The Grind
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Many people give little thought to the minor tasks—like going to the bank, buying groceries, or picking up a takeout meal—that help keep their daily lives running smoothly. These errands are just things that must get done. Yet depending upon a person’s social class position, she may or may not have a car to load groceries into or a bank account through which to process transactions. Understanding class as a social process means recognizing how it organizes in very direct ways daily demands on both individuals and families. Seeing how social structures of class build frameworks for everyday life and work sheds light on the varied experiences of poor people versus the nonpoor. Attention to many of life’s daily tasks is necessary for some and voluntary for others depending on one’s social class status. It is the conditions under which demands of daily life occur that are largely determined by class-based resources or the lack thereof.

Social class and social location, in addition to race and gender, largely impact how we experience these types of daily tasks. In particular, living in a poor inner-city community directly informs how one’s daily errands unfold (DeVault 1994, 168–169). For example, being an apartment dweller in a low-income neighborhood may require lengthy and routine walks.
to a laundromat in lieu of on-site laundry facilities often found in apartment complexes in middle-class communities. The simple luxuries of a privileged class status are often taken for granted as we move through our daily routine. When you don’t have a car or a bank account and live in a poor urban community, this routine, unfolds in public and, at times, can become humiliating and painful, especially when interacting with others who treat them in harsh and degrading ways. In such cases, women must learn to negotiate what I term the *microinteractional assault*: a particular type of troubled face-to-face public encounter. The general message sent by microinteractional assaults is to intimidate, threaten, instill feelings of inferiority, and make the targeted person feel unwanted and unsafe (Sue 2010, chap. 2).

Few studies acknowledge the microinteractional work that goes into managing public space for black women. This chapter responds to three key questions: What are the central features of a consumer-oriented microinteractional assault? In what ways does this type of interaction typically unfold? What is at stake for these women as they routinely negotiate this kind of interaction? The cases included in this chapter reveal how microinteractional assaults unfold in local community institutions like the grocery store or corner market. An analysis of these cases reveals how inequalities are reproduced in public space during the course of interaction (West and Fenstermaker 2002, chap. 8). In her study on gender and public harassment, Carol Brooks Gardener (1995) emphasizes the significance of encounters in public space, in part due to their frequency and cumulative impact, and particularly on persons who are situationally disadvantaged like women, persons with disabilities, and people of color, among others. Gardener’s work illustrates how members of such groups are often excluded from the rules of public courtesy and how that informs their ongoing experiences in public. When a grocery store clerk treats a
woman as if she is not deserving of respect, and the woman reacts in a way that unintentionally reinforces this perception, this maintains the basis for the clerk’s behavior and his beliefs in the inferiority of black women.

**Microinteractional Assaults:**

**A Definition**

Microinteractional assaults (MIAs) are a type of troubled public interaction. These encounters reflect and reinforce the social power dynamics among local business owners, employees, and the black women who live in the neighborhood and frequent these businesses. Such assaults can occur during the regular activities required to manage daily life, including buying groceries, cashing checks, and riding the city bus. In East Oakland, women shared with me their experiences with these types of hostile encounters. Terri shared her experience about shopping in a local grocery store: “When I got to the front of the line, I said hello to the checker, and as usual he didn’t say anything. I knew from there that it was all downhill. I then see the bagger pretty much throwing my stuff into the bag. When I got home two of my cans were dented. I hate going to that store, but it’s the only halfway decent thing over here.”

Terri’s account displays the routine nature of rude encounters with store personnel, and going to the store thus brings up a range of negative emotions. Her experience contrasts with general public customer service etiquette and basic expectations that many human beings bring to an encounter. Terri perceives that the store employee in this interaction has determined that she is undeserving of common courtesy because of who she is. In general, conversations are expected to be a continued exchange between participants. This includes offering a greeting or invitation with the expectation of receiving a greeting or other form of acknowledgment in return. Terri’s greeting to a store employee is met with silence, which is a
type of dismissal and a form of rejection. This response suggests that a person is unworthy of the rules of public courtesy and civility. Once customers experience such dismissal on the part of store employees they are simultaneously denied any form of civil customer service. As illustrated in other cases presented later in the chapter, customers are routinely denied other commonly requested forms of customer service such as conducting “price checks” and retrieving items from store shelves. In turn, a hostile conclusion routinely ends the interaction. In the case of Terri, her groceries were aggressively thrown into a shopping bag, resulting in damage to her canned goods. Terri’s encounter is an example of how a consumer-oriented microinteractional assault can unfold.

The sequence of greeting–dismissal–denial–hostility represents the key microinteractional elements of these hostile encounters that make them identifiable. Yet it is important to note that, because of the fluid nature of interaction, one element does not always determine the other. Nonetheless, this sequence marks how consumer-based MIAs typically unfold for poor black women in the inner city, and this sort of interaction contrasts with middle-class expectations of “going to the store” which are grounded in friendly, polite, and attentive customer service. Violations of these expectations can be grounds for requesting to see the manager. Terri’s account suggests that she is aware that this encounter violates the general expectations of civil public interaction. Though her routine experience with interactions unfolding in this way with local store personnel is still frustrating, she has become somewhat used to this type of encounter.

In the same way that residents adapt to the frequency of gun violence in the neighborhood, Terri has accommodated to the routine nature of these hostile encounters, which are best understood as a form of social injury, the microinteractional assault. MIAs work to communicate either explicitly or
subtly, through verbal and nonverbal communication, a range of biased attitudes and beliefs held about marginalized groups. They are intended to attack the group identity of the targeted individual, be it race, gender, sexual orientation, or social class status through avoidant behavior, name calling, or other discriminatory actions. What I note as microinteractional assaults complements what Derald Wing Sue calls “microaggressions”: the “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership (people of color, women, or LGBTs)” (2010, 24). Other scholars have described this phenomenon as put-downs (Pierce et al. 1978, 66), subtle insults (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000), as well as microinequities (Hinton 2004). While previous studies focus primarily on the experiences of middle-class minorities with one “master status” (Hughes 1945) such as race, gender or sexuality, my analysis of MIAs extends previous discussion in the literature by focusing on a form of social injury that occurs at the intersection of race, gender, and class and reflects the complicated experience of having more than one marginalized status while living in a distressed inner-city neighborhood. My analysis is also distinct in its examination of the experiences of poor and working-class black women.

The microaggressions Sue (2010) describes tend to illustrate troubled verbal and nonverbal interactions involving at least one person with a marginalized identity; he does not, however, examine how intersecting categories influence interactions. Instead he considers each categorical identity separately, not taking into account the impact of belonging to more than one marginalized identity category. For example, within everyday public encounters a middle-class white woman can experience microaggressions targeting her gender and a middle-class black man may encounter race-oriented microaggressions; but a middle-class black woman endures microaggressions attacking both her marginalized race and gender identity.
Although these forms of microaggressions are significant independently, I argue that microaggressive encounters cannot be adequately conceptualized without acknowledging the intersections of multiple identities. I propose that social class status contributes heavily to how microaggressions unfold and influence who is targeted and the resulting consequences. Sue (2010) illustrates how microaggressions impact being on the margin through membership in a targeted identity category such as people of color or women, yet he describes these interactions in such a way that the normative targets happen to be members of the middle class and above. In this study I uncover how poor black women become routine targets of MIAs in an inner-city neighborhood. I also take into account how poverty intersects with place by showing how the consequences of MIAs are further complicated when experienced by persons who are poor, black, and live in a depressed urban setting. Through respondent accounts I show how intersections of race, gender, and class influence the structure and frequency of consumer-oriented MIAs and further complicate their impact. I illustrate not only how these assaults are interactional but also how the roles of participants within each interaction are not equal. The ways in which power operates in these interpersonal exchanges is central to illustrating how inequality is reproduced in day-to-day encounters in a key public setting: local businesses where consumer transactions are taking place.

**Face-to-Face Interactions**

A microinteractional assault is a type of conscious and deliberate face-to-face interactional encounter, a social arrangement that consists of an exchange of words and glances between participants. Specifically, face engagements include “instances of two or more participants in a situation joining each other openly in maintaining a single focus of cognitive and visual attention” (Goffman 1963, 89). This exchange is understood to be a single
mutual activity involving favored communication rights. Examples of typical face engagements include small talk, a waitress taking an order, a shop owner making a sale, or a formal discussion. An example of a troubled encounter would be a waiter walking away from a customer who is trying to place an order, one passerby bumping into another or pushing another down onto the sidewalk as they pass one another on the street, or a waitress spilling coffee on a patron and then laughing aloud.

MIAs take the form of what Erving Goffman calls “regular” occasions, a subcategory of social occasions. Regular occasions are “instances that form part of a series of like occasions, the series being seen as a unit and developing as such as a daily, weekly, or annual cycle” (Goffman 1963, 19). Such occurrences often include the same participants or participants exhibiting similar characteristics; other events, like impromptu parties or one-shot affairs, would not be considered regular occasions. Goffman highlights the varying participant roles on display during regular occasions, and notes that roles differ from one person to another within the same interaction. For example, when a school-age child enters an ice cream shop with the intention of making a purchase, her role may be one of leisure, while the middle-aged store employee standing behind the counter may be performing a role of work (Goffman 1963).

A central component of face-to-face interactions are that they are embodied. This means that they include the exchange of messages between persons present via bodily activity. Such messages can include laughter, spoken words, or a hard shove. These activities send meaningful messages to the other person(s) present in the exchange. In addition to physical activities as a form of exchange, physical presence can express belonging or outsider status. Finally, suitable management of personal appearance, or the neglect thereof, can convey compliance with dominant social norms for public presentation or poor self-control. Expression through what Goffman (1963) calls “unfocused interaction” can
happen within a brief moment between passersby and without any spoken interchange. Microinteractional assaults can occur during the regular activities required to manage daily life. Common settings where MIAs occur in inner-city neighborhoods include the local grocery store, the corner market, in and around neighborhood check-cashing establishments, and on the street. While conducting routine tasks in these settings, women experience a range of MIAs that vary in intensity and levels of intrusion. In this chapter, I describe two categories of microinteractional assaults, hostile encounters and hypersurveillance, as they occur in local businesses where consumer transactions take place. Women in this setting typically manage consumer-oriented MIAs through the strategy known as interactional resistance.

Hostile Encounters

Hostile encounters operate as a key form of microinteractional assaults; they are brief but routine forms of verbal and behavioral humiliation. Unlike degradation ceremonies, with MIAs women are subject to repeated shaming based on dominant ideas about who they are. Harold Garfinkel explains that a part of degradation ceremonies is to use moral indignation to denounce an individual before witnesses. In this way degradation ceremonies are about exposing a person for who the denouncer believes she really is, not who she appears to be (1956, 421–423). According to respondent accounts, women in East Oakland seem aware of how they are often perceived by employees in local businesses. Though most do not accept these ideas about themselves (e.g., as unworthy of civility, as inferior, etc.), they are familiar with and often expect the MIAs that often accompany outsider beliefs in their lesser status. With each individual MIA women experience it is not guaranteed that the next will be more degrading than the last. Nevertheless, in every new encounter with these assaults mainstream perceptions about poor black women are reinforced.
The cumulative effect of these encounters over one’s lifetime work to intensify resulting feelings of humiliation, anger, frustration, and the like with each troubled interaction.

Hostile interactions can play out intentionally or unintentionally, but either way conveys contentious, negative, and insulting messages based on marginalized identity status (Sue 2010). Examples of hostile encounters at work are elevated voice, forceful and insulting language, or poor verbal and physical customer service (e.g., dropping groceries, grabbing money from a patron). Hostile encounters can be understood as a form of microinteractional assault that is often observed within consumer-oriented interactions. Sue (2010) asserts that when such behaviors become interpersonal encounters they reflect much more than the individual views and feelings of the perpetrator. When these hostilities unfold between persons within face-to-face encounters the harsh and derogatory messages being sent reflect a larger dichotomous worldview that includes dominant understandings of inferiority/superiority, normality/abnormality, and the like (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000; Sue 2010).

Lionel D. Scott, in his study of racial identity and discrimination among African American adolescents (2003), notes that these types of microstresses that happen in public can be damaging to the psyche of African American adolescents as their effects intensify the adolescents’ overall levels of stress (Scott 2003; see also Fee and Krieger 1994). The constant and cumulative nature of microaggressions results in severe, lifelong, systemic consequences for the targeted person or group (Nielsen 2004; Sue 2010). Unlike hate crimes or other overt forms of discrimination, hostile encounters are often seen as lesser offenses. Yet some resulting consequences can be the development of mental and physical health problems, anger, frustration, perpetuated stereotypes of marginalized groups, a hostile work climate, reduced productivity, and disengagement
(Sue 2010, chap. 3). The consequence of hostile encounters may be especially troublesome for poor, black women, since those who are most at risk for developing stress-related health conditions such as hypertension are women who have been found to internalize their responses to discrimination (versus those who actively speak out against unfair treatment; Fee and Krieger 1994, 17–18; Krieger 1990).

Dominant perceptions about poor, inner-city, black women that motivate instances of MIAs also work to reproduce a type of degraded femininity. Remaining visible on the street and when patronizing local businesses, women are exposed to demeaning mainstream perceptions about who they are in the form of MIAs. Through these interactions black women become redefined by these ideas, even if only for a moment. Repeated encounters where MIAs play out and target black women who often cannot escape when, where, and with whom these assaults occur begins to define particular conditions, behaviors, and expectations that come to reproduce a degraded normative understanding of black femininity. These troubled interactions have become a form of public social control within the confines of urban neighborhoods. Though these particular microassaults are not physically violent they do aim for a level of psychological control through repeated humiliation.

Due to a lack of resources women must enter local spaces where they are regularly targeted and made vulnerable to verbal and nonverbal assaults. Lack of reliable and consistent transportation often confines poor residents to their residential community; such limits placed on mobility force many women into stores and onto streets where they are regularly assaulted, stripping them of agency and control of their own movements. Such actions work to routinize oppression within what Patricia hill Collins describes as a culture of violence (2005, chap. 7). In this way, MIAs are much like the violence that forms the backdrop of neighborhood life.
The following excerpt from my field notes illustrates a hostile encounter as it unfolded in a local grocery store that involved a black woman in her early twenties negotiating a purchase with her Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) card at a local grocery store in her East Oakland neighborhood:

I wait in the checkout line of the neighborhood grocery store and look on as a black woman in her early 20s calmly tells the middle-aged white female store clerk who is ringing up her items that she wants to buy some milk along with her other groceries lying on the conveyor belt. The young woman explains to the checker that the gallon-size 2% milk that she wants has an expiration date of tomorrow printed on the outside of the container. The checker proceeds to tell the young woman that if she doesn’t want to get that particular container of milk then she should get another one with an expiration date that she prefers. The customer then asks the store clerk if she can have someone go in the back to see if there are any more gallons of 2% milk with a later expiration date, because all of the containers she sees on the shelf have the same date as the one in front of her, and she really needs to buy the milk today. The checker replies to the woman in a voice loud enough for me to hear while waiting in line several steps away, “No. You have to get what is on the shelf or come back another day.” The customer replies in a calm voice, “I just don’t want to waste my money on a gallon of milk that is going to spoil in one or two days.” The checker replies, “You’re not paying with your money, you’re paying with that,” and she points to the EBT card the woman is holding.

Multiple markers of verbal hostility are displayed in this scene. The elevated and antagonistic tone of voice of the store employee directs at the customer is belligerent in nature.
Additionally, the store clerk refuses to check on a product requested by the customer and instead informs the customer that her only option is to retrieve another of the same food product (which the customer has already deemed unsatisfactory) from the store shelf. This behavior directly opposes norms of civility, particularly in the context of customer service. Such conduct raises the question of why a departure from civil customer service practices is taking place. The roles in this interpersonal exchange are unequal: the customer is being treated as if she is a member of an inferior group (i.e., like a child), and the store employee seems to view the customer as unworthy of civility based on the verbal and nonverbal exchanges they are having. The store employee’s assertion of power in this interaction in the form of refusing a customer request further reinforces the lesser status of the young woman trying to buy a gallon of milk.

Historically, the identity markers of this customer—some of which include black, female, and poor—have been markers of inferiority and lesser power. The assumed phenotypical identity category of whiteness held by the store clerk has historically defined cultural normativity and power yielding (Sue 2010). These varying cultural positions are at work here as the store clerk assumes a position of authority while she dictates what she will and will not do and gives unsolicited directions to the customer within this interaction.

Throughout this interaction each person in the exchange has normative ideas about the other as well as about herself. This includes attitudes, behavior, and types of self-presentation that align with who each understands the other (and self) to be (e.g., woman, man, black, white, poor, nonpoor, store employee, customer, etc.). In the case of the store checker, as she asserts a sense of power over the customer by refusing to perform civil customer service practices she makes an evaluation about who she is in this interaction (a person of authority, superior) and
who the customer is (of lesser status, inferior). As this exchange continues to unfold the customer remains calm, which seems to send a message of compliance to the store clerk further reaffirming her feelings of superiority. This superiority is expressed further as she reminds the customer that she is making a purchase using government assistance (the EBT card) and not money.

EBT is a form of public assistance that can be used to pay for food. The store employee implies that the act of using EBT gives the young woman a status as “less than” a typical customer. This statement suggests that her status as an EBT cardholder makes her unworthy of the privileges “regular” customers are afforded. Such privileges include making requests of store employees and other forms of civility that most customers may assume and generally receive when patronizing a business. This interaction illustrates more than just a troubled exchange between customer and store employee; it represents what the roles of white female store clerk and poor black female customer look like in this space through interaction. As the meanings of poor black customer and white female store clerk are produced in this interaction, their respective statuses as superior and inferior are reproduced. This reflects what Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) describe in their discussion of gender and the division of labor. They explain that when individuals engage in activities, more than just the action is taking place; specific roles are being produced and reproduced, including who is dominant and who is subordinate. With each microinteractional assault that occurs there is more than just a troubled interaction taking place in a grocery store. The role of poor black women who live in this distressed setting and who frequent this business is reinforced as subordinate while the role of store employees is reinforced as dominant (West and Zimmerman 2002). For example, as a result of much of the social stigma around government aid programs, making public the customer’s status
as an EBT card user may have been one of the more demeaning things the store clerk could do. In turn, this action reinforces her own position of power in this space over this particular type of customer.

Michelle, a nineteen-year-old mother of a newborn, also uses EBT to pay for food at this local grocery store, and she recounted for me a hostile encounter she experienced while trying to make a purchase:

When it was my turn in line, the checker began to ring up my groceries as I watched the screen that displays the price of each item. I then realized that I had picked up the wrong package of diapers, so I asked the checker to please take this package off of the bill and if he could call somebody to go get the correct one that I need. He then starts breathing hard and rolling his eyes. He calls over the loudspeaker for someone to bring the diapers I asked for up to the register. No one comes. A minute or so later he calls again, but still no response. I then decide to go get it myself. When I return just moments later, all of the groceries he had already scanned had been removed from the register. When I asked him where all my groceries were, he said he didn’t know what I was talking about but if I wanted to buy something I needed to go wait in line like everybody else.

The interaction Michelle describes is another example of how hostile encounters can unfold in this space. As is common in these encounters, the store clerk has more power in this context, which is not likely to be so in the broader society. As a way to reaffirm his precarious hold on power he asserts his dominance within interactions with women in this particular setting.¹

Michelle explained to me that she was momentarily “frozen” when the store clerk said he didn’t know where her gro-
ceries were and sent her to the end of the line. “At first I wanted to believe this was a joke, until I snapped back to reality and remembered that this is how things work here,” she recounted. She explained to me that she was really angry as she looked at the long line she would have to go back and wait in, and she thought about the time wasted gathering her groceries initially, only to have to do it all over again. At this point Michelle decided to leave the store without the goods she came for. “I didn’t have the energy to fight with him or wait in line again. I went back another day when I had the energy to deal with this kind of thing.” Michelle’s description of this interaction reflects the routine nature of hostile encounters in this space. The scene also indicates how accommodation to circumstances and place are shaped for local residents. Making the decision to leave the store only to return another day when prepared to “deal with this kind of thing” demonstrates her familiarity with this type of interaction.

The consumer-oriented encounter Michelle describes is another example of the frustration and trauma that can accompany daily tasks such as grocery shopping for many women in the inner city. When I asked women in East Oakland how they feel when they are put down, dismissed, or denied service by store employees in the neighborhood many replied just as twenty-four-year-old Jennifer did: “Yeah, I don’t like it and I sure as hell don’t deserve to be treated bad and talked to crazy when I am just asking nicely about something I am paying for, but where else am I going to go?” This question is one that was posed to me repeatedly when I asked about the troubled interactions women experienced in local stores. A significant element of these kinds of interactions is that no matter how customers like Michelle and Jennifer may feel about being dismissed or humiliated during encounters, the community conditions considerably limit residents from being able to shop anywhere else. Poor families tend to suffer this type of limited
mobility and restricted access in many socially isolated low-income communities.

*Hypersurveillance*

Hypersurveillance—keeping extreme watch over others, predominantly under the guise of suspicion—is another type of microinteractional assault that is practiced in the inner city and experienced by women. Throughout the interviews conducted for this study, respondents overwhelmingly reported feelings of anger and frustration with their treatment in local stores in two ways: first, when spending their money (as a paying customer), and second, as potential customers browsing in a store. Several participants noted being closely followed and asked if they needed help by store employees many more times than what they felt was to be generally expected. Two women described being startled by store employees who seemed to “appear from nowhere” while they were shopping. As a twenty-one-year-old respondent described her everyday experience of intense surveillance when she enters neighborhood stores, “Every day, people always look at me crazy and follow me around in stores. They ask me way too many times if I need help.” She went on to illustrate the routine nature in which she is surveilled as she goes about her daily business. With obvious irritation she told of the “crazy” looks she receives and repeated questioning about her need for assistance while inside the establishment. Her claim that this sort of experience happens “every day” represents how MIAs in the form of hypersurveillance have become routine. Although such encounters are visibly upsetting to respondents, as in this case, they have become expected interactions in the urban environment.

In addition to cases of hypersurveillance becoming standard for black women within and beyond the boundaries of the neighborhood there is another level of interaction that accompanies the visual and verbal scrutiny that takes place: the
role of physical intervention as a component of surveillance. One nineteen-year-old woman described to me how she feels about a store employee carrying her merchandise to the register for her and about being followed while in the store. “When I go downtown to [large retail chain] shoe store, me and my friends always get followed around and watched extra close,” she explained. “A couple of times the people at the store carried my stuff to the register for me, but I didn’t see them doing that for anyone else. They probably thought that I was going to try and steal it, but I wasn’t. I don’t get down like that; I have a job.” This respondent stated her awareness that she is likely perceived by store employees to be a thief because she is a young black woman. She challenged this assessment by stressing that she is employed and doesn’t steal, as stealing is something she feels is presumed in such an encounter.

Elijah Anderson argues that in public places black men are often assumed to be poor or criminal simply because they are black. Since these evaluations are often made in very brief public interactions, there is rarely time to disprove these assumptions (Anderson 2011, 255). I propose that this is also true for black women in public places. For example, the young woman in the shoe store expressed her familiarity with such assessments as she recounted her story of being closely monitored by store personnel while shopping. When talking with her about this encounter I observed how she aimed to invalidate the reasons why she was surveilled while in the store. She explained to me that she was employed and had been for years, and she was proud that she did not take part in criminal activity and had no intention of doing so. Like the young men Anderson writes about, she too is seen as someone who carries the stigma of what Anderson describes as the “iconic ghetto” (2011, 255). As a black woman, her race and class status is associated with criminality, poverty, violent behavior, and the like. When the woman entered the shoe store it was quite likely that her
presence was met with apprehension and suspicion because store employees associated her with the iconic ghetto and thought she was prone to criminal behavior and as a result warranted careful monitoring.

In this case the woman recounted more than just being “watched” while in the store; she described a type of hyper-surveillance. Yet this scrutiny is poorly camouflaged as careful and exaggeratedly attentive customer service. Such methods of surveillance are strategic. This manipulation of traditional and civil customer service is careful not to abandon common rituals associated with civility in this setting, like offering help to a customer upon her entrance to the store; this way the customer cannot accuse store employees of being rude, unhelpful, or inattentive. Nevertheless, the woman did not feel as if she received good customer service simply because so much attention was likely paid to her out of suspicion. As a result, she felt as if civility had been abandoned entirely. Though the aim of store personnel may have been for their actions to go undetected as surveillance and instead seen as attentive, the consumer described feeling singled out by the attention she received (Feagin and Sikes 1994, 45–49; Sue 2010, 79). Whether deliberately poor or camouflaged customer service takes place, the targeted patron often leaves feeling hypervisible.

The customer in this case acknowledged that the very specific service she received was not universal; nor was it unsuspecting. Although technically she was being served in a responsive manner, she knew that she was still being surveilled and appraised because of who she is. She saw this as unjust. Yet in this downtown retail store the evaluation being made about this woman and her friends is often the same evaluation made when they enter stores in their residential neighborhood. The appraisal is that these women are criminal and should be closely monitored while inside any retail business. In essence, these women are carrying around the iconic ghetto with them wher-
ever they go. The perception that they represent a form of poverty and crime is a type of social baggage that they never leave home without.

In their work on racism and the black middle class, Joe R. Feagin and Melvin P. Sikes point out that a central problem that black people encounter while shopping is the widespread assumption by whites that their intent is to steal. With this assumption must come uncomfortable consequences. Beyond the reality of surveillance while still in the store, there is a constant reminder that you are black and unequal in a nonblack world. Further, the recurring feelings of frustration, anger, humiliation, and powerlessness stay with you long after leaving the specific racist encounter (Feagin and Sikes 1994, 72–77).

Such testimonies exhibit some of the implications that come with being marked as suspicious or threatening, to the point of being under careful watch while in public. As these respondents carry out the daily tasks of shopping, store employees and possibly others treat them with skepticism. The respondents note this type of treatment when shopping in both the neighborhoods in which they live and in other communities. This brings up the question of where one belongs. Being treated as a problem, inconvenience, or threat is an assault on oneself and one’s character. While simultaneously being a consumer, this sends a powerful message that, based on visible identity markers, one person’s patronage is not as valuable as that of another. Gardener talks about communication in public being very “appearance dependent” based on physical qualities, nonverbal indicators, and overall appearance; she points out that this encourages judgment from both parties and makes stereotypes predictable (1995, 52–53).

In situated encounters like this one a woman’s race, class, and gender are communicated and defined before she enters a store. Her presence in the store operates as a type of trigger that elicits a reaction from the store employees based on prede-termined associations between what they perceive to be the
woman’s race, class, and gender and wider ideas such as crime, violence, and poverty. As both verbal and nonverbal interactions unfold between consumer and store employees, the consumer becomes accountable to the normative ideas that store personnel have about young, black, women. Her presence in this space gives those she encounters there an opportunity to make the predetermined associations they have about her real. This woman and others like her experience daily encounters where they walk into expectations informed by gender, race, and class and shaped by controlling images. Interactions like this one contribute to the reproduction of inequality. These public scenes operate as a mechanism through which dominant oppressive beliefs produce individual consequences from day to day (West and Fenstermaker 1995). The repetitive nature of these sorts of episodes for members of disadvantaged groups reinforces their subordinate social status to self and others alike.

Often it is assumed that only black men are exposed to these types of encounters. I suggest that women are also exposed to this sort of surveillance simply by virtue of their subordinate position in a race/class hierarchy. The stereotype of “black dangerousness” can produce an image of a hostile, violent, and angry black man (Sue 2010, 259), but the widespread understanding of blackness in general being associated with crime and violent behavior does not exclude women. Black women’s oppression can take the form of racism in one instance, sexism in another, or gendered racism (Feagin and McKinney 2003, 19). The strength of oppressive race, class, and gender forces at work in the lives of women of color is what Denise A. Segura describes as “triple oppression”; she notes that the cumulative impact of this particular form of oppression places women of color in a “subordinate social and economic position relative to men of color and the white population” (1986, 48). Though black men may be the go-to image representing the “black dangerousness” stereotype, black women are very much associated with the
ideas of violence and criminal behavior linked to this perception. The expectation of black women as criminal and violent is informed by prevailing controlling images. The cumulative impact of this association works to further complicate black women's oppression.

**Interactional Resistance in Consumer-Oriented Microinteractional Assaults**

Black women are regularly exposed to microinteractional assaults, and they develop a set of strategies to protect themselves from injury or harm. These strategies of defense include physical and, more commonly, verbal confrontations in response to MIAs. I use the term *interactional resistance* to refer to these verbal and physical oppositions to MIAs. Women from the inner city use interactional resistance to challenge being overcharged in the grocery store and as a way to call attention to being treated with less than common courtesy by employees while shopping.

Considering the routine experiences black women have with microinteractional assaults in local businesses, their value as consumers seems insignificant. According to the McKinsey Global Institute's (2009) analysis of consumer spending and U.S. economic growth from 2000 to 2007, consumer spending accounted for a contribution of over 75 percent. With a U.S. economy so reliant on consumer spending one would think that the role of any consumer is an important one. The everyday MIAs that women encounter while shopping in the inner city is a reminder that the value of consumer status is often associated with race, gender, and, class identity. The routine troubled encounters women experience with store personnel while shopping in urban communities indicate that they are often perceived as unworthy of the common courtesy most customers receive. This unworthiness goes beyond the
level of face-to-face interaction. Based on their race, class, and
gender, black women also seem to be appraised as less valuable
consumers. In sum, women in the inner city describe encoun-
ters with harassment and, in general, being treated as insignifi-
cant. Being perceived as a consumer who is not valued increases
the negative impact of MIAs.

Interactional resistance plays out in distinct ways for black
women shopping in poor urban neighborhoods. The follow-
ing excerpt from my field notes documents a hostile encounter
in which Mecca, a black woman and neighborhood resident,
acknowledges and contests being overcharged for a store item.
This excerpt displays how the store clerk refuses to correct or
even give further attention to the possibility of overcharging
Mecca, even after she brings it to his attention. This dismissal
of Mecca’s request by the store clerk suggests that he believes
his actions to be acceptable. His construction of her as some-
one worthy of being dismissed suggests she is being evaluated
within the context of a controlling image (Collins 2004, 123),
an image that was conceived before this interaction and will
likely remain once it is over:

I wait in the checkout line at the neighborhood grocery
store close enough to hear the interaction unfold at the
head of the line. The woman at the head of the line getting
her items rung up lives in the neighborhood and I know
her as Mecca. I hear her say to the store clerk helping her,
“No, that is $15.99, not $21.99. I saw it in the sale paper the
other day and the sticker on the shelf says $15.99—go look
for yourself.” Agitated, the checker replies to the young
woman, “It doesn’t matter what the sticker says or what the
paper says. I have to charge you what is listed in my com-
puter.” Mecca answers back, “I don’t care what your com-
puter says, and y’all shouldn’t put in the paper prices that
aren’t true.” The checker then says, “I don’t know what you
It Happens All the Time

saw, but I still have to charge you the $21.99.” Mecca retorts, “Yeah, whatever. But I’m gonna bring the paper in here so you can give me back the difference.” The checker says, “You have to take that up with the manager.” As the checker puts Mecca’s bottle of tequila (the item for which the price is under debate) in a grocery bag she says to him, “Why can you overcharge me but I have to go to the manager to get it right? And, knowing him, that will probably never happen. This whole thing is fucked up.” The checker looks at Mecca with a smirk on his face as she leaves the store. The man waiting in front of me steps up in the line to have his merchandise rung up. The store clerk looks at the middle-aged black man and says aloud, “Some people.” The man replied, “She was right. I saw the same price she said was advertised in the sale paper.” The checker mumbles, “Whatever. Not my problem.” The man shakes his head and remains silent.

This excerpt depicts an encounter in which Mecca employs interactional resistance. She asserts herself to the store employee whom she believes is charging her more than the quoted sale price. The store clerk does not offer to do a price check or to consult a manager or another employee in an effort to clear up this matter. He and Mecca engage in back-and-forth talk regarding this price, yet the store employee does not change his position. Further, he makes it clear to Mecca and to others who can hear him that this is not his problem; it is hers. If she wants someone to look into the matter she must return to the store at another time and consult with the store manager.

The ways in which the store clerk engages in a particular set of “rules” regarding a price dispute with Mecca operates as a form of social control over poor black customers. He asserts his dominant status as the intermediary between Mecca and the product she wants to purchase. In situations like this one he makes the final determination as to what price will be
charged for the item in question. For many local residents who have limited access to other grocery stores they are forced to abide by the “rules” at work even if they are manipulated based on the race, class, and gender of the customer.

The issue of invoking the store manager is significant here. Taking into account when and why the store clerk suggests that Mecca consult the manager is complicated, because not every customer with a discrepancy is referred to a store manager; this only happens in particular cases. Here I consider some of Mecca’s categorical identities to be culprits in why she must seek out a manager to obtain a fair resolution. Why can’t this relatively simple matter be solved with the store employee before her? This brings up the different outcomes in regard to fairness for different people based on categorical identity.

When Mecca verbally disputes the price being charged, she interrupts the normal flow of an interaction, momentarily upsetting the raced and gendered power structure within the interaction. When the white male clerk’s declaration of the price to be charged is not readily accepted by this traditionally subordinate black woman, he then calls on a structural resource of power in this setting: the store manager.

Ultimately, Mecca does purchase the item, yet she makes clear through her verbal interaction with the store clerk that there is a problem. She does this in a voice loud enough for all those in a reasonable distance to hear that she is aware that she is being wronged. Even after Mecca exits the store her position becomes reinforced without her knowledge. The middle-aged black man who waits patiently behind Mecca in the grocery line displays solidarity with her when he tells the store clerk that the price he charged her is incorrect and that the young woman was valid in her request. Even though Mecca leaves the store after purchasing the item under dispute, her interaction reveals that she does not ignore what is happening.
Mecca does not back down from being overcharged by the white male store clerk, who appears to be in his early forties. In this case she still purchases the product, which is not an uncommon practice even when being overcharged. As a result of limited resources caused by the social isolation that often accompanies racialized poverty in East Oakland, there are few other stores in which to shop. By purchasing this product that she believes she is being overcharged for, Mecca can appear to the store clerk and others not close enough to hear the interaction as being loud and aggressive for no “real” reason. Such interactions can be perceived in a way that reinforces controlling images of black working class women as “bitches.” Though Mecca is asserting herself by pointing out a price discrepancy because of her particular race, class, and gender, as many consumers would, she can easily be perceived as “confrontational and actively aggressive” in interactions like this (Collins 2004, 123). Her encounter in the grocery store is an instance of everyday racism informed by her class and gender. Mecca’s method of confronting this situation was direct and unwavering. Feagin and Sikes suggest that this is one of many strategies often employed by blacks in the face of daily discrimination from whites. In their study of racism and the black middle class, Feagin and Sikes (1994) describe how when encountering routine racist slights in public, some believe it is important to demand respect and educate the other party on his ignorant behavior (1994, 47–49). They note that over time this method causes a slightly lesser degree of psychological stress and harm than some more suppressive methods.

There are a number of businesses that my respondents in East Oakland regularly frequented. Many women complained of consistently poor service by store employees when shopping in the local grocery store. When I inquired about what this “poor service” looked like, Myisha, a twenty-four-year-old
A woman who has lived in East Oakland her entire life, explained what shopping is often like for her:

When I go to the store and I need something that they don’t have out on the shelf I just leave. I don’t ask anyone to check and see if they have it anymore, because it’s always a problem. Either they just say they don’t have it without checking or they say they are going to go look and then they never come back to let me know either way. Same goes if something is up on a high shelf and I can’t reach it; I look around for a ladder or stool to give me a lift so I can get the item myself. I do this because if I ask someone who works at the store to get it for me, they say to give them a few minutes to get a ladder but never usually return to help me. It is so frustrating because I am spending my money just like everybody else, but it’s like they don’t even care.

Myisha explains that she often feels dismissed while interacting with the store’s personnel as she attempts to buy goods there. This experience of dismissal is a key feature of consumer-oriented MIAs and in part shapes how these encounters unfold. Myisha employs a form of interactional resistance by limiting verbal interaction with store employees; she draws on her past experiences of having her questions and requests dismissed, and at times ignored or denied, to inform her current resistant actions. Here she explains her resistant reactions in two ways. First, if she doesn’t see what she came to the store to purchase out on the shelf she leaves the store, no questions asked. If she can’t find the items she’s looking for she does not consult with store employees; in fact, she tries to keep encounters with them to a minimum. If she sees goods she wants but they are located out of her reach, she takes on the responsibility of finding a way to access the items herself by locating a stool or ladder. In doing this she blurs the boundaries of traditional customer behavior and the behavior of store staff: at this moment she is
required to perform the tasks she is essentially paying for as a store patron.

Both Mecca and Myisha must live with the consequences of the different ways in which they manage consumer-oriented MIAs. These small acts of resistance appear unsuccessful in disrupting fundamental inequalities. Rather, they risk reinforcing stereotypes about black women as angry, loud, confrontational, and so on. When women in the neighborhood have encounters in local stores where they believe they are being overcharged or generally mistreated by store employees, they become angry. Some react aggressively, reinforcing widespread beliefs about who they are.

The two forms of interactional resistance that Myisha performs—leaving the store when she can’t find what she needs or climbing up on a store ladder to reach items that store employees won’t get for her—are complicated and interconnected. These actions, which are a result of situational circumstances, contrast with expectations of hegemonic femininity. Myisha does not defer to store employees when she cannot find an item she needs or if a product is out of her reach. Instead she enters the store with no intention of seeking help even if she needs it; she steps outside the boundaries of typical customer behavior by climbing atop store ladders to reach available products. Such actions do not project the submissive demeanor commonly linked to white middle-class femininity. Myisha’s actions illustrate not only that such characteristics of normative femininity may not be desirable but also that they are not possible if she is to successfully acquire the goods she needs from local stores where she is evaluated as an inferior consumer and unworthy of civility (Collins 2004, 193–197). Myisha indicates that on the occasions that she leaves the store empty-handed she must still return; this continued patronage after multiple instances of poor service suggests that she has few, if any, local options for places in which to purchase her groceries. She acknowledges with
precision her experiences of frequent troubled encounters in stores, yet still she must endure them repeatedly. This is why daily life can often feel like a grind for poor black women.

The types of interactional resistance that Myisha performs also operate as strategies she uses to manage recurring consumer-oriented MIAs. Her strategies provide her with ways to keep such assaults at bay, at least some of the time, while still being able to access groceries and other goods needed to survive from day to day. The forms of interactional resistance Myisha carries out are complicated by her not having the luxury of boycotting this business in the traditional sense. Instead she rejects interaction with immediate representatives of the establishment—its employees. Additionally, while resisting the interactional power present she remains proactive in getting her needs met. She does this by declaring her own sense of dominance in this space by using store-owned ladders and stools to reach what she needs herself. She creatively exerts what power she has in an effort to keep her interactions with store employees minimal while still trying to get the goods she desires. When I talked with Myisha about how she felt about the kinds of interactions she had with store personnel, she explained, “It doesn’t feel good being ignored, and all you’re trying to do is buy food and you’re not bothering anybody.” She went on to say that even though she doesn’t like it, this is the reality if she is going to continue living in this community. So, for now, she tries to avoid any verbal exchange with store employees as best she can.

Myisha is not alone in her experiences of feeling dismissed and ignored while shopping. “Black shoppers at all income levels report being ignored when in need of service,” note Feagin and Sikes (1994, 48). Yet such feelings do not simply fade away at the close of an interaction. Associated emotions like pain, frustration, anger, and humiliation can be long lasting. Single incidents of hostility and discrimination can often produce lifelong memories that inform the lives and perspec-
tives of those targeted. The Rotter Introversion–Extroversion Scale, which measures whether people feel in control of their lives, has found that blacks and whites score differently. Research studies using this scale describe how blacks primarily seem to feel that their lives are controlled by outside forces. A key component here is that when one feels little to no control over his life there is a struggle in maintaining a sense of personal well-being and achieving desired life goals. Continued fighting against daily MIAs rooted in discrimination can result in a very real sense of powerlessness (Feagin and Sikes 1994, 76). The experiences of present-day MIAs are also directly linked to historical trauma, including the generational inheritance of histories of discrimination. As a result, for every assault that occurs today, every past wound—even those of prior generations—is deepened. Finally, it must be taken into account that experiences of microaggressive stress that happen to marginalized groups compound ordinary stressful life events that occur for almost everyone, and together they result in a profound if not inhuman amount of stress for any person to endure (Sue 2010, 96). In the case, specifically, of poor black women, situational circumstances encourage them to violate gender expectations, which makes them more vulnerable to sanctions. For example, poor black women who have worked outside the home for generations and as a result are not financially subordinated within black families and communities have been marked as less feminine because they have to work. Such work outside the home violates assumptions of hegemonic femininity. This kind of work makes it hard to view black women as delicate or attractive. Hegemonic black femininity marks the least desirable form of femininity as it is composed of prevailing images of black women as bitches, whores, bad mothers, and the like (Collins 2005, 193–199). This status of being on the bottom of the social hierarchy places black women at risk to the violence and oppression reserved for those who are not “real women.”
Intersections of race, class, and gender inform even the most simple and routine life tasks. For black women living in urban communities, significant time out of their daily lives is spent experiencing and refuting microinteractional assaults as they maneuver through public space. As women carry out the routine public tasks associated with managing their daily lives they experience different types of MIAs. Understanding the key features of these encounters, how they typically unfold, and the consequences of such interactions reveals in part what inner-city life is like for poor black women. Through these encounters we see how race, class, and gender directly influence and complicate how women experience some of the daily demands of inner-city life, including how they have become familiar with the trauma of these assaults not only within the encounters themselves but also through their lasting consequences.

To be routinely targeted by verbal and behavioral humiliation works as a way of evaluating who these women are and who they are not. With each troubled public interaction where race, class, and gender are communicated, defined, and evaluated, we simultaneously see the courtesies of public civility disregarded. Such encounters reproduce inequality via the reinforcement of dominant perceptions of women in the urban space. With every MIA that occurs, a larger message is conveyed that poor black women are unworthy of civil public interaction. To be marked as unworthy of a form of basic human courtesy is both a powerful and extremely harmful label. Such a status increases the vulnerability of black women to harassment and abuse in the public space.

As a result of countless encounters over their lives, women in my study were aware that MIAs are likely to await them when entering a local grocery or corner store. This repeated experience and its harmful consequences can become overwhelming. For women already struggling to manage daily lives complicated by poverty, underemployment, and violence,
routinely encountering hostility, dismissal, and denial when trying to purchase necessities intensifies the constant daily stress they already live with. Scholars have found that the constant and cumulative nature of these kinds of encounters causes intense levels of stress for members of marginalized groups. Such stress over time has been proven to negatively impact one’s physical, emotional, and psychological health (Sue 2010, 105–109). Yet in large part these effects have been found when evaluating members of the middle-class and above. For poor black women who already live under harsh conditions in underserved communities, routine experiences with MIAs intensify their already difficult lives. Consequently, these customary encounters seem to be extremely detrimental to their overall health. Daily experiences with MIAs over the course of a lifetime appear to be a very harmful and life-altering punishment for being poor, female, and black in an urban setting.