WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT MICROAGGRESSION BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK

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ABSTRACT

Microaggression has been defined as "the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, and sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue, 2010, p. 229). Microaggression has been an underexplored construct in organizational psychology studies to date. In this paper, we provide a comprehensive review of the microaggression literature and describe its characteristics, classifications and themes, and provide examples of conduct that constitute microaggressive behaviors. In doing so, we discuss what it is and what it is not, by exploring the conceptual overlap and distinction between microaggression and various other forms of negative acts such as aggression, bullying, incivility, social dominance theory, and social stigma and ostracism. We then posit that microaggression is likely present in many workplaces and how it may manifest. We describe the difficulty in correctly interpreting the intent or lack of intent of the perpetrator and consider the psychological dilemmas created by microaggression that contribute to the difficulty in discussing or addressing microaggression. We examine the impact of microaggression, and discuss the coping mechanisms used by targets and observers of microaggressive behaviors. Finally, we provide a discussion as to implications and recommendations for managers and work environments to create an organizational culture that reduces or mitigates the occurrence of microaggression in their organization.

Keywords: workplace microaggression, microaggression, incivility, bullying, aggression, stigma

WHAT IS MICROAGGRESSION?

The term micro-aggression has evolved since its inception in the 1970s by Chester M. Pierce, when he used it to describe various slights and dismissals he observed committed by non-black Americans towards African Americans. Microaggressions were defined as "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges which are "putdowns" (Pierce et al., 1978, p. 66). The term was extended by Mary Rowe in 1973 by suggesting that certain types of comments directed towards women could also be considered microaggression. She referred to these actions as "apparently small events which are often ephemeral and hard-to-prove, events which are covert, often unintentional, frequently unrecognized by the perpetrator, which occur wherever people are perceived to be 'different'" (Rowe, 2008, p. 2). Microaggression has been further expanded to refer to primarily unintentional, unplanned degradation of socially marginalized group members since that time (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, 2019; Paludi et al., 2010). Members of groups that experience "societal exclusion due to race, gender, social economic status (SES), disability, and/or sexual orientation" are likely to experience microaggressions (Johnson & Johnson, 2019, p. 2).

Sue (2010) defined microaggressions as "the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, and sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group" (p. 229). The term microaggression has evolved

from forms of racism to recognizing "the subtle indignities regularly suffered by marginalized groups" (Johnson & Johnson, 2019, p. 2). According to Merriam-Webster, a microaggression is a "comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group (such as a racial minority)."

Classifications of Microaggression

Sue et al. (2007) theorized that there are three distinct forms of microaggression and related those to persons of color; namely, microassault, microinsult, and microinvalidation. Nadal (2013) examined these classifications in terms of the LGBTQ+ community, and in Nadal (2018), elaborated on the effects of these classifications to additional communities of people.

Microassault: This type includes verbal or non-verbal slights, insults and behaviors, which may be deliberate and obvious, manifesting as conventional forms of discrimination. These actions may include name-calling, verbal remarks that are disparaging, or inactions such as avoidance and exclusion. Some microassaults are both blatant and intentional, such as when a manager specifies to their subordinate staff member not to hire any "feminine men", knowing that their staff member is part of the LGBTQ+ community. In contrast, some microassaults can convey deliberate or implied biases but are not intended to be harmful. For example, it is common in humor to make jokes referring to stereotypes relating to groups of people, most often when the comedian is a member of the group. Although not intended to be hateful, these jokes or insults can perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

Microinsult: This type includes verbal remarks or behaviors that contain stereotypes about members of distinctive groups. Microinsults can be veiled, aware or unaware, purposeful or accidental, and often suggest a concealed offensive message (Berk, 2017). These may include impolite or offensive comments, indirect rebuffs, or insulting messages that are not realized by the perpetrator (Sue et al., 2007; Nadal 2013). Conversely, deliberate verbal and non-verbal behaviors such as profiling and acting on the belief that a black person is more likely to be unemployed, or making comments about the "masculinity" of a female athlete, are also examples of microinsults. Verbal digs, derisive remarks, and jokes, which may be considered humorous perpetuate stereotypes, can also be considered microinsults (Berk, 2017). A perpetrator's implicit biases can also reveal themselves through microinsults (Berk, 2017).

Microinvalidation: This type is most often verbal rather than behavioral, and attempts to deny, refute, or dispute the lived experiences of members of various groups. Situations where people are told that their perceptions of not being considered equal citizens is their imagination and that they should stop "whining" about their imaginary plight is an example of microinvalidation. In the USA, the lasting intergenerational effects of slavery are questioned by some individuals, and believe that black people should "just get over it.

Themes of Microaggression

In considering racial microaggression, Sue et al. (2007) proposed nine themes of microaggression, depicted in Table 1.

Table 1
Themes of Microaggression Examples

Microaggression Theme	Description	Example
Alien in own land	When it is assumed that people of color (POC) are from a different country or immigrants.	"You speak English very well for a newcomer."
Ascription of intelligence	When POC are assigned a level of intelligence based on their race.	"I hope there are applicants from Japan for the job as they have great computer skills."
Color blindness	When POC are told that there is no differential treatment or discrimination due to race.	"I treat everyone the same."
Criminality/assumption of criminal status	When POC are assumed to be criminals or dangerous due to their race.	"I will need you to pre-pay your taxi fare before I take you anywhere."
Denial of individual racism	When statements are made denying racial biases.	"I have friends that are Jewish, so I can't be racist."
Myth of meritocracy	When the assumption is made that race does not affect life successes.	"If you work hard enough in school, you can have a great job like everyone else."
Pathologizing cultural values/communication styles	When non-majority cultures and values or communication styles are perceived as less desirable.	"You need to speak louder."
Second-class citizenship	When POCs are not treated as equals or do not receive equal rights.	"I'll take your order once I have helped everyone else."
Environmental microaggressions	When enduring environmental messages of being unwelcome or devalued.	"I see no issue with having statues of plantation owners in the neighborhood."

This identification of themes of microaggression was revised and expanded in 2010 by Sue to consider identities other than race for experienced microaggressions. The expanded listing of themes includes Alien in own land, Ascription of intelligence, Color blindness, Criminality/Assumption of Criminal Status, Denial of Individual Racism/Sexism/Heterosexism, Myth of Meritocracy, Pathologizing cultural values/communication styles, Second-class citizen, Sexist/Heterosexist language, and Traditional gender role prejudicing and stereotyping.

Williams et al. (2021) developed a revised racial taxonomy of microaggression based on a review of 61 studies. This taxonomy is comprised of 16 categories: Not a true citizen; Racial categorization and sameness; Assumptions about intelligence, competence, or status; False color blindness/invalidating racial or ethnic identity; Criminality or dangerousness; Denial of

individual racism; Myth of meritocracy/race is irrelevant for success; Reverse-racism hostility; Pathologizing minority culture or appearance; Second-class citizen/ignored and invisible; Tokenism; Connecting via stereotypes; Exoticization and eroticization; Avoidance and distancing; Environmental exclusion; and, Environmental attacks.

Nature and Intent of Microaggressions

Although the above examples are of a verbal nature, it should be recognized that many microaggressions are nonverbal in nature. These types of microaggressions can be specific actions, inactions, expressed through body language, or environmental assaults, whether intentional or not. Some examples of nonverbal microaggressions (Gueits, 2022; Nadal, 2018; Sue, 2010; Torino et al., 2019; Williams, M., 2019) might include:

- People clearly "tune-out" when you are speaking or try to contribute to the discussion.
- People roll their eyes when you say that you feel invalidated.
- Physically turning their back on you or avoiding in-person interactions.
- Facial expressions that show scorn or contempt when you speak.
- Not verifying in advance that the event or meeting spaces are accessible for persons with disabilities.
- People interrupting you or excluding you in conversations.
- Not ensuring that everyone's dietary needs are considered when ordering food for a meeting.
- A bank teller counts out your cash withdrawal onto the countertop, rather than in your hand as previously done with all other customers.
- Putting up a road sign to commemorate a past leader that perpetuated human suffering.

Microaggressions are more than merely thoughtless remarks, insults, or negative behaviors. They are actually quite specific – the types of questions, jokes, comments or deeds that are upsetting as they refer to a person's membership in a group that may be subject to stereotypes or discriminated against (Desmond-Harrisjenne, 2015). In addition, they often happen offhandedly and thoughtlessly, and often without intending harm to the recipient (Desmond-Harrisjenne, 2015).

Many acts of microaggressions are unintentional, and therefore are not perceived by the perpetrator as negative or harmful. Indeed, many perpetrators believe that their communications or behaviors are helpful and supportive (Smart Richman & Leary, 2009; Williams, M., 2019). In some cases, perpetrators see their comments as part of their personal style, where the use of sarcasm or pithy choice of words is their trademark (Berk, 2017).

RELATED THEORIES TO MICROAGGRESSION

Social-Dominance

Microaggressions persevere over time as the underlying root of these actions support social inequalities and hierarchies that the in-group desires expense and are detrimental to the out-group (Williams, M., 2019). Social-dominance theory (Pratto, 1999) suggests that group-based disparities are reinforced by intergroup behaviors. These intergroup behaviors include behavioral asymmetry (like microaggressions) and individual discrimination (Sidanius et al., 2012). Rationalization of these behaviors are achieved by considering cultural myths which

generate inaccurate stereotypes that further support and allow inequality to flourish (Sidanius et al. 1992; Williams, M., 2019). Social-dominance theory has often been applied to various forms of discrimination (Foels & Pratto, 2015), and microaggressions can be studied using this framework.

Aggression

In social contexts, aggression is normally defined as "behavior that is intended to harm another person who is motivated to avoid that harm" (Allen & Anderson, 2017, p. 2). These authors indicate that two main criteria need to be present to be considered aggression (Allen & Anderson, 2017). Aggression must manifest as an observable behavior, and therefore it cannot be limited to a thought or feeling or belief. In addition, the behavior must be deliberate and intended to harm another person. For this reason, harm that is caused accidentally is without intent and cannot be considered aggression. Since microaggressions are often unintentional or even well-intentioned, and potential harms small, microaggressions are not generally classified as a type of aggression or violence (Williams, M., 2019). For these reasons, Lilienfeld (2017) objected to the use of the term microaggression, as it did not fully fit the social psychology definition of aggression. Aggression versus microaggression literatures come from different experiences.

Pierce et al. (1978) proposed the term microaggression to describe all forms of covert and subtle racism, and the use of microaggression has been evident within multicultural psychology for over 50 years (Williams, M., 2019). Freeman and Stewart (2019) discussed the term microaggression as appropriate due to "micro" signaling the perpetrator's viewpoint of the size of the wrongdoing, and "aggression" refers to the perspective of the target in the situation. Further, aggression may occur when the target of the microaggression attempts to confront the perpetrator but is fearful of the potential consequences of taking this action (Williams, M., 2019). Therefore, microaggressions are distasteful and unwanted, but targets are often not able or willing to reject them (Nadal, 2018; Sue, 2010; Torino et al., 2019).

Incivility

Andersson and Pearson (1999, p. 456) defined incivility as "low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm the target". The differentiating characteristic of incivility versus aggression "is that the intent to harm – as perceived through the eyes of the instigator, the target, and/or the observers – is ambiguous" (Andersson & Pearson, 1999, p. 456). A person may exhibit behaviors that are uncivil fully intending to harm the target, or are without intent. In addition, the perpetrator may not even be aware of their intent to harm the target (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Finally, in contrast to perpetrators of aggression, the intent is not clear and may be subject to interpretation allowing perpetrators to deny intent to harm and may result in perpetrators indicating that the comments or behavior wasn't meant to be harmful, it was misinterpreted by the target, is meant to be a joke, or that the target is hypersensitive (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Nadal, 2018; Reich & Hershcovis, 2015).

Microaggression also conceptually overlaps with selective incivility as a form of subtle bias (Haynes-Baratz et al., 2021). Selective incivility combines the concepts of general incivility (as discussed above) with modern or contemporary forms of discrimination in organizations (Cortina et al., 2013). Cortina (2008) put forth the theory of selective incivility to describe the modern expression of bias that affects women and people of color in work life. In addition,

theories put forth of double jeopardy and intersectionality submit that women of color may be more subjected to this form of mistreatment (Cortina et al., 2013). Evidence also suggests that observers or bystanders who experience incivility second hand (by observing the mistreatment of coworkers) also have negative outcomes (Cortina et al., 2013; Lim et al., 2008).

Bullying

According to Matthiesen and Einarsen (2010), workplace bullying is the persistent exposure to interpersonal aggression and mistreatment. According to the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, bullying is "usually seen as acts or verbal comments that could psychologically or 'mentally' hurt or isolate a person in the workplace…Bullying usually involves repeated incidents or a pattern of behavior that is intended to intimidate, offend, degrade or humiliate a particular person or group of people. It has also been described as the assertion of power through aggression." As described by Einarsen et al. (2003, p. 15), "bullying is an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. A conflict cannot be called bullying if the incident is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal 'strength' are in conflict".

Bullying can be considered a subtype of aggression, where aggression is goal-directed and intentional (Neuman and Baron, 2005). The concept of intent distinguishes workplace aggression from bullying, as intent of the perpetrator is normally not a required component in bullying research (Zapf & Einarsen, 2005). Often, it is difficult to confirm the presence of intent in bullying behaviors (Zapf & Einarsen, 2005), and most definitions of bullying exclude intent as it is difficult to determine different components of intention, such as the intent to act, the intent to harm, the intent to victimize, and the intent to be systematic and repeated (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010).

Many similarities between bullying experiences and microaggression exist, but bullying by definition requires a series of occurrences or a recurring pattern of behavior by the perpetrator, whereas microaggression may entail only one experience or incident, although the harm experienced by the target may be as severe (Berk, 2017).

Negative Interpersonal Experiences (Social Stigma and Ostracism)

There is a considerable body of work associated with the effects of negative interpersonal experiences. As observed by Smart Richman and Leary (2009), "this work is currently scattered across a number of disparate areas of behavioral science and appears under the guise of a variety of different phenomena such as ostracism, exclusion, rejection, discrimination, stigmatization, prejudice, betrayal, unrequited love, peer rejection, bullying, neglect, loneliness, homesickness, and humiliation" (p. 365). As such, it is often difficult to acknowledge and integrate work done by authors in this diverse literature base. Herein, we will highlight several constructs that most closely relate to microaggression theory.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) developed the concept of the *need to belong* from reviewing significant evidence in the literature indicating that human behavior, thought, and emotion are widely motivated by a fundamental interpersonal aim to garner acceptance and to avoid rejection by other people. These authors believed that the need to belong originates from human evolution due to human dependence on cooperative social relationships and membership

in groups for reproduction and survival. Acceptance and belonging are required for both physical and psychological health and well-being, and those experiencing rejection will be in a state of deprivation detrimentally affecting their emotions, thoughts and behaviors (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Smart Richman & Leary, 2009). When a group member is expelled from a group or the entire group is ostracized, this threatens the goal of being respected and accepted by others (Smart Richman & Leary, 2009; Williams, K.D., 2007; Williams & Nida, 2022). In addition, many implied indicators of "prejudice and stigmatization are couched in neutral (and even positive) terms (McConahay, 1986), instances in which people are avoided or ignored are often subtle, and people sometimes have difficulty knowing whether a criticism connotes well-meaning constructive feedback or a sign of social devaluation and lowered acceptance" (Smart Richman & Leary, 2009, p. 366). Regardless, the power of these types of experiences is based on the threat that other people will not accept or include them in social groups or interpersonal relationships, negatively affecting their perceived relational value (Smart Richman & Leary, 2009; Williams, K.D., 2007).

DeSouza et al. (2017) determined that both ostracism and microaggression are subtle types of discrimination that stigmatized persons experience in their workplaces. These authors argue that microaggression theory is an extension to stigma research by Sue et al. (2007) and Nadal (2008). Mounting evidence indicates that stigma is at the root of ostracism and bullying behaviors. Social ostracism, when individuals are excluded or ignored, can be experienced in many social contexts (Williams, K.D., 2009). Ostracism may also be perceived to jeopardize access to basic psychological needs, such as the need for control, self-esteem, belonging, and meaningful existence (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Smart Richman & Leary, 2009; Williams, K.D., 2007; Williams, K.D., 2009; Williams & Nida, 2022).

DeSouza et al. (2017) conceptualized microaggressions:

> As acts of commission (e.g., making a subtle but insulting comment that is typically aimed at or intended for an out-group member). In contrast, ostracism may be conceptualized as acts of omission (e.g., ignoring an individual) that are typically generalized and can be used on either in-group or out-group members, thus being hard to substantiate with perpetrators easily evading blame (Williams, K.D., 2001). For example, if accused of explicitly ignoring someone in a social gathering or neglecting to include someone on a mass email, the ostracizer can claim ignorance and argue the ostracized person simply has misinterpreted the event as something malevolent. Further, bystanders may assume that the target is simply being overly sensitive because there is no direct evidence of discrimination. (pp. 124-125)

Additional authors in the microaggression research area consider ostracism behaviors as microaggression, in particular behaviors related to the theme of invisibility, second-class citizen, or non-verbal behaviors (e.g., Gueits, 2022: Nadal, 2018; Sue et al., 2007; Sue, 2010; Torino et al., 2019; Williams, K.D., 2009; Williams, M., 2019).

EXTENDING MICROAGGRESSION

Since 2007, more than 100 studies have examined microaggressions targeting persons of and those in the LGBTQ+ (Nadal, 2018; Resnick & Paz Galupo, 2019). Persons who belong to identifiable groups such as race, religion, gender/cisgender, ethnicity/culture/nationality, sexuality and sexual orientation, persons with mental disability or illnesses, physical disabilities,

ageism/age generation, and intolerance to different belief systems have all been subject to microaggressive behaviors (e.g., Berk, 2017). More recently, research is being conducted to determine whether experiences of microaggressions differ depending on the individual's group affiliation.

Intersectional microaggression has been examined since 2015, where a person's membership in more than one group could affect the type and severity of microaggressions that are experienced (Nadal et al., 2015: Weber et al., 2018). For example, a person who identifies as homosexual and disabled could be targeted and encounter microaggressions related to each of the identities, plus cumulative microaggressions related to both identities.

Hierarchical Microaggression

While conducting a literature review of research on microaggression, one paper (Young et al., 2015) applied microaggression to a workplace context (hierarchical microaggressions), and Berk (2017) further extended this concept. Young et al. (2015) used academic workplaces to highlight that the recognized status and positional hierarchy could result in those in power positions perpetrating microaggressions over individuals lower in the hierarchical structure. In academic environments, a person's rank is initially based on their level of education. A high level of privilege is provided to those with a doctoral degree, and those with no or lesser degrees are afforded a lower or lack of privilege (Berk, 2017; Young et al., 2015). Hierarchical relationships also exist between and within categories of positions, such as staff, faculty, and administration. Academic administration (president, deans, department chairs, etc.) have the highest level of privilege. Faculty (professoriate ranked individuals, instructors, and adjunct) have a lower level of privilege. Lastly, staff (administrative assistants, technology specialists, nonfaculty employees such as electricians, events personnel, and janitors) have the lowest level of privilege. There is also hierarchical ranking or "pecking orders" within each of the categories of work roles. To illustrate, faculty ranking accords full professors the highest level, then associate professors, assistant professors, then instructor category faculty members, then adjunct faculty, etc. More vulnerable are academic staff and lower ranked, nontenured, and adjunct faculty (Berk, 2017). The "value" of positions determined by the hierarchical ranking in the workplace create an environment suitable for hierarchical microaggressions to occur (Young et al., 2015). Young et al. (2015) defined these as "everyday slights found in higher education that communicate systematic valuing (or devaluing) of a person because of the institutional role held by that person" (p. 62).

Based on the work environment, hierarchical microaggressive behaviors may or may not resemble those targeted toward underrepresented group members, and have differing motives (Young et al., 2015). Young et al. (2015) found four themes to describe these hierarchical microaggressions: "valuing/devaluing based on role/credential, changing accepted behavior based on role, actions (ignoring/excluding/surprise/interrupting) related to role, and terminology related to work position" (p. 61).

Individuals experiencing hierarchical microaggressions also experience the combined effect of intersectionality where their position in the organization and membership in an underrepresented group can create additional targeting by a perpetrator (Berk, 2017; O'Farrell et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2021; Young et al., 2015). This issue is further exacerbated by the prevalence of underrepresented employees in lower ranks in an academic workplace (and/or are

in contingent or temporary positions), which can increase the likelihood of becoming a target for microaggression (both hierarchical and associated with underrepresented group identity).

Extending Workplace Microaggression to All Individuals

Our review of studies indicates that any definable group can be subjected to microaggressions. As such, microaggression can be considered a subtle type of bullying that uses linguistic power, resulting in marginalizing any target with an indication of intolerance by demonstrating the concept of *other* (Gendron et al., 2016). As a result, microaggressive behaviors are present in all areas of life, including in public, private or work-related environments. Previous research has focused on the experience of microaggression targeting marginalized or underrepresented groups. In contrast, this paper posits that anyone can be subject to microaggression due to some characteristic that the perpetrator thinks are less valued or valuable. This paper also focuses on microaggression in workplace environments wherein which any individual that is considered *different* or *other* can be targeted. To demonstrate this concept, we provide a few examples of workplace microaggression comments or behaviors not related to the formerly researched marginalized groups in Table 2.

Table 2
Workplace Examples of Microaggression Comments or Behaviors

Reason for becoming a Target (Otherness)	**Why is it noticed at the workplace**	**Microaggression comments or behaviors**
Accent	Speaking to coworkers or clients	I can't understand what you are saying? Can I speak to someone that speaks English?
Allergies /Dietary restrictions (not related to religion)	Considered "high maintenance" or a hassle	Oh, the special meals again.
Attractiveness	Receiving more tips than other servers	Look, she's shaking that tail again.
Family size/type (not gender specific)	Maternity (female), Parental (typically male), or Adoption leaves of absence from work (any gender)	Oh great! What is it, his fifth kid?
Food choices other than allergies/dietary restrictions	Smells related to food being heated up at the workplace, or sharing a communal refrigerator	Oh no! He's heating up that disgusting food in the microwave again!
Promotion to higher position	Seen in organizational structure	I'm sure you were really nice to the boss to get the promotion.
Socioeconomic Status	Clothing, brand of vehicle driven	You must have a very lucrative second job to afford that car!

PSYCHOLOGICAL DILEMMAS OF MICROAGGRESSIONS

Sue (2010) proposed four psychological dilemmas that add to the difficulty in addressing or discussing microaggression.

Clash of realities: Conflict may be experienced when people have different interpretations of situations or events. The target may experience the comments or behaviors as harmful or discriminatory, but the perpetrator sees their comments or behaviors as harmless. This may lead to difficulty addressing the behavior, as defensive feelings or actions may result. As an example, a manager may perceive themselves an ally of the LGBTQ+ community but may use outdated language such as referring to a lesbian as a "dyke". The target may experience this as microaggression but be hesitant to address the use of this language by the manager, fearing it may cause the manager to become defensive and create a negative work environment.

Invisibility of unintentional bias: Dominant norms in societal members prevail due to socialization which may lead to implicit bias towards marginalized group members. For example, it is expected that individuals will enunciate clearly and use language similar to that found in the region. In an employment interview, if a candidate has a heavy accent or uses phrases that are not common to the area, this may contribute to the perception of *otherness* or lack of fit for the job, team, or organization. As a result, they may not be hired. Even when hired, the supervisor, coworkers, or customers may enact microaggressive behaviors towards the employee due to the accent or language differences.

Perceived minimal harm of microaggressions: This relates to the belief that the target of microaggression experiences minimal harm. Ample research indicates that there is a relationship between negative health outcomes and microaggressions (e.g., Brees et al., 2013; Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Brotheridge et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2018; Lee & Brotheridge, 2006). Others question, disbelieve, or mock the view that microaggression comments or behavior causes injury. Perpetrators may believe that targets are weak or oversensitive when they indicate that they were harmed by the microaggression. Even some researchers have written that microaggression theory is not thoroughly supported (Lilienfeld, 2017), creates a victim mentality (Campbell & Manning, 2014), or considers the concept of microaggression "pure nonsense" (Thomas, 2008, p. 274).

Catch-22 of responding to microaggressions: This refers to the difficulty in responding to microaggressions and concern over possible further negative consequences. For example, if an employee attempts to address a perceived microaggression with their coworker, the coworker may become defensive and create a negative work environment for the target. The employee may choose to not address the issue, since it may take valued resources such as time, effort and energy, and cause additional stress. Therefore, the target may choose to not respond, but the situation may still take its toll on the employee as they think about and relive the microaggression experiences.

MICROAGGRESSION'S IMPACT

Our analysis of the psychological impact of workplace micro-aggression on targets, observers, and perpetrators is based on a recent review of micro-aggression studies (Owen et al., 2019), and explores how it affects the psychological well-being of those who experience it, witness it, and commit it. Microaggressions are distinctly characterized by their subtle and indirect nature, which can make it difficult for the target or observers to understand whether the act was intended as a joke or to cause harm. This uncertainty results in increased cognitive effort

for both parties to determine an appropriate response (Ng et al., 2020). This situational ambiguity and the challenge of coping effectively can jointly add to distress for the targets.

If targets engage in emotional labor, it can lead to burnout (Kim et al., 2018). The energy required to maintain a facade or engage in surface acting can result in emotional exhaustion, a key component of burnout (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002). In addition, microaggressive behavior such as belittlement can increase self-doubt and result in indirect or passive coping responses. Self-doubt, in turn, has been associated with higher levels of burnout and symptoms of ill-health (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006). Among college students of color, microaggressions can result in cumulative stress, leading to higher levels of depression and anxiety, and lower levels of self-esteem (Williams et al., 2020).

Witnessing microaggressions can be emotionally draining for observers, as they struggle to interpret and respond appropriately (Totterdell et al., 2012). There is a complex interplay between observers and the actors, and repeated exposure to microaggressive acts can alter observers' attributions and subsequent responses, influencing interactions between the perpetrator and target (Ng et al., 2020). Initially, observers tend to take the target's perspective, resulting in negative views of the perpetrator and positive views of the target, leading to anger and the perception of the perpetrator as incompetent (Reich & Hershcovis, 2015). However, when perpetrators undermine the target's ideas, observers may perceive targets as less competent, devalue their ideas, and become less willing to work with them (Duffy et al., 2002).

Training bystanders to identify instances of microaggression and respond in a bias-free manner could help reduce incidents of microaggression (Haynes-Baratz et al., 2021). However, the health consequences for perpetrators are often overlooked and less understood (Lilienfeld, 2017). Perpetrating microaggressions requires significant emotional regulation and labor to conceal their true intentions, and such surface acting is associated with emotional exhaustion and unhealthy detachment (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002). Similar to bullying, perpetrators themselves may have been victims of microaggressions, leading them to engage in counter-aggression against their abusers or others (O'Farrell et al., 2018), but this approach is self-defeating in the long run (Aquino & Thau, 2009). Targets who engage in such behavior also experience negative health outcomes due to ineffective coping mechanisms, which ultimately diminishes their well-being (Brotheridge et al., 2012).

All parties involved, including targets, observers, and perpetrators, assess the effectiveness of their initial adaptive responses and make changes until they achieve desired outcomes (Lee & Brotheridge, 2017). However, this feedback loop can also lead to a downward spiral in which those with limited resources become increasingly vulnerable to victimization and distress (Rodriguez-Muñoz et al., 2015). When exposure to microaggressions triggers defensive responses, such as avoiding action, blaming, or resisting change, it can increase depression and maladaptive coping, which can be harmful to the workplace in the long run (Ashforth & Lee, 1990; cf. Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

DEALING WITH MICROAGGRESSION

The research on microaggression has not delved deeply into attributional processes and coping responses, despite their significant impact on psychological well-being (Owen et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2018). To inform our discussion, we draw from studies on workplace microaggression perpetrated by supervisors/managers, subordinates, and coworkers (such as

indirect put-downs, undermining of credibility/reputation, gaslighting, and ostracism) using Lee and Brotheridge's (2017) conceptual framework.

Workplace Triggers of Micro-Aggression

Perpetrators may engage in microaggression in response to various workplace events, including stigmatizing targets based on physical and social attributes (such as age, gender, race, culture, and disability) or perceived dispositional traits like low self-confidence. Other triggering events may include relational difficulties stemming from incompatible values or expectations, competition over scarce resources, communication issues, or perceived inequities. These trigger events affect the work environment and lead to joint attributions by both perpetrators and targets, creating conditions for abuse. Trigger events can occur at both the organizational level, such as downsizing activities, and the interpersonal level, such as conflicts, as noted by Mazzula and Campón (2018) and Zapf and Gross (2001).

Targets and observers often struggle to detect microaggressions, as they are often subtle and indirect in nature, such as recruiting coworkers to act with hostility or gaslighting (Mazzula & Campón, 2018). This ambiguity can make it challenging to discern whether the perpetrator intends to cause harm or is merely jesting. It is only after repeated interactions that a pattern of hostility may become apparent to targets. Understanding the relational context is crucial in determining whether an act was meant as a joke or intended to cause psychological harm (Aquino & Lamertz, 2004). Repeated interactions between the parties also play a role in how targets interpret and attribute the perpetrator's behavior. For instance, staff members working in the British royal household have complained about the "dehumanizing" practice of hiding from view whenever a royal family member approached, which they perceive as reinforcing a toxic work climate and an outdated class system (Llewelyn, 2020).

To summarize, we posit that specific circumstances can trigger targets' exposure to microaggression, particularly when managerial perpetrators fear losing their positions of influence due to organizational downsizing or restructuring. This then initiates two processes: (1) the targets' attributions of responsibility for the mistreatment among themselves, the perpetrator/s, and the organization, and (2) their choice of coping responses. These attributions can have significant effects on coping and subsequently lead to various consequences. Additionally, organizational factors such as size, flexibility in HR policies, and the extent of supervisor and colleague support may moderate the impact of coping on outcomes, either by mitigating the harmful effects of ineffective coping or enhancing the positive effects of effective coping (Lee & Brotheridge, 2017).

Attributional Processes and Workplace Responses

Targets of microaggression seek to make attributions about the motives of the perpetrators in order to assign responsibility for their behavior (Neuman & Baron, 1998). When targets experience unexpected negative outcomes, they are prompted to search for explanations for why the microaggression occurred (Weiner, 1995). To understand why they have been subjected to potential hostilities following a trigger event, targets typically make attributions about whether the cause was internal (originating from the self) or external (originating from another party), stable (likely to persist) or unstable (temporary), controllable or uncontrollable, and intentional or unintentional.

Zero attributions: Making zero attributions for microaggression in the workplace can occur when the target of the microaggression chooses not to attribute the behavior to any particular internal or external factor. For example, if a colleague consistently mispronounces a coworker's name, the target may choose not to make any assumptions about why this is happening. Instead, the target may calmly and assertively correct the colleague and provide the correct pronunciation of their name. By choosing not to make attributions, the target is not assuming that the behavior is intentionally disrespectful or that the colleague is deliberately trying to be hurtful. Instead, the target is addressing the behavior itself and asserting their own agency in correcting it. This approach can help the target maintain a sense of agency and control in the situation, rather than feeling like a victim of the microaggression. It can also help prevent the situation from escalating into a larger conflict by keeping the focus on the behavior and its impact, rather than assigning blame or making assumptions about motives.

Internal and stable attributions: Targets who attribute negative outcomes to internal and stable causes are less likely to respond with counter microaggression, as this often results in personal self-blame, guilt, and lower self-esteem. Internal and stable attributions of microaggression in the workplace might occur when a coworker consistently interrupts and talks over a female employee during meetings. An internal attribution would be the belief that the female employee is being interrupted because she lacks assertiveness or confidence, rather than attributing the behavior to the coworker's own lack of respect or consideration for others. A stable attribution would be the belief that the behavior is a consistent and unchanging trait of the coworker, rather than a situational factor such as stress or a lack of preparation for the meeting. Together, these internal and stable attributions can contribute to the normalization of microaggressions and perpetuate a culture of disrespect and exclusion in the workplace. However, such attributions may lead to self-directed aggression, including substance abuse, neglect, or depression (Brees et al., 2013).

External, stable, controllable, and intentional attributions: When targets make external, stable, controllable, and intentional attributions for negative outcomes, they are more likely to feel angry and frustrated, which may lead to retaliation, revenge, and sabotage against perpetrators (Douglas & Martinko, 2001; Brees et al., 2013). A workplace example of the target making external, stable, controllable, and intentional attributions for microaggression could be a scenario in which a colleague consistently makes derogatory comments about an employee's religion or cultural background. Here, the target of the microaggression may make the following attributions: (1) external attribution - the target may attribute the behavior to the colleague's cultural background or upbringing, rather than assuming that the behavior is a reflection of their own worth or value as an employee; (2) stable attribution - the target may believe that the colleague consistently makes these derogatory comments about their religion or cultural background, rather than assuming that the behavior is a one-time occurrence or a fluke; (3) controllable attribution - the target may believe that the colleague has control over their behavior and could choose to stop making these derogatory comments if they wanted to; and, (4) intentional attribution - the target may believe that the colleague is deliberately trying to be hurtful or disrespectful, rather than assuming that the behavior is unintentional or due to a lack of awareness.

In cases where the colleague's behavior is driven by external, stable, controllable, and intentional factors can be particularly disheartening and demoralizing for the target of the microaggressions, as it suggests that the behavior is unlikely to change without significant systemic change or intervention. It can also be challenging for the target to address the behavior

without feeling like they are fighting an uphill battle against deeply ingrained biases and prejudices. The target may choose to address the behavior by having a private conversation with the colleague or by reporting the behavior to a manager or HR representative. By making these attributions, the target is taking ownership of their own experience and asserting their right to be treated with respect and dignity in the workplace.

External, stable, and uncontrollable attributions: When targets make external, stable, and uncontrollable attributions, they tend to respond in a non-hostile fashion. A workplace example of the target making external, stable, and uncontrollable attributions for microaggression could be when a coworker consistently makes derogatory comments about an employee's physical disability or appearance. Here the target of the microaggression may make the following attributions: (1) external attribution: The target may attribute the behavior to the coworker's lack of understanding or empathy for individuals with disabilities or physical differences, rather than assuming that the behavior is a reflection of their own worth or value as an employee; (2) stable attribution - the target may believe that the coworker consistently makes these derogatory comments about their disability or appearance, rather than assuming that the behavior is a one-time occurrence or a fluke; and, (3) uncontrollable attribution - the target may believe that the coworker may not have control over their behavior, either due to a lack of awareness or a deeply ingrained belief system.

In this scenario, the target may choose to address the behavior by having a private conversation with the coworker or by reporting the behavior to a manager or HR representative. However, the target may also acknowledge that changing the coworker's behavior may be difficult or even impossible, given the external and uncontrollable nature of the attributions they have made. In this case, the target may focus on finding ways to cope with the behavior and maintain their own sense of self-worth and dignity in the workplace.

Direction of attributions: Targets may direct hostilities toward either specific perpetrators or the entire organization for negative outcomes, depending on their perceptions of responsibility. While targets may attribute the cause of aggression to certain perpetrators, there are various reasons why they may also assign blame to the organization and hold it responsible for the presence and actions of the perpetrators. This may occur when senior management is aware of the aggressive acts but fails to address the toxic work environment, leading to the perception that the organization is responsible for the behavior of the perpetrators.

Coping Approaches

Lazarus and Folkman's research (1987) proposed two types of coping responses related to microaggression:

Problem-Focused. Targets who perceive mistreatment may adopt various adaptive strategies to manage the situation in a problem-focused manner.

Direct problem-solving: Targets may directly confront the perpetrator and clarify their perceptions to establish boundaries for appropriate behavior (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006).

Direct retaliation against perpetrators: This approach involves a tit-for-tat response after repeated exposure to microaggression (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Targets are more likely to engage in deviant acts toward perpetrators who possess high formal or referent power but low task interdependence. This response is more likely when targets are not dependent on their perpetrator to complete work tasks or meet performance goals.

Direct retaliation against others: Targets may undermine others in a "kick the dog" fashion if their work was undermined (Lee & Brotheridge, 2006). This behavior is more likely in employees who hold favorable attitudes towards revenge and experience higher levels of victimization (Aquino & Douglas, 2003).

Quitting, requesting a job transfer, use of sick leave, avoiding/ignoring perpetrators: Targets may also choose non-aggressive options, such as quitting or requesting a job transfer (Zapf & Gross, 2001), using sick leave time (Kivimäki et al., 2000), avoiding the perpetrators, or ignoring their behaviors (Keashly et al., 1994). Instead of simply accepting the behavior and trying to endure it, the employee may take action to address the situation by choosing to distance themselves from the perpetrator via a change in their work schedule, requesting a different work area, or avoiding interactions with the individual as much as possible.

Support seeking from coworkers, friends, and family: Support from coworkers and managers/supervisors can help reduce adverse health outcomes following victimization (Kim et al., 2018). Informational support through training on how to manage such workplace events has been associated with higher emotional well-being. Lewis and Orford (2005) found that a lack of coworker and organizational support impaired female employees' ability to defend themselves against their perpetrators, leading to isolation, vulnerability, and diminished self-worth.

Emotion-Focused. There are three adaptive approaches that targets of mistreatment may use to manage the emotional consequences of victimization, known as emotion-focused coping strategies (Aquino & Thau, 2009).

Using humor: Targets may employ humor as a coping mechanism to interpret a potentially hostile situation. If the perceived microaggressive act was intended as a joke, humor could be an appropriate response to prevent any misunderstanding. Conversely, if the same act was malicious, humor might help de-escalate a tense situation (Hogh & Dofradottir, 2001).

Engaging in emotional labor: The second approach is emotional labor (Kim et al., 2018). Targets may respond to microaggressive incidents by suppressing their negative emotions and displaying desirable emotions to diffuse hostile encounters. Targets facing less stressful encounters may use positive refocusing and perspective-taking as part of deep acting.

Forgiveness: A third approach is to forgive the perpetrator for their mistreatment, regardless of their intentions. By forgiving, targets aim to overcome negative feelings and thoughts about the perpetrator and replace them with neutral or positive feelings (Aquino et al., 2006; Freedman & Enright, 1996).

The coping approaches mentioned above can work together (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Retaliation is a problem-focused approach that can also help release a target's anger and frustration, serving an emotion-focused purpose. On the other hand, avoidance is problem-focused because it allows targets to avoid short-term mistreatment, but it also gives them a break from the negative emotions related to victimization. As a result, it can better prepare them to respond positively in the long run (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004).

Practical Implications

Factors beyond individual interactions can either contribute to or prevent microaggressions in the workplace. Poor team climate, low job autonomy, and unfair treatment have been found to be related to microaggressions and belittlement (Brotheridge and Lee, 2006). To discourage microaggressions, it is important to promote empowerment and equitable treatment of all organizational members, and to encourage organizational and peer support (Kim

et al., 2018). Progressive organizations are taking steps to prevent microaggressions from becoming a toxic work climate and evolving into other forms of incivility and even open conflict (Prieto et al., 2016).

The primary challenge faced by workplaces is to create an environment that fosters inclusivity and makes every member feel welcomed and valued. In order to establish a tolerant and respectful work climate, managers and supervisors should demonstrate an "ethic of care" towards their members, as outlined by Prieto et al. (2016). It is imperative that managers who aim to promote diversity first acknowledge the existence of microaggressions and their potential to cause psychological distress. In order to ensure that visible minorities and vulnerable members are not disproportionately exposed to microaggressions, the "Broken Windows" approach can be implemented, which involves promptly addressing and resolving microaggressive incidents as they occur. For instance, during a discussion about the socialization of US public servants, a remark made by one of the authors (RL) was called out by an associate dean, who highlighted the potential for the author's statement to perpetuate the "glass-ceiling" exclusion of women from higher ranks of government. By addressing the incident, the "broken window" was mended, and future occurrences of microaggressions amongst colleagues were discouraged.

To effectively address microaggressions, it is essential to detect and correct them. However, microaggressions can be difficult to identify and address. As a solution, Prieto et al. (2016) suggest actively promoting "management by walking around." This approach involves managers frequently interacting with their staff, which allows them to observe and address any potential issues early on. This practice not only prevents subsequent hostile acts, no matter how subtle, but also raises awareness among potential perpetrators of their actions' negative consequences on others, particularly the most stigmatized and vulnerable organizational members. Although microaggressions may seem harmless, ignoring them could cause them to persist, reoccur, and worsen over time.

Finally, one promising intervention for reducing microaggressions is workplace training. Studies have found that training programs that focus on diversity and inclusion can increase awareness and understanding of microaggressions, and promote a more inclusive and respectful workplace culture (Kulik et al., 2020; Stainback et al, 2014). Training can also provide employees with the tools and skills necessary to recognize and address microaggressions, which may prevent these incidents from occurring in the first place (Richardson & Molina, 2018). Therefore, workplace training is a promising approach for reducing microaggressions and promoting a more inclusive and respectful workplace culture.

CONCLUSION

Workplace microaggression is often overlooked in comparison to other forms of negative behavior in both research and popular literature. Microaggressions can contribute to a hostile and exclusionary workplace culture, which can lead to decreased job satisfaction, psychological distress, and decreased organizational commitment. Research suggests that individuals from stigmatized or marginalized groups are more likely to experience microaggressions, making it a critical issue in promoting workplace diversity and inclusion. This paper argues that any organizational member can become a target of microaggression based on a variety of distinguishing characteristics.

One distinct characteristic of microaggression is its ambiguity, which can mislead the target and observers regarding the perpetrator's intentions. This makes microaggression difficult

to diagnose and respond to as the target, observer, or the organization. Workplace training is one promising intervention that can reduce microaggressions by increasing awareness and understanding of these incidents and promoting a more inclusive and respectful workplace culture. However, studies should determine the most effective strategies for preventing and addressing microaggressions in the workplace. Additional research is needed to investigate the long-term impact of workplace training on employee behavior and organizational outcomes. Overall, the study of workplace microaggressions underscores the importance of promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace, and highlights the need for continued attention to addressing microaggressions and promoting a more inclusive and respectful workplace culture.

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