Sexual Orientation Microaggressions and the Experience of Sexual Minorities

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This qualitative study sought to confirm and expand on previous research on sexual orientation microaggressions—subtle discrimination in the form of verbal, behavioral, and environmental slights and indignities as defined by Sue (2010). The study had two primary research questions: Does the data from the sample validate Sue’s (2010) typology of sexual orientation microaggressions? Beyond Sue’s (2010) typology, are other themes/types of sexual orientation microaggressions present in the data? Using a focus group methodology, data was collected from a sample of self-identified non-heterosexual college students (N = 12). Data analysis confirmed five previously identified themes from Sue’s (2010) typology (Endorsement of Heteronormative Culture, Sinfulness, Homophobia, Heterosexist Language/Terminology, and Oversexualization) and demonstrated two new themes (Undersexualization and Microaggressions as Humor). The implications of sexual orientation microaggressions, along with limitations and future research directions, are discussed.

KEYWORDS bisexual, discrimination, gay, lesbian, heterosexism, sexual orientation microaggressions

There is considerable evidence that the daily lived experience of oppressed populations, such as those who identify as non-heterosexual\(^1\), is different.

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than those from majority groups or groups who hold social power (Lewis, 2009; Meyer, 2003; Sue, 2010). Although in recent years it is less socially acceptable to engage in overt discriminatory behavior against sexual minority groups, psychologists are now focusing on the harmful impact of subtle, implicit manifestations of prejudice that still remains a common experience. These subtle, covert behaviors and interactions are defined by Sue, Capodilupo, et al. (2007) as microaggressions—brief, commonplace, and daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental slights and indignities directed toward specific groups of people. A major component of the daily lives of all minority individuals, including those who are non-heterosexual, is coping with the impact of microaggressions.

These discriminatory experiences stem from systemic, deeply ingrained social justice problems such as privilege and oppression, inequities in power, stereotyping, and societal biases (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodsen, 2002; Sue, 2003). Microaggressions can be outside the level of conscious awareness of the perpetrator and are often committed by well-meaning individuals (Banaji, Hardin, & Rothman, 1993; DeVos & Banaji, 2005; Sue, 2010). However, microaggressions have been found to have a cumulative negative impact on the psychological well-being of those they are perpetrated against (Lewis, 2009; Meyer, 2003; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). Regardless of intent by the sender, the underlying meanings conveyed in microaggressions demean the integrity and dignity of the receiver.

The majority of the empirical research on microaggressions focuses on the experience of racial and ethnic minorities. Racial and ethnic minority individuals report experiencing numerous types of microaggressions on a frequent basis (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010). For example, one recurring microaggression faced by both Black Americans and Asian Americans involves assumptions regarding intelligence. Black Americans often experience statements that ostensibly compliment them on their intelligence, such as “You are very articulate.” But, the underlying message actually conveys that they are exceptions to the perceived intellectual inferiority of Black Americans in general (Sue, Nadal, et al., 2008). Sue, Nadal, et al. (2008) found that Blacks felt pressure to think and act intelligent as to refute stereotypes about Black Americans. Asian Americans face an opposite, but equally damaging, stereotype. Asian Americans are frequently assumed to be highly intelligent, especially in math and science (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007). This treatment often feels like a burden of having to represent one’s entire racial group.

Given the relationship of microaggressions to societal biases, it is reasonable to assume other minority and oppressed groups also experience microaggressions in their daily lives. In recent years, there is increasing recognition that other types of minority individuals also experience microaggressions (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011; Nadal, 2008; Owen, Tao, & Rodolfa, 2010; Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011;
Sue, 2010). For example, Sue (2010) discussed gender, socioeconomic status, and disability microaggressions, among others. Given the importance of understanding microaggressions against various groups of people, this project focused on exploring the unique microaggressions faced by individuals who are sexual minorities such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and other non-heterosexual orientations. Although considerable research focuses on racial microaggressions, less empirical study has looked at the specific nature of sexual orientation microaggressions.

SUE’S (2010) TYPOLOGY OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION MICROAGGRESSIONS

Sue (2010) compiled a typology of sexual orientation microaggressions he theorizes are likely to occur against this population. Sue (2010) theorizes sexual minority individuals face seven different types of sexual orientation microaggressions: Oversexualization, Homophobia, Heterosexist Language/Terminology, Sinfulness, Assumption of Abnormality, Denial of Individual Heterosexism, and Endorsement of Heteronormative Culture/Behaviors. The underlying message in each type of sexual orientation microaggression is potentially harmful to sexual minority individuals.

The Sue (2010) typology begins with the theme of Oversexualization, which involves the tendency of people to immediately associate one’s sexual orientation with sexual activities and behaviors. Rather than being thought of as complex individuals, individuals who are sexual minorities are reduced to merely sexual beings. For example, if a woman were to avoid undressing in a locker room because a lesbian was present out of fear the lesbian would immediately think of her sexually, she would be perpetrating this form of microaggression.

The next theme, Homophobia, has to do with the assumption that homosexuality (or other non-heterosexual orientations) is contagious and, therefore, those who are not heterosexual should be avoided (Sue, 2010). Fear of becoming gay can prompt irrational behavior such as avoiding physical contact with individuals who are sexual minorities or not allowing one’s children to be around individuals who are sexual minorities. An example of a homophobia microaggression is when a man at a party won’t sit next to a gay man for fear of “catching it.”

The third sexual orientation microaggression theme proposed by Sue (2010) is Heterosexist Language/Terminology. This type of microaggression involves the use of language that reflects a heteronormative value system. It also includes terminology like husband or wife, rather than spouse or partner. This type of microaggression also includes using the word gay as a general derogatory term, which is a common experience (Burn, 2000).
The fourth theme is Sinfulness, the belief that any non-heterosexual orientation is morally deviant and wrong (Sue, 2010). For example, some people view a non-heterosexual orientation as intrinsically sinful and worthy of punishment. Not surprisingly, this theme is strongly associated with religion and an individual’s religious beliefs. Microaggressive statements that fit this theme often reflect the perpetrators underlying religious beliefs along these lines.

The fifth theme of Assumption of Abnormality stems from the outdated thought that any non-heterosexual orientation has its origins in psychological pathology (Sue, 2010). When individuals who are sexual minorities are assumed to need therapy or are told that they are going through a phase, they are being sent messages of abnormality. An example of this type of microaggression is when a non-heterosexual individual is told that they are just going through a phase and they will grow out of it and have “normal” feelings soon.

The sixth theme described by Sue (2010) is Denial of Individual Heterosexism. Similar to other forms of prejudice, members of the majority group are inclined to deny any biases or unfavorable attitudes they may hold. This could be done consciously because of social barriers or awareness of political correctness or unconsciously and unintentionally. For example, one may say, “I’m not heterosexist, I have a gay friend.” Although one’s explicit attitude may be one of acceptance and equality, no one is immune from the influences of society that expose us to messages of negative attitudes and beliefs. These influences then manifest themselves in one’s unconscious words and actions.

The final theme that Sue (2010) identified is Endorsement of Heteronormative Culture and Behaviors. This theme recognizes that the standards and norms of society are based on what is standard and normal for heterosexuals and excludes those who are sexual minorities. Examples of this microaggression include always asking men about girlfriends and women about boyfriends, defining marriage as between a man and a woman, and only discussing heterosexual topics in sex education classes.

Sue (2010) and colleagues (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011) theorized that sexual minority individuals likely experience microaggressions that are both similar and different than other oppressed groups. In terms of similarities, it is likely that this population faces microaggressions that promote negative stereotypes and reflect common societal biases. Also, all minority groups who face microaggressions in daily life report the cumulative impact can take a toll both physically and emotionally (Lewis, 2009; Meyer, 2010).

However, one main difference is the experience of microaggressions for sexual minorities is the less visible nature of sexual orientation (Sue, 2010). Early in interpersonal interactions, individuals who are sexual minorities often can mask the oppressed portion of their identity if they so choose,
as compared to racial minority individuals. They can choose whether to disclose their sexual orientation to others. Therefore, “coming out” is a daily, long-life process. Many sexual minority individuals often choose not to disclose for fear of rejection, retaliation, damaging personal relationships, safety, or loss of social support (Sue, 2010; Burn, Kadlec, & Rexer, 2005). In many cases, if an individual chooses to confront a microaggression, one must also disclose sexual identity, yet remaining silent increases the invisibility of the impact of the microaggression. The bind this creates for sexual minorities is especially difficult and is different than the experience of other types of more visible minority groups.

THIS STUDY

Sue’s (2010) typology is informative and represents an important theoretical advancement in understanding sexual orientation microaggressions. What is needed now is more research to substantiate Sue’s (2010) theory and to explore other possible types of sexual orientation microaggressions that are unique to sexual minority individuals. Given this need, the goal of this study was to conduct a qualitative analysis of the experience of microaggressions for non-heterosexual individuals. The purpose of this study was to explore themes, experiences, and the impact of sexual orientation microaggressions. In addition, the goal of this study was to substantiate the sexual orientation microaggression themes identified by Sue (2010) and to identify any new themes not already theorized. To that end, the study had two primary research questions:

RQ1: Does the data from this sample validate Sue’s (2010) typology of sexual orientation microaggressions?
RQ2: Beyond Sue’s (2010) typology, are other themes/types of sexual orientation microaggressions present in the data?

METHOD

Participants
A total of 12 individuals across two focus groups participated in the study. Participants in the study self-identified as lesbian \((n = 6)\), bisexual \((n = 3)\), gay \((n = 1)\), and queer \((n = 2)\). All participants were undergraduate students at a small college in the Midwest. The majority of the sample was White, Euro-American \((n = 11)\), most reported middle to upper middle class socioeconomic status \((n = 10)\), and all and were between the ages of 18 and 22. The sample contained 10 female and 2 male participants.
Data Collection

A semi-structured interview protocol was used for collecting data within the focus groups. The protocol was adapted from an interview on microaggressions developed by Sue, Bucceri, et al. (2007) for use in focus group data collection. As the original protocol was designed to address racial microaggressions directed at Asian Americans (Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007), the interview questions were modified to reflect sexual orientation for this study. All questions were open-ended to give freedom in responding and elicit real-life examples that the participants experienced. An example of a question used is as follows: “What are some subtle ways that people treat you differently because of your sexual orientation?” Refer to the Appendix for full interview questions. A short, eight-question demographic questionnaire was also used in the study.

Participants were solicited through advertisements in a college bulletin board, word of mouth, and invitations to members of a campus lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer group. Participants completed one of two focus groups and were compensated with coupons for a free drink to a local coffee shop. Each focus group lasted 90 min, and was conducted by the primary researcher (Platt), who functioned as the facilitator. A second facilitator was also present and served primarily as the notetaker and later assisted in the data analysis. Prior to each focus group, both researchers went through a brief behavioral rehearsal related to moderating the focus group discussion. The groups took place in an on-campus location. After giving informed consent, participants completed the semi-structured interview and the demographic questionnaire. The focus groups were audiotaped with permission. The audiotapes were later transcribed and all identifying information was removed prior to data analysis. Focus groups have been shown to be effective in obtaining in-depth information about a relatively unexplored concept like microaggressions (Creswell, 1998). Focus groups also allow for social environment to encourage the development of meaning and to facilitate rich interactions among the group members. Immediately following each focus group, a debriefing session was held between the two facilitators to discuss their own reactions, observations about the group process, and the major themes that arose. The audiotapes of the focus groups were then transcribed verbatim and all identifying information of the participants was removed from the transcripts.

Data Analysis

The phenomenological analysis of this investigation was derived from the guidelines of Moustakas (1994) and involved (a) collecting verbal transcripts that described the experience, (b) reading them to get a sense of the whole, (c) extracting significant statements, (d) eliminating irrelevant repetition, (e)
identifying central themes, and (f) integrating these meanings into a single description of a phenomenon (Creswell, 1998).

A five-person research team, in addition to the primary researcher and the second group facilitator, began the process of analyzing the transcripts by simply reading each transcript in its entirety to get a sense of the participants as a whole. Each team member then sifted through the transcripts for significant statements and meaningful units that reflect microaggressions. The research team’s task was to look at what types of microaggressions non-heterosexual individuals experience, the underlying messages contained within these microaggressions, and the type of psychological or behavioral reactions the participants had in response to the microaggressions. Initially, each member of the team individually reviewed the data. The team was told to review the data for (a) the presence of responses that support Sue’s (2010) typology of sexual orientation microaggressions, (b) other responses that represent microaggressions not found in Sue’s (2010) typology, and (c) the best illustrative examples for both.

This preliminary analysis by each team member was then presented in a group format to compare and contrast individual coding and come to a consensus on themes found within the data. This group consensus process also served as a means of helping to maintain the validity and objectivity of each individual research team member’s coding (Creswell, 1998). This process yielded the final consensus on the seven central themes found within the data. Once the central themes were identified, the phenomenon of sexual orientation microaggressions could be described.

RESULTS

The study had two main research questions:

RQ1: Does the data from this sample validate Sue’s (2010) typology of sexual orientation microaggressions?  
RQ2: Beyond Sue’s (2010) typology, are other themes/types of sexual orientation microaggressions present in the data?

The results indicated several of the types of sexual orientation microaggressions discussed by Sue (2010) were validated by these data. The results also indicate potential shifts in the nature of sexual orientation microaggressions, especially among young adults as several new themes were also identified.

Based on the data analysis, a total of seven themes were found in the data. The first five themes found in the data were consistent with Sue’s (2010) theory outlining sexual orientation microaggressions. These five themes include the following:
1. Endorsement of Heteronormative Culture.
2. Sinfulness.
3. Homophobia.
5. Oversexualization.

Sue’s (2010) original typology also included the themes of Assumption of Abnormality and Denial of Individual Heterosexism; however, these themes were not as salient in our data. Themes 6 and 7 in these data were new themes not previously discussed in the microaggression literature. These new themes include the following:

6. Undersexualization.
7. Microaggression as Humor.

The following section outlines the seven total sexual orientation microaggression themes found in the data, including examples from the combined focus group transcripts.

Theme 1: Endorsement of Heteronormative Culture

Consistent with Sue’s (2010) description of sexual orientation microaggressions, one of the most common themes found in the data was participants’ experiences of microaggressive statements that reflect endorsement of heterosexual behavior as normal and expected. Many participants discussed experiences with family, friends or college activities where microaggressive statements and actions along these lines indicated an assumption that all people are, or should be, heterosexual.

For example, one female participant discussed a course project designed to be a virtual simulation of the experience of raising a child. In this example, she points out how the simulation only allowed for heterosexual family experiences:

You choose multiple choice questions throughout and you raise it. It shapes your child based on what questions you choose. What really bothers me is every time I click on a question and it says, “Your kid is starting to adapt to dad”, or “He has fun playing with dad”, or “Dad lost his job.” It never offered the option for a same-sex parent. It’s frustrating because it’s not fair to assume everyone is straight and will have a dad and a mom one day.

Several participants discussed participating in university activities that implicitly reinforced this type of sexual orientation microaggression:
Earlier there was a Halloween speed dating thing, but it was specifically for males and females who are heterosexual. There was no option for same sex partners. So I did not participate even though it sounded like a fun experience.

During freshman orientation, the males and females in my group were told to walk around holding hands to emphasize that you should meet your future spouse here at college. There wasn’t an option to hold hands with someone of the same sex. Another orientation group had a speed dating activity for only heterosexual people. Everyone was assumed that it was heterosexual, which was very difficult for me.

Many participants also discussed similar situations with their family members and friends. Many discussed how these types of microaggressions increased their feelings of invisibility:

My extended family at Christmas kept asking “Oh who are you texting, your boyfriend?” I didn’t want to have to tell them I was actually texting my girlfriend.

“Didn’t you meet a nice boy yet?” Or, “When are you going to bring a boy home?” I wanted to say, “What would you do if I brought a girl home?” I don’t know how my parents would react if I actually did that but, I can’t imagine it would be good. I mean they’re pretty hard-core Catholic but, you know it’s just things like that, the subtle reinforcement of, “Where’s your boyfriend?”

On a daily basis if people ask, “Oh do you have a boyfriend?” It’s not like they’re discriminating against you necessarily but it makes it a little bit more awkward because it’s like no I’m not in a relationship and no I don’t date men. They don’t ask, “Oh are you seeing anybody?” It’s always like “Oh do you have a boyfriend?”

I’m bisexual... the few times when I have done something with a guy they’re like “Oh we knew you’d go back to guys.” As if that is the preferred type of relationship.

Participants also discussed microaggressive statements about their style of dress and appearance that fit within this theme:

I was kind of dressed up and my friend said “You don’t really look like a lesbian.” And I was thought to myself, “Why, because I’m wearing boots and leggings?”
Because when we talked about telling my extended family my mom said "Well everyone is going to be surprised because you don't look like a lesbian." I said to her, “Ok mom, what are they supposed to look like?"

Participants report the impact of these types of heteronormative microaggressions as particularly harmful when the perpetrator is unaware the participant is not heterosexual. In such cases, the victim of the microaggression is placed in a challenging situation when deciding how to respond because responding also means having to disclose one’s sexual orientation, which may be unsafe or come with considerable consequence. Many participants also discussed how this type of microaggression increases feelings of isolation and marginalization, especially if the individual is not “out” in multiple settings:

My extended family does not know I am a lesbian. They simply thought I was good friends with K., the women I was actually dating. That woman and I eventually broke up. At Christmas dinner a few months later, my aunt asked me why I was not friends with K. anymore. She knew K. was a lesbian, so my aunt asks me, “Did she come on to you is that why you’re not friends anymore?” And all I could say was “No that’s not it.” I was so upset about her question but I also wasn’t in a position to come out to the whole family at Christmas dinner.

This type of microaggression reflects the ingrained societal bias that heterosexual relationships are the norm. Like many types of microaggressions, they are insidious because most are unknowingly perpetrated by well-meaning individuals who do not realize their heteronormative values and assumptions can have serious consequences for those who are not heterosexual. These exclusionary microaggressions often force an individual to disclose his or her own sexual identity to confront the offender or else live silently with the impact of the microaggression.

Theme 2: Sinfulness

Another common theme found in the data was participants’ experience of microaggressive statements that reflect an underlying assumption that having a non-heterosexual orientation is sinful and morally deviant. This theme was also reported by Sue (2010) as a potential type of sexual orientation microaggression. Many participants reported multiple incidents in which subtle statements made by family or friends indicated a belief that being non-heterosexual was a reflection of going against what is considered morally acceptable:

When I came out to my parents, my dad was against it and he said “Well you’re a good girl you, you have your head on straight, and you’re going
to school. You don’t do drugs and alcohol and I know you’re going to stay on the right path.” And I thought to myself “I know, and I can also be gay.”

I heard comments such as, “Oh you’re just being tempted by the devil.” or “Are you sure that’s what God wants you do to?” And another person asked, “Well don’t you believe in absolute truth?” These questions are difficult to respond to.

When I came out to my religious father he said, “My worst fear was true.”

Individuals are left feeling deeply shameful and forced to choose between living their true sexual orientation and retaining their religious faith:

I was denied communion by a priest recently because he knew I was lesbian. He gave me a really nice death glare that I will never forget. I grew up Catholic, but after college I am going to look into a different faith community after this happened.

Much has been written about the challenge of integrating religion and sexuality for non-heterosexual individuals (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Morrow & Beckstead, 2004). It is likely that this type of microaggression plays a major role in the negative experiences many individuals face. For those who have a strong tie to their religious faith, the emotional toll can be immense. This theme was particularly salient in this sample draw from students at a religiously affiliated college. Most reported having cultural and family roots within the Catholic church, and were now facing the challenge of navigating their sexual identities in this religious context. Microaggressions about sinfulness exacerbate the pain faced by this highly personal struggle between faith and sexual identity.

Theme 3: Homophobia

Also consistent with themes identified by Sue (2010), microaggressions involving homophobia were reported by many participants. This type of microaggression communicates irrational anxieties toward non-heterosexual individuals. They also communicate that not being heterosexual is inherently a negative condition. They pathologize non-heterosexual orientations as something to be feared and avoided. Usually these microaggressive messages convey a fear of becoming gay or of catching a disease from non-heterosexual individuals. This theme includes microaggressions that reflect beliefs that exposure to non-heterosexual people will negatively influence heterosexual people. Many participants discussed experiences when they were treated as if their sexual orientation was akin to a feared disease:
Once my roommate knew I was a lesbian she acted terrified of me. You could see the terror on her face. She avoided me and treated me like I had a contagious disease.

When I first came out, there was one girl that I wasn’t very close with, but she found out and she wouldn’t talk to me, wouldn’t stand close to me, and pretended like it was a disease or something. She acted like I was going to give her AIDS or something if I stood next to her. A lot of people at high school did that. It was very common.

Not only did participants discuss how these microaggressions affect them now, but they also expressed the fear that these types of microaggressions will impact their future career endeavors:

I’m an elementary education major and I always worry about what it will be like when I’m a teacher someday. I just don’t know how it’s going to be. There are going to be parents that will be like, “Oh, you’re a lesbian? I’m not comfortable with you teaching my child.” That’s my biggest fear.

The impact of microaggressions involving homophobia is very negative. Repeated exposure to these types of attitudes is thought to result in internalized homophobia, unconsciously adopting negative attitudes and assumptions regarding one’s sexual orientation (Nicholson & Long, 1990; Szymanski, Chung, & Balsam, 2001). Research suggests that internalized homophobia is a primary cause of psychological distress among non-heterosexual individuals (Szymanski et al., 2001). Homophobic microaggressions also leave non-heterosexual people feeling like outcasts. They produce further marginalization and separation between non-heterosexual and heterosexual people (Elia, 1993).

Theme 4: Heterosexist Language/Terminology
Another theme identified in the data, consistent with the themes suggested by Sue (2010), was microaggressions that involve the use of heterosexist language. These language microaggressions reflect the underlying negative assumption that being non-heterosexual is deviant and outside of the norm.

Many participants specifically discussed the impact of hearing the word “gay” used in a derogatory manner. For example, one male participant stated the following:

I get upset when someone says, “Oh that’s gay” to mean something is stupid or bad. I feel like it is wrong in the same way that saying “It’s retarded” is wrong. But people will say it and look at me and instantly say to me, “Oh, I’m really sorry.” It is always upsetting because it’s not about me, you shouldn’t be saying it anyway. How would they react if
they said the same statement around their straight friends? Because I’m in the room, they suddenly have to acknowledge me and apologize.

Others participants discussed the impact of hearing terminology that uses one’s sexual orientation as an identifier, such as “my lesbian teacher” instead of simply saying “my teacher.” Participants discussed feeling singled out by this type of microaggressions. This type of microaggression also serves to limit one’s full identity because sexual orientation becomes the main focal point.

Theme 5: Oversexualization

Participants in the study also report commonly encountering microaggressive statements that reflect the negative stereotype that all non-heterosexual individuals are primarily interested in sex and physical gratification only. This theme is also consistent with Sue’s (2010) typology of sexual orientation microaggressions. Others report microaggressions that assume they are sexually attracted to all members of the same-sex:

I was coming out my freshman year to one of my close friends, and I said to her, “I’m a lesbian,” and she said “Oh my god, so all this time you’ve been hugging me, you actually like me? Is that what you’re trying to say?” I said to her, “No! I’m a huggy person, I love hugs! And I’m telling you as a friend.” And we really haven’t been friends since.

Once I tell people I’m not straight the common reaction is, “Oh so you think I’m attractive?” It feels like the assumption is I’m so gay I’m automatically attracted to everyone of the same sex. I want to say to them, “Is it the same thing if you’re heterosexual? You’re not attracted to every girl or guy?”

Participants reported this type of microaggression left many feeling judged and misunderstood. This type of microaggression also serves to diminish the true nature of non-heterosexual relationships as containing both emotional and physical intimacy and instead portrays them as only sexual in nature:

I recently had a friend say to me, “How do you know you are gay, is it just because you’ve just never slept with a woman? Maybe you are not really gay?” And then I said to him, “Well have you ever slept with a man? How do you know you aren’t gay?” But the assumption is that my being attracted to men is due to a lack of sexual experience with women, not my desire to have a quality emotional and physical relationship with a man.
If I talk to a guy and he finds out I’m a lesbian he’s like “Oh my god can I watch you with another girl? That would be so hot.”

Microaggressions that portray same-sex relationships as only sexual in nature perpetuate the lack of legitimacy that many non-heterosexual couples experience. These types of statements degrade same-sex relationships as less meaningful or important.

Theme 6: Undersexualization

Two new themes were found in the data that have not been previously presented in research on sexual orientation microaggressions. The first new theme, Undersexualization, was present at many points in both focus groups. In contrast to the theme of Oversexualization described earlier, many participants reported microaggression experiences that reflected a surface level acceptance of the individual being a sexual minority, but only when the person was not actively in a relationship:

My mom initially responded to my coming out by simply saying, “I just want you to be happy.” However, a couple months after when I brought my first girlfriend home, I overheard her talking to my sister and she sounded disappointed and said, “So this really isn’t a phase?”

This theme reflects the face of modern heterosexism, where the common sentiment can be summed up as, “Don’t ask, don’t tell.” Many participants reported a neutral response from family and friends until they attempted to engage in relationships or expose those in their life to a same-sex partner. The impact of this type of microaggression for participants in the study was an increase in isolation and frustration, especially when friends or family that initially seemed accepting were ultimately not supportive:

My mom said, “You can be whoever you at school, but when you’re in my hometown where I have to stay and live and where I’m representing, you’re going to need to be a lot more subtle about it.” I was very hurt by this statement.

I’ve noticed a really subtle just lack of communication. The conversation stops when I bring up a partner or an interest.

One evening about six months after I came out to my parents I told them I was going to a local gay bar with some friends. My dad said “Oh that’s awesome!” But my mom said, “So you really are gay.” When I appeared upset she said, “Oh, just double checking.”
This type of microaggression reinforces the implicit message that same-sex relationships are not acceptable, even when the explicit message may be one of relative acceptance. Participants report this type of microaggression is particularly isolating and disheartening. As one participant stated, “It’s easy for people to dismiss your sexuality if there’s not somebody there.”

Theme 7: Microaggressions as Humor

The other new theme found in the data deals with how microaggressions are communicated to non-heterosexual individuals. Many participants gave examples of having the type of experience where microaggressive statements were delivered in a joking or humorous manner. The microaggressions varied in their content and underlying message, but were presented in a joking manner presumably to make the comment more socially acceptable. For example, one participant described an incident with his cousin shortly after starting college:

My cousin texted me a couple months after I had come out. His text said in a joking way, “So how’s being gay?” I think I said to him, “I don’t know how I respond to that.” I wanted to say, “How’s being straight?” I was unsure his intention. Was he asking about college or my love life or something else?

Another participant reported:

When I first came out in high school, I told one of my close guy friends and he made a joke. He said, “Am I going to catch it?” And yes, it was a joke and he didn’t mean it, but I still felt like it was something you don’t say to somebody especially when they’re trying to open up with. That’s not a good time for a joke, nor is your joke funny.

Participants reported this type of microaggression experience is especially difficult to respond to because the participants were told to “lighten up” or were told “to not be so sensitive, it is only a joke.” Perpetrators of microaggressions presented as humor benefit from the minimizing effect of the method of delivery (i.e., “I didn’t mean anything by it, it’s only a joke”), but this method of delivery further devalues the victim’s experience (i.e., “Why are you so sensitive?”).

Whereas the first six themes found in the data are organized around the content and underlying message of the statements being delivered, this theme is also important in recognizing there are different styles in which sexual orientation microaggressions can be delivered. In this theme, the style is humorous to the perpetrator but harmful and demeaning to the victim.
Taken together, the seven themes found in the data both partially validate Sue’s (2010) typology and demonstrate the presence of two new types of sexual orientation microaggressions. Collectively, the types sexual orientation microaggressions found in these data demonstrate the variety of challenges faced by being a sexual minority. Sexual orientation microaggressions reflect heterosexism and long-held societal biases that continue to have a negative impact on the lives of individuals who are not heterosexual. The daily effect of this type of microaggression is an increase in marginalization, isolation, and devaluing of the lives of sexual minorities (Sue, 2010). However, similar to most types of microaggressions, they remain largely invisible to those not directly impacted. The themes found in these data reflect a snapshot of how sexual orientation microaggressions are common and invisible, but harmful.

**DISCUSSION**

The themes found in the data both partially validate Sue’s (2010) typology and demonstrate the presence of two new types of sexual orientation microaggressions. Five themes from Sue’s (2010) original typology of sexual orientation microaggressions were validated in these data (Endorsement of Heteronormative Culture, Sinfulness, Homophobia, Heterosexist Language/Terminology, and Oversexualization). This finding indicates many parts of the current theories of microaggressions may indeed accurately represent the common daily experiences for sexual minorities. This finding is also consistent with the other research on microaggressions with sexual minorities and other groups (Balsam et al., 2011; Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011). Consistent with Sue’s (2010) original work in this area, the results of the study indicate sexual minorities face a range of microaggressions that promote heterosexism, bias, and harmful stereotypes on a daily basis.

In addition, two themes from Sue’s (2010) original typology of sexual orientation microaggressions were only minimally present in these data. This finding may indicate shifting trends in the types of microaggressions individuals experience, especially young adults.

In regard to the lack of validation of Sue’s (2010) theme Assumption of Abnormality, these data may indicate a shift in the public’s belief that being non-heterosexual as a pathological condition. Most peers of the participants in the sample were born after the era when “homosexuality” was formally considered a psychiatric illness. Further, even in the last decade, there has been an increasing normalization of images in the media of same-sex couples and young adult peers identifying as a sexual minority. This less pathological viewpoint may explain why microaggressions that reflect the Assumption of Abnormality were not as salient for this sample, all between the ages of 18 and 22.
The other theme not fully validated in Sue’s (2010) typology was the theme of Denial of Individual Heterosexism. Although there were instances of this type of microaggression found in the data, it did not rise to the level of a main research finding. In some cases participants reported experiences with individuals who were explicit in their heterosexist values and behaviors—heterosexist but not in denial. These individuals encountered by participants did not appear to feel societal pressure to present as non-heterosexist in the same way one would feel pressure to appear non-discriminatory in other ways such as non-racist or non-sexist. In some circles, it is still more socially acceptable to be heterosexist than it is to be racist or sexist (Walls, 2008). In many arenas (i.e., religious settings, heterosexist laws) discriminatory thoughts and behaviors against sexual minorities are still considered “acceptable” and not something to deny in order to be socially acceptable. So, although participants did not report a high number of microaggressions in which the perpetrator denied his or her heterosexism, they did report a fair number of incidents in which the perpetrator would openly acknowledge his or her heterosexist values and beliefs. Although it is likely that many sexual minorities still experience Denial of Individual Heterosexism microaggressions, these findings may indicate that, at least in this sample, other types of explicit discrimination were more salient.

Two new themes (Undersexualization and Microaggressions as Humor) also emerged in the data. This important finding indicates the experience of sexual orientation microaggressions is likely more nuanced and complex than has been previously discussed. These new themes add to the understanding of how sexual orientation microaggressions can take many forms.

The first new theme found in the data is Undersexualization. This theme represents the common experience of non-heterosexual individuals gaining only surface level acceptance from those around them. This acceptance ends when the individual actively engages in a romantic and sexual relationship with a same-sex partner. Microaggressions in this category often bring to the surface unstated disapproval. Undersexualization microaggressions represent a challenging situation for sexual minorities because physical and emotional intimacy with another person is an important part of human sexuality. However, this type of microaggression sends the message that same-sex sexuality should remain hidden, private, and invisible.

Microaggressions as Humor, the other new theme found in the data, also reflect a difficult situation to manage for those at the receiving end of the microaggression. In communication, humor is often used to reduce the impact or power of the delivered message (Trenholm, 2007). Stating a microaggression as a joking statement gives the perpetrator a level of immunity from being responsible for the impact (i.e., “It was only a joke, I didn’t mean it.”). This added layer of denial increases the lack of power felt by the victim of the microaggression. There is little room in this situation to
defend against the microaggression or make it visible. Given how common this form of microaggression delivery was in the data, this trend is important to consider further. It is clear that the ways in which microaggressions are communicated is as important as the content of the microaggressions because those delivered as humor tend to further silence and devalue the recipient (Sue, 2010). Future research should focus on how microaggressions are communicated, and the impact of the various types of delivery methods.

On a whole, the findings also highlight the unique problem of being an “invisible minority” while trying to deal with often invisible microaggressions. Facing microaggressions either further silences the individual or creates a situation in which a person must take the risk to disclose sexual identity in a potentially unsafe environment. Microaggressions complicate the life-long process of disclosing one’s sexual identity. This dilemma was particularly significant for this sample of young adults, many of whom are still relatively early in their sexual identity development and may not be confident or comfortable readily disclosing in new situations.

The findings are also relevant given what is known about the impact of discrimination on sexual minority individuals. Disparities in physical and psychological health have been found in numerous studies (Lewis, 2009; Meyer, 2003) when comparing heterosexual and non-heterosexual samples. Cocaine use and binge-drinking are some of the physically harmful behaviors that have been associated with discrimination against sexual orientation (Lewis, 2009). The psychologically harmful consequences found are also extensive. There is evidence of more suicide attempts and suicidal thoughts (Cochran, 2001; Lewis, 2009), greater risk of depression (Cochran, 2001), diminished quality of life (Mays & Cochran, 2001), and greater mental health morbidity (Cochran, 2001; Lewis, 2009; Mays & Cochran, 2001).

The prejudicial attitudes also have a negative impact on sexual minority individuals when they begin to adopt these as their own negative implicit attitudes about being non-heterosexual (Hatzenbuehler, Dovidio, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Phillips, 2009). When the prejudicial statements are coming from close friends or romantic partners and other people whose actions are deemed personally relevant, it is most likely that these attitudes will be internalized (Balsam et al., 2011). Internalized heterosexism can lead to greater rumination, psychological distress, and suppression of emotion when confronted with microaggressions in the future (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2009).

Negative consequences also arise when sexual minority individuals face microaggressions in therapy. Shelton and Delgado-Romero (2011) found that sexual minority individuals withheld information from their therapist, failed to discuss their sexual orientation or related issues, and reported feeling uncomfortable, confused, powerless, invisible, and rejected when microaggressions were present in therapy. It was also found that feelings of invalidation, frustration, and anger contributed to the sexual minority
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individuals doubting the effectiveness of therapy and their therapists’ investment in the process. They were also less likely to seek help or treatment in the future (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011).

The findings emphasize the importance of sexual orientation microaggressions for non-heterosexual individuals. These microaggressions occur frequently, cause significant distress, and reflect the larger societal biases that need to continue to be addressed. They are often subtle and perpetrated by well-meaning individuals. Although often invisible, it is important to acknowledge sexual orientation microaggressions are a very real presence in the lives of sexual minorities.

Limitations and Future Directions

As with all research, the results from this study must be viewed in light of its methodological strengths and limitations. The sample used for the focus group was small and not representative of the larger population. The participants were all college students from a small college in a rural setting. Other non-heterosexual individuals, such as those from a different age group or geographic location, may have different experiences of sexual orientation microaggressions. The sample was also primarily Euro-American with similar cultural backgrounds. This likely impacted the participants’ experiences of microaggressions in ways that are not representative of all sexual minority individuals. In addition, the sample was primarily women, with only two male participants. As gender and sexual orientation are frequently intersecting identities, the gender of the participants likely shaped their experiences of sexual orientation microaggressions. Care should be taken in generalizing the results to all individuals who may experience this type of microaggression, as the sexual minority community is a large, diverse group when viewed as a whole population. It would be beneficial to confirm these results by doing further research with a larger and more representative sample to determine the exact nature of sexual orientation microaggressions across groups.

Also, this research is based on the analysis of coders who identify as heterosexual allies. This is primarily a strength of the study, as the researchers were able to focus on the material in the data without losing objectivity based on personal experience (Creswell, 1998). Further, efforts were made throughout the data analysis to reduce any bias and remain objective. However, it must be acknowledged that coding data from the perspective of an ally may bring a different result than if the researchers were non-heterosexual individuals.

Future research should focus on differentiating between the microaggressive experiences of different groups of people who are non-heterosexual. It will be important to investigate the within group variation with microaggressions among different sexual minority groups. For example,
bisexual individuals often face unique challenges with harmful bias about the validity of being sexually attracted to both genders (Firestein, 1996). Gay men tend to face distinct forms of discrimination due to the restricted masculine gender roles, whereas lesbian women may not be judged as harshly (Helgeson, 2009). Future research is needed to explore how these specific societal biases toward different groups within the non-heterosexual community impact the type of microaggressions individuals may encounter.

Similarly, it is advisable that future research examine the experiences of individuals with multiple minority identities. For example, a person who is bisexual and is also Asian American will likely have different experiences with various forms of microaggressions as compared to a person who is bisexual and White. A comprehensive theory of microaggressions will need to address the complexity of multiple social identities and the lived experience of many types of people.

In addition, future research that explores sexual orientation microaggressions using qualitative and quantitative methodology is needed. With the development of quantitative means to measure sexual orientation microaggressions on a larger scale, comprehensive research can be undertaken. Combined with qualitative inquiry, this type of research could greatly enhance the understanding of the true impact of microaggressions for minority groups.

The study of microaggressions against minority individuals is an important and growing body of research. For sexual minorities, it is critical that further research explore the unique nature of sexual orientation microaggressions, their impact on psychological and physical health, and ways that individuals can cope with the harmful impact. Building on the results of this study and others to come, it is hoped that the lives of sexual minority individuals can be improved and enhanced by giving voice to the challenge of microaggressions in daily life.

NOTE

1. Given the wide range of self-identifiers used in the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, pansexual, etc.), the more simple terms *non-heterosexual* or *sexual minority* are used throughout the article and are meant to include any sexual orientation identification that is not heterosexual.

REFERENCES


**APPENDIX**

**SCRIPT FOR FOCUS GROUP** (adapted from Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007)

Hi, my name is “facilitator.” Thank you for coming here today to participate in this focus group. The purpose of this group is to gain a better understanding of day-to-day discrimination and experiences of subtle discrimination. I am sure that you are familiar with overt forms of discrimination such as hate crimes. However, today we are interested in hearing about your experiences of subtle acts of being discriminated against because of your sexual orientation. These experiences may have occurred in any setting or at anytime in your life. We will be asking you some questions that we encourage you to answer to the best of your ability and we recognize that many of you will have unique experiences of being subtly discriminated against.

There are no wrong answers.

At this time, I’d like to introduce “observer,” who will be a nonparticipating member of our group today. He/She is here to record our conversation so that I can be involved in the group without having to take too many notes. Okay, so, I am going to give everyone a form now which basically states that your participation in this group is entirely voluntary and that you may decline to participate and leave the group at any time. Please read this sheet carefully before signing it. It discusses potential risks to you as members of this group as well as the use of audiotaping during this session. I’d like to give everyone the opportunity to ask any questions they may have before we begin the group. Question/Answer. . .

**Statement of Confidentiality**

We will be audiotaping this session in an effort to maintain the integrity of your dialogue. However, your identities will not be revealed to anyone, and only the researchers will have access to this tape. This discussion is to be considered confidential, and we would hope that you will all respect each other rights to privacy by not repeating any portion of this discussion outside of this session.

**Opening Question**

At this time we would like for each of you to say your first name, your occupation and why you are interested in participating in this study.
General Question

Sexual minorities often have experiences in which they are subtly, invalidated, discriminated against, and made to feel uncomfortable because of their sexual orientation. In thinking about your daily experiences, could you describe a situation in which you witnessed or were personally subtly discriminated against because of your sexual orientation?

Interview Questions

- What are some subtle ways that people treat you differently because of your sexual orientation?
- Describe a situation in which you felt uncomfortable, insulted, or disrespected by a comment that had discriminatory overtones.
- Think of some of the stereotypes that exist about your sexual orientation. How have others subtly expressed their stereotypical beliefs about you?
- In what ways have others made you feel “put down” because of your sexual orientation or communication style?
- In what ways have people subtly expressed that “the heterosexual way is the right way”?
- In what subtle ways have others expressed that they think you’re a second-class citizen or inferior to them?
- How have people suggested that you do not belong here because of your sexual orientation?
- What have people done or said to invalidate your experiences of being discriminated against?

Transition Questions

- What are some of the ways that you dealt with these experiences?
- What do you think the overall impact of your experiences has been on your lives?

Ending Questions

So today you shared several experiences of subtle discrimination. Some of you said. . . . There were several themes that were consistent across many of your experiences. These themes include. . . . Does that sound correct? If not, what themes might you add?