the revision of those same resources. A compromise to epistemic agency, when unwarranted, damages not only individual knowers but also the state of social knowledge and shared epistemic resources."*²⁰

Epistemic oppression can be understood as involving infringement on epistemic agency, which harms the general state of social knowledge within a given epistemic community. We can think of infringements of epistemic agency as taking the following two possible forms: an agent can be epistemically oppressed in their capacity as a *acquirer of knowledge* (e.g., if they were prevented from asking questions and learning from others) or as a *transmitter of knowledge* (e.g., if they were prevented from sharing their knowledge and participating in the revision and expansion of shared epistemic resources). Dotson discusses Patrica Hill Collins, who famously noted the relative lack of serious engagement with black feminist scholarship within the academy in her book *Black Feminist Thought* (2000). Collins claims that work from black feminist scholars has been excluded and ignored from academic spheres, which Dotson argues constitutes an epistemically oppressive dynamic. We can then say that black feminist scholars have been epistemically oppressed as knowledge producers because existing inequitable power structures have prevented them from contributing to the production of social knowledge within the academy.

I claim that nonverbal marginalization infringes on the epistemic agency of historically oppressed people. In particular, pervasive patterns of nonverbal marginalization impair peoples' abilities to acquire and produce knowledge within their epistemic communities. Thus, I'm arguing that nonverbal marginalization can exemplify both dimensions of epistemic oppression.

First, experiencing nonverbal marginalization can hinder people in their acquisition of knowledge. For example, being nonverbally marginalized often causes people to feel intimidated, which discourages them from asking questions. This prevents them from acquiring knowledge from others. Think of Ann in the Technology Company case, who's being nonverbally marginalized by the

¹⁹ Kristie Dotson, "A Cautionary Tale: Of Limiting Epistemic Oppression," *Frontiers: A Journal in Women Studies* 33(1) (2012): 24.

²⁰ *Ibid* p.24

consultant, David. David's nonverbal marginalizing behavior blocks Ann out of the conversation, making her too intimidated to ask questions of David (even though he's been hired to share his expertise with Ann and Mark). Thus, David's (presumably offline) nonverbal marginalization of Ann prevents her from acquiring knowledge.

Second, experiencing nonverbal marginalization can prevent people from transmitting knowledge to others. This harms both the person being nonverbally marginalized and others within their epistemic community who could have benefited from the marginalized's expertise. Think about Eric in the Academic Conference case, who is nonverbally marginalized by the other two (white) conference panelists. Their nonverbal disregard makes it difficult for him to participate in the discussion and share the research he was invited to discuss. Clearly, Eric is harmed by his fellow panelists' nonverbally marginalizing behavior towards him (and this experience triggers his imposter syndrome as a person of color, which I'll discuss more in section 4). But Eric's greater epistemic community is also harmed — specifically, the other conference attendees, who came to the panel to learn about the panelists' research and didn't get to hear Eric's fully fleshed out thoughts.

Thus, the primary epistemic harm of nonverbal marginalization (in so far as it's helpful to distinguish between 'primary' and 'secondary' harms in this context) is one of epistemic oppression. Patterns of nonverbal marginalization impair historically oppressed peoples' abilities to acquire and transmit knowledge, thereby isolating them from social knowledge production.

3.2 Hermeneutical Injustice

The secondary epistemic harm of nonverbal marginalization (which comes about as a consequence of the primary harm) involves hermeneutical injustice. Miranda Fricker defines hermeneutical injustice as the experience of “having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource”.²¹ By 'collective hermeneutical resource' Fricker is referring to the shared concepts and epistemic resources a society generates and makes use of. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when members of marginalized social groups are prevented from participating in the processes of creating and maintaining these conceptual resources. As a result, the concepts which do emerge end up disproportionately reflecting the interests and lived experiences of socially powerful groups at the expense of marginalized groups. Fricker illustrates this by discussing the concept of 'marital rape', which historically wasn't categorized as a type of rape, reflecting the interests of men who crafted the conceptual resource to their own exploitative advantage at the expense of women.

Fricker stresses that not all hermeneutical deficits (i.e., collective conceptual gaps) involve *injustice* in the relevant sense. She claims that “for something to be an injustice, it must be harmful but also wrongful, whether because discriminatory or otherwise unfair”²². Hermeneutical injustices, then, instantiate facets of structural oppression which target a person because they are a member of a

²¹ Miranda Fricker *Epistemic Injustice: Power & Ethics of Knowing* pp. 155.

²² *Ibid* p. 151

group which occupies a less socially powerful position due to an existent identity prejudice (where identity prejudices might include racism, sexism, etc.). In short, hermeneutical injustices are hermeneutical deficits that reflect social biases.

“What is bad about this sort of hermeneutical marginalization is that the structural prejudice it causes in the collective hermeneutical resource is essentially discriminatory: the prejudice affects people in virtue of their membership of a socially powerless group, and thus in virtue of an aspect of their social identity”²³

With this in mind, we can now put forward a general definition of hermeneutical injustice:

Hermeneutical Injustice: to experience hermeneutical injustice, S must be harmed in virtue of some hermeneutical deficit relevant to S’s membership to a social group G, where members of G have been excluded from producing and maintaining epistemic resources due to an anti-G structural identity prejudice. As a result of this exclusion, emergent epistemic resources within S’s epistemic community do not sufficiently reflect lived experiences relevant to G membership, including experiences of anti-G oppression.

Following Fricker, the above definition emphasizes the structural dynamics of hermeneutical injustice. However, in the context of the present discussion of nonverbal marginalization, I particularly want to consider how hermeneutical injustice manifests at the level of individual psychology:

Manifestation of Hermeneutical Injustice: S will experience hermeneutical injustice related to G membership as inability to either (1) make sense of (either some type or token) anti-G oppressive experience(s) to themselves and/or (2) communicate those anti-G oppressive experience(s) to others.

It should be clear why manifestations of hermeneutical injustice significantly hinder efforts to build solidarity movements and politically organize against oppression. If a person lacks the hermeneutical resource necessary to identify a manifestation of their own oppression or discuss that oppression with others who similarly experience it, how can they politically organize around ending that type of oppression? Crafting hermeneutical resources that accurately reflect lived experiences is especially powerful for marginalized people, at both the personal and political level.

Now with an account of hermeneutical injustice on the table, let’s circle back to nonverbal marginalization. I’ll argue that the harms of nonverbal marginalization are often compounded by hermeneutical injustice because victims of nonverbal marginalization lack the hermeneutical resource necessary to make sense of these oppressive experiences. I’ll propose that the missing hermeneutical resource is the ‘nonverbal marginalization’ concept. Thus, there’s a sense in which this paper attempts to address the hermeneutical injustice by proposing the missing hermeneutical resource: nonverbal marginalization.

²³ *Ibid* p. 153

Why think there's a hermeneutical deficit? There doesn't exist a term for the phenomenon I've been calling 'nonverbal marginalization' (at least as far as I'm aware). As such, it's not been recognized or discussed within mainstream social discourse. To illustrate, contrast nonverbal marginalization with 'mansplaining' and 'gaslighting', concepts which have been recently introduced into social discourse to fill existing hermeneutical gaps. While you were likely unfamiliar with nonverbal marginalization before reading this paper, you might already be familiar with the term 'gaslighting'. And if you already possess the 'gaslighting' hermeneutical resource, you'll find that you're able to identify and call out the behavior (to some degree) in virtue of having the concept. In this way, the possession of the hermeneutical resource can actually lessen the harmful effects of the behavior in many instances — for example, if you already know what gaslighting is, you might be less psychologically rattled when someone tries to gaslight you. Thus, while introducing the 'gaslighting' hermeneutical resource doesn't entirely nullify the harmful effects of gaslighting, having the concept makes it easier for potential victims of gaslighting to identify and address the behavior. Therein lies the power of hermeneutical resources.

However, because 'nonverbal marginalization' is not an existing hermeneutical resource, victims of nonverbal marginalization can't readily identify the phenomenon when they experience it. This points to a 'nonverbal marginalization' hermeneutical deficit, which I'll claim for the rest of this section also constitutes a hermeneutical injustice, in that failing to possess the 'nonverbal marginalization' concept undermines people's abilities to make sense of nonverbally marginalizing experiences to themselves and communicate those experiences to others.

First, members of historically oppressed groups can have difficulty making sense of experiences of nonverbal marginalization to themselves. Lacking the concept of nonverbal marginalization, people simply aren't 'on the lookout' for the phenomenon and thus can't recognize it when it occurs. For example, Ann and Eric aren't able to recognize their interlocutors' behaviors in the business meeting and seminar room as (implicitly) sexist and racist because they aren't familiar with the 'nonverbal marginalization' concept. Experiencing this type of hermeneutical injustice means that they don't engage in online monitoring of other peoples' nonverbal behaviors and therefore are largely insensitive to discriminatory patterns of nonverbal behavior.

But, again, there's a potential fix here. Amending the shared hermeneutical resource to include the concept of 'nonverbal marginalization' addresses this manifestation of hermeneutical injustice in that possessing the 'nonverbal marginalization' hermeneutical resource should enable people to more easily identify the oppressive nonverbal behaviors in real-time. This type of hermeneutical empowerment can undermine some of the harms created by nonverbal marginalization.

To illustrate, imagine that Eric in the Academic Conference case possesses the concept of 'nonverbal marginalization' such that he is on the lookout for the phenomenon in professional settings. This should hermeneutically empower him to more easily recognize his fellow conference panelists' patterns of nonverbal behavior *as* instantiations of nonverbal marginalization, enabling him to see the white panelists' behavior as a reflection of *their* implicit racial biases rather than of *his*

philosophical ability. Of course, this recognition doesn't change the fact that Eric is still being nonverbally marginalized. However, deploying the appropriate hermeneutical resource should mean that his internal conception of his professional competence is (relatively) unscathed such that he'll be less likely to internalize the incident. Addressing the hermeneutical injustice should also lessen some of the psychological harms I'll discuss in the next section that are often triggered by nonverbal marginalization, including experiences of imposter syndrome and impaired task performance.

Hermeneutical injustices also make it difficult to communicate experiences of oppression to others. I claim that this type of communicative impairment is common in cases of nonverbal marginalization. In fact, it's extremely difficult to describe experiences of nonverbal marginalization to other people (or call people out for engaging in nonverbally marginalizing behavior) without first possessing the concept of 'nonverbal marginalization'. To illustrate, consider what a call-out for nonverbal marginalization would look like. Assuming that Ann and David in the Technology Company case all lack the concept of 'nonverbal marginalization', what should Ann say if she wants to call out David for nonverbally marginalizing her? The complaint might look something like: "you weren't looking at me in the meeting as much as you were looking at Mark". However, thinking back to section 1, David's nonverbal communication in the meeting is almost certainly occurring offline (again, nonverbal communication defaults to being offline). This means that David probably isn't aware of his nonverbal cues at all, even though his gender biases end up manifesting in his spontaneous nonverbal behavioral patterns. Therefore, as a result of the hermeneutical injustice, he would probably dismiss her complaint offhand as being overly sensitive.

3.3 Epistemic Harms and Identity Prejudices

Recall from section 2.2 that normatively problematic kinds of nonverbal marginalization are caused by implicit or explicit biases. I want to close this section by considering the ways identity prejudices epistemically manifest in cases of nonverbal marginalization, drawing out the relationship between cognitive architecture and social organization. In order to do this, it'll be helpful to draw a distinction between identity prejudices and individual biases. We can think of Fricker's notion of identity prejudice as being a higher-level social and political phenomenon that can reflect and/or reinforce individuals' biases. For example, sexist identity prejudices (understood socially, politically, and historically) get reflected in individuals' implicit or explicit sexist biases.

Recall that hermeneutical injustice involves a conceptual deficit which exists in virtue of some identity prejudice (sexism, racism, etc.). We clearly see this dynamic in instances of nonverbal marginalization. Consider the hermeneutical injustices experienced by Ann and Eric the Technology Company and Academic Conference cases in terms of individual-level biases and social-level identity prejudices. On the individual level, the nonverbal marginalization Ann and Eric experience is caused by their interlocutor's implicit and explicit biases.

But Ann and Eric are also being harmed by social-level identity prejudices, which give rise to the hermeneutical injustices they experience. In virtue of sexist and racist identity prejudices, Ann and Eric fail to possess the hermeneutical resource that would allow them to recognize and

communicate their experiences of nonverbal marginalization. After all, the ‘nonverbal marginalization’ hermeneutical deficit persists because groups who serially experience nonverbal marginalization (women, people of color, etc.) have been excluded from creating and maintaining the collective hermeneutical resources. Fricker emphasizes that sustaining these types of hermeneutical deficits benefits high power groups at the expense of low power groups. Indeed, members of high power groups are benefited by the pervasive (probably implicit and offline) nonverbal marginalization of low power groups because (1) members of high power groups receive preferential patterns of nonverbal behavior and (2) members of low power groups experiencing nonverbal marginalization don’t have the right conceptual resources to identify or call out the behavior. Thus, addressing the hermeneutical injustice can contribute towards addressing the primary epistemic harm.

However, to foster the production of hermeneutical resources which accurately reflect lived experiences of oppression, marginalized people must be able to participate in social knowledge production — for example, to introduce the ‘sexual harassment’ or ‘nonverbal marginalization’ concepts, one must have the power to amend the collective hermeneutical resources. Addressing hermeneutical injustice, then, ultimately becomes a matter of having the ability to participate in social knowledge production. Yet, as I discussed in section 3.1, historically marginalized groups are often excluded from social knowledge production due to various identity prejudices. This dynamic highlights the connection between epistemic oppression (being excluded from social knowledge production) and hermeneutical injustice (not having the appropriate concepts to describe experiences of oppression).

Finally, I want to conclude the discussion of hermeneutical injustice by considering identity prejudices in the context of online and offline nonverbal communication. Introducing people to the ‘nonverbal marginalization’ concept as a way to address the hermeneutical injustice will inevitably involve bringing aspects of nonverbal communication online (i.e., possessing the concept will cause people to be on the lookout for biases in patterns of nonverbal behavior). This sort of online monitoring can epistemically position people favorably to recognize and address nonverbal marginalization in their behaviors and in the behaviors of others.

However, recall from section 1 that online nonverbal communication is comparatively effortful and involves additional cognitive resource expenditure compared to (the default) offline nonverbal communication. So, to bring nonverbal communication online, there must be some justification for the extra cognitive resource expenditure and I propose that possession of hermeneutical resources like ‘nonverbal marginalization’ provides this justification. Moreover, we shouldn’t be overly concerned by the additional cognitive effort involved in bringing nonverbal communication online as a strategy to undermine default patterns of nonverbal marginalization. The extra effort involved in online monitoring of our own nonverbal behaviors and the nonverbal behaviors of others ends up looking like a relatively minimal sacrifice to ensure that (1) our nonverbal behaviors don’t reflect our implicit biases and/or (2) we aren’t being marginalized by other peoples’ implicitly biased nonverbal behaviors. Therefore, possession of the ‘nonverbal marginalization’ concept can push us to bring

nonverbal communication online, making it preferable to offline nonverbal communication (which, again, tends to reflect and reinforce implicit biases).

However, there's also reason to think that bringing nonverbal communication online in the short-term (despite the additional cognitive resource expenditure) can actually cause people to habituate more equitable *offline* nonverbal behaviors in the long-term. For example, perhaps you recently acquired the concept of 'nonverbal marginalization' and as a result want to avoid nonverbally marginalizing behaviors, which will almost certainly involve bringing your nonverbal communication online in many situations — for example, deliberately making sure you look and smile at your female colleagues when they valuably contribute in department meetings. On the face of it, this approach might seem like an awkward and onerous way to go about correcting for your own biases. However, much of the empirical literature on habituation suggests that online conscious monitoring can affect gradual changes in patterns of spontaneous offline behavior.²⁴ The thought would be that over time you would find yourself spontaneously exhibiting more equitable nonverbal behaviors, even when you aren't engaging in (cognitively effortful) online monitoring.

Hence, we affect change in our marginalizing offline nonverbal behaviors by monitoring our online nonverbal behaviors. It all starts with familiarizing ourselves with the 'nonverbal marginalization' concept and being on the lookout for nonverbally marginalizing patterns of behavior in ourselves and others. While addressing the hermeneutical injustice by bringing our nonverbal communication online might be cognitively taxing in the short-term, this strategy can help us habituate more equitable (and cognitively efficient) offline nonverbal behaviors over the long-term. Moreover, I suggest that given the various harms of nonverbal marginalization, it will be natural to think that the short-term cognitive processing costs of habituating equitable offline nonverbal behaviors are almost certainly worth the normative benefit of training nonverbal behaviors that don't reinforce harmful prejudices.

4. Psychological Harms

Now with the epistemic harms on the table, I want to consider the psychological harms of nonverbal marginalization. Nonverbal marginalization can shed novel light on two well-studied but undertheorized phenomena in social psychology: imposter syndrome and performance gaps between high and low power social groups.

4.1 Imposter Syndrome

²⁴ For work on habituation as an offline bias reduction technique, see Jules Holroyd and Kelly, D. Implicit Bias, Character and Control. In: Masala, A. and Webber, J., (eds.) From *Personality to Virtue Essays on the Philosophy of Character* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Patricia G Devine, et al. "Long-term reduction in implicit race bias: A prejudice habit-breaking intervention." *Journal of experimental social psychology* 48.6 (2012): 1267-1278; Saaid A. Mendoza, Peter M. Gollwitzer, and David M. Amodio. "Reducing the expression of implicit stereotypes: Reflexive control through implementation intentions." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36.4 (2010): 512-523.

Imposter syndrome, frequently experienced by members of marginalized groups, involves having negative attitudes about one's ability (where those attitudes are false). Victims of imposter syndrome characteristically feel as if they are imposters or frauds, which can lead them to feel isolated from their professional and social communities.²⁵ Though imposter syndrome has been observed in various populations, there is still philosophical and empirical debate about what causes imposter attitudes and how they can be most effectively challenged and eliminated. Consider a paradigmatic case of imposter syndrome like the following:

Lawyer: Sofia, a young latina lawyer, can't help feeling that she's an imposter in her workplace. Despite having ample evidence of her own professional ability, she believes herself to be incompetent relative to her male colleagues.

What causes imposter attitudes like Sofia's? It's worth stressing that this question isn't only of philosophical and empirical interest — understanding the causes of imposter syndrome can also inform institutional policies aimed at reducing bias for ways I'll lay out in a moment.

The traditional answer to the question involves ascribing victims of imposter syndrome a type of blameless irrationality. On this view, imposter attitudes are triggered by agents' knowledge that identity prejudices exist in the world but are not necessarily directly caused by prejudice in their immediate environments. In other words, Sofia is aware that racist and sexist prejudices about professional women are present in her culture and her imposter syndrome psychologically manifests this awareness. Importantly, however, her imposter syndrome might not accurately reflect what's going on in her immediate environment (because it's characteristic of imposter syndrome cases that agents are competent and have evidence of this competence). Of course, we wouldn't say that Sofia is blameworthy — after all, her experience of imposter syndrome is caused by her awareness of very real sexist and racist identity prejudices, which unjustly disadvantage her. But, on this view, Sofia's epistemic behavior is (at least in some sense) suboptimal given the evidence she has.

This sort of explanation also has implications for institutional policy. According to the blameless irrationality view, Sofia's coworkers can be said to be doing their professional due diligence in their treatment of her (e.g., engaging with her at work, giving her favorable performance reviews, etc.). As such, whatever imposter feelings Sofia has can be attributed to her awareness of existent cultural biases rather than anything going on in her immediate environment. This often lets institutions pass the prejudicial buck, as it were. For example, an institution can claim they've done all they can to make minority employees feel welcome, blaming any residual imposter attitudes on more general social biases.

²⁵ See Pauline Clance & Suzanne Imes. "The Imposter Phenomenon in High Achieving Women: Dynamics and Therapeutic Intervention," *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice* 15(3), (1978): 241-247; Dena Bravata, et al. "Prevalence, Predictors, and Treatment of Impostor Syndrome: a Systematic Review." *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 35(4), (2020): 1252-1275.

However, with the concept of nonverbal marginalization on the table, we put forth another explanation of imposter syndrome: pervasive patterns of nonverbal marginalization within institutions cause members of minority groups to experience imposter syndrome. To illustrate how this occurs, consider this dynamic from the perspective of both the production and interpretation of nonverbal cues. As I've already discussed in section 1, on the production side peoples' implicit biases get reflected in their patterns of offline nonverbal behavior. But on the interpretation side, offline processing of this nonverbally marginalizing behavior can cause experiences of imposter syndrome. In many cases, then, experiencing imposter syndrome is the result of repeatedly being nonverbally marginalized within an environment. I should hasten to add that the claim isn't that all cases of imposter syndrome are caused by nonverbal marginalization. But nonverbal marginalization can harmfully contribute to experiences of imposter syndrome. This view also makes implementable policy predictions: reducing patterns of nonverbal marginalization should likewise reduce prevalence of imposter syndrome.

The nonverbal marginalization explanation of imposter syndrome also importantly shifts the dynamic of epistemic blame. In nonverbal marginalization cases, it might be that victims of imposter syndrome like Sofia are updating their beliefs about their own professional competence according to the available evidence. However, their evidence in part consists of the (probably offline) processing of others' (also probably offline) patterns of nonverbally marginalizing behavior, which epistemically supports the imposter narrative. Hence, the available evidence (nonverbal marginalization and all) can end up supporting the marginalized's imposter beliefs.²⁶

For example, we can imagine that Sofia's coworkers' nonverbal behaviors sometimes reflect their implicit racist and sexist biases in patterns of nonverbal marginalization — for example, failing to nonverbally engage with her as much in meetings or in social settings. Assuming Sofia doesn't have the 'nonverbal marginalization' conceptual resource, we should assume that she processes their nonverbally marginalizing behaviors offline. Offline processing of their nonverbal marginalization would cause her to form the conscious-level impression that they regard her as incompetent. Thus, their nonverbal marginalization causes her imposter attitude. However, as I discussed in section 1, because she's processing her interlocutors' nonverbal cues offline, she probably won't realize that her imposter attitude is formed on the basis of her interlocutors' biased nonverbal behaviors. This makes it seem to Sofia and her nonverbally marginalizing coworkers as if she formed the imposter attitude spontaneously, seemingly lending support to the traditional view that imposter beliefs reflect more general cultural biases rather than specific features of environments. However, we can now more accurately diagnose the etiology of her imposter attitude as originating from patterns of nonverbal

²⁶ Katherine Hawley argues for a similar line in Katherine Hawley "I—What is impostor syndrome?." *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*. Vol. 93. No. 1. Oxford University Press, 2019. Challenging the orthodox view in psychiatry, which holds that imposter attitudes are wholly irrational, she argues that imposter attitudes (though mistaken) can nonetheless be epistemically justified by hostile environments that promote sorts of bias — though she mostly focuses on environmental features like performance feedback rather than nonverbal cues.

marginalization within her environment. In this way we can see how patterns of nonverbal behavior can play a significant cognitive and epistemic role in creating and maintaining imposter attitudes.

4.2 Performance Gaps

Finally, nonverbal marginalization can go some way to explaining certain performance gaps between high and low power social groups that have been observed in social psychology — e.g., men and white people outperforming women and people of color on various types of assessment.²⁷ These results have often been explained by appeal to innate ability differences between groups.²⁸ Certain of these performance gaps seem to go away when other social factors (like the structure of the assessments and the unequal distribution of resources between groups) are controlled for. However, some performance gaps seem to remain, which get pointed to as supporting these innate ability explanations. I will close out this section by demonstrating how nonverbal marginalization can shed novel light on certain types of performance gaps, without problematic appeal to innate ability differences.

Up until this point I've mostly considered nonverbal marginalization from the perspective of members of oppressed social groups, who are the victims of nonverbal marginalization. But I want to now consider the experiences of socially powerful groups, who as a result of the nonverbal marginalization of others receive comparatively more positive and affirming nonverbal cues. Take a familiar example: a graduate philosophy seminar. Let's consider nonverbal marginalization in the seminar room from two distinct perspectives: that of the powerful person being nonverbally validated and that of a comparatively less powerful person(s) being nonverbally marginalized.

Nonverbal Validation in the Seminar Room: Imagine a small graduate seminar on a specialized topic in philosophy, led by a prominent faculty member. When white male student Kyle speaks in the seminar, he tends to get nonverbally acknowledged in a positive and preferential way by the other students and the faculty member. For example, when he contributes to discussion they look, nod, and smile at him, which he takes to be indicative that his comments are welcome and valuable. These subtle nonverbal affirmations also end up affecting the fluency and frequency of Kyle's comments, making him come across as more knowledgeable and articulate than the other students. Therefore, the positive nonverbal validation he receives causes him to perform *better* than the other students.

²⁷ See Rodolfo Mendoza-Denton “A Social Psychological Perspective on the Achievement Gap in Standardized Test Performance Between White and Minority Students: Implications for Assessment,” *Journal of Negro Education* 83(4), (2014):465-484; Shima Salehi et al. (2019): “Gender Performance Gaps Across Different Assessment Methods and the Underlying Mechanisms: The Case of Incoming Preparation and Test Anxiety,” *Frontiers in Education* 4(107)(2019); Ebony Shockley, “Expanding the Narrative of the Black-White Gap in Education Research: Black English Learners as a Counterexample,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 90(1), (2021):7-25.

²⁸ Lee Jussim, Jarret Crawford, & Rachel Rubinstein, “Stereotype (In)Accuracy in Perceptions of Groups and Individuals,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 24(6)2015): 490–497.

Nonverbal Marginalization in the Seminar Room: On the other hand, the women and people of color in the seminar don't receive the same degree of positive nonverbal attention. For example, when one of the minority students contributes, the faculty member and other students don't look at them or nod their heads as much. This makes them feel anxious and causes them to second guess the quality of their comments. As a result, the women and people of color end up contributing less in the seminar and when they do speak their comments tend to come across as less polished than Kyle's (e.g., they stumble over their words more because the other seminar participants' nonverbal behaviors make them feel unsettled).

Note that there is a genuine performance difference (qua philosophical ability) on display in the seminar. Kyle is contributing more frequently to discussion than the non-white and non-male students and the quality of his comments (at least in certain respects) is better. But is this performance difference best explained by a genuine ability difference? In other words, does the performance difference in the seminar suggest that Kyle is a better philosopher than the minority students? Clearly not.

To drive this point home, consider another familiar example. Think about the experience delivering the same talk to a nonverbally engaged audience (exhibiting positive nonverbal behaviors like nodding and smiling) vs a nonverbally disengaged audience (exhibiting negative nonverbal behaviors like frowning, looking at their phones, and staring into space). The positive nonverbal feedback from the first audience will almost certainly translate into a better talk performance. However, receiving positive or negative nonverbal cues obviously doesn't alter your underlying philosophical ability. It's just that receiving positive nonverbal cues makes you feel more confident, so you end up giving a better talk.

So, what should we say about the performance differences in the Seminar Room case? First, we should imagine that it's something the students and faculty are probably consciously tracking. As such, the faculty member and other graduate students will likely conclude that Kyle is the most competent student in the seminar. Taking the performance difference on display to be an indication of a genuine ability difference, the other graduate students might more readily defer to Kyle, judging him to be more knowledgeable on the topic. The professor might even be likely to write him a better recommendation letter based on his in-class contributions.

However, clearly the performance difference isn't due to any innate ability difference between the graduate students. Rather, it's fostered by an environment of subtle nonverbal marginalization in the seminar room — the white male student receiving more positive and affirming nonverbal cues than the women and people of color, which causes him to perform better and them to perform worse. Given what we've said about the subtlety and pervasiveness of nonverbal marginalization, we should imagine that there will be many cases like this, in which biased patterns of nonverbal behavior undermine the capacity of minority individuals to fully manifest their abilities (and where performance deficits are assumed to reflect genuine ability deficits).

Hence, understanding nonverbal marginalization can help us explain certain performance gaps while resisting empirically and socially questionable innate ability explanations. From the perspective of identifying and challenging bias, this is especially important because narratives about innate ability not only undermine minority individuals' task performance but end up feeding into the biases which motivate patterns of nonverbal marginalization in the first place.

Performance/Bias Feedback Loop: Consider the bias (implicitly or explicitly held) that white people are intellectually superior to people of color. For reasons discussed in section 2, this bias motivates the nonverbal validation of white people and nonverbal marginalization of people of color. Reflecting on the relationship between nonverbal communication and performance described here, we should expect that these patterns of nonverbal engagement will sometimes cause white people to outperform people of color — these performance effects should be especially present in environments where nonverbal marginalization is particularly salient. This performance difference (driven entirely by biased patterns of nonverbal behavior) will seemingly provide evidence for the racial bias that initially motivated the nonverbal marginalization in the first place.

Harmful feedback loops emerge: social biases cause patterns of nonverbal marginalization towards low power social groups; nonverbal marginalization causes performance differences between high and low power social groups; performance differences between high and low power social groups are then taken to be evidence of the initial biases, and so on... Therefore, undermining biased patterns of nonverbal marginalization can help us undermine performance gaps between high and low power social groups, enabling members of oppressed groups to fully manifest their abilities and competences.

Conclusion

I've herein laid the groundwork for future developments in the philosophy of nonverbal communication, stressing the communicative richness of our nonverbal cues and demonstrating how our nonverbal behaviors can reflect and reinforce widely held social prejudices. Further, I've introduced the concept of 'nonverbal marginalization', which can help us begin to identify and address the various ethical, epistemic, and psychological harms of discriminatory nonverbal behavior.