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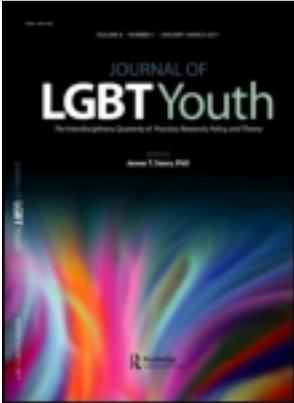
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## **Sexual Orientation Microaggressions: “Death by a Thousand Cuts” for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth**

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*In recent years, there has been a growth of literature examining the mental health impacts of microaggressions, which are defined as subtle forms of discrimination toward oppressed groups. The current study utilized a qualitative focus group method and directed content analysis to categorize several types of sexual orientation microaggressions that exist. Eight themes were identified, including “Use of heterosexist terminology” and “Endorsement of heteronormative culture/behaviors.” Results suggest that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals experience both conscious and unconscious microaggressions from heterosexuals and support that microaggressions negatively impact LGB individual’s mental health. Implications for youth development are discussed.*

**KEYWORDS** *Bisexuals, discrimination, gay men, lesbians, mental health, microaggressions, sexual orientation, violence*

Racism and other forms of discrimination have been embedded as part of American society on social, political, and economic levels (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). The civil rights movement and subsequent equal rights initiatives had a significant impact on changing racial attitudes and overt prejudicial behaviors. In fact, 40 years later (particularly with the election of an African-American president), many Americans may believe such movements eliminated racism and created true equality between Whites and people of color (Sue, 2010; Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007; Thompson & Neville, 1999).

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However, some authors have suggested that discrimination continues to exist and has transformed from an overt form to a more covert form; these types of discrimination have been labeled as microaggressions (Sue, 2010).

Microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward members of oppressed groups” (Nadal, 2008, p. 23). Research has found that microaggressions can occur in various settings and have detrimental impacts on the individuals who experience them (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009). When individuals commit microaggressions, they are often unaware of the impact of their statements or behaviors and may even become defensive if confronted by others (Nadal, 2008; Sue, 2010). Based on past literature on racial microaggressions (Pierce et al., 1978; Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007; Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2008), there are three posited forms of microaggressions.

*Microassaults* are defined as the usage of explicit and intended derogations either verbally or nonverbally, as demonstrated through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or discriminatory actions toward the intended victim (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). For example, maliciously calling a person of Asian descent “Oriental” and telling a Latino person to “go back where you came from” are both forms of microassaults.

*Microinsults* are often unconscious and are described as verbal or non-verbal communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s heritage or identity (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). For instance, when persons with disabilities are spoken to in a condescending tone or when women are told they aren’t capable of something, subtle messages are sent that these individuals are inferior to the dominant group (i.e., able-bodied persons or men).

*Microinvalidations* are also often unconscious and include communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the realities of individuals of oppressed groups (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). An example includes a white student telling a student of color that she or he complains about race too much. While seemingly innocuous, such a message indirectly invalidates the racial realities that the person of color faces on a regular basis.

Most empirical studies examining microaggression have focused primarily on the impacts of racial microaggressions on people of color (Pierce et al., 1978; Sue et al., 2009; Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2008). Empirical studies of other groups such as women (Capodilupo et al., 2010; Swim, Ferguson, & Hyers, 1999; Swim & Hyers, 1999) and persons with disabilities (Keller & Galgay, 2010) suggest that other oppressed groups might also experience subtle discrimination or microaggressions.

Microaggression literature also describes various ways that systems, institutions, and environments are microaggressive in nature (see Sue, 2010,

for review). For example, when buildings are named only after white men or colleges only displays paintings of white men, a subtle communication is sent to people of color and women that white men are superior and that people of color have not contributed significantly to society (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). Similarly, racist, sexist, heterosexist, or other discriminatory legislations convey messages that discrimination is still acceptable. For example, Arizona's Senate Bill 1070 (also known as Arizona SB-1070), a law passed in the US state of Arizona in April 2010, requires all individuals to maintain their legal documents at all times and allows law enforcement officials to demand such documents to be produced when requested. One of the major critiques of this bill is that it allows racial profiling of Latinos and other immigrant groups. With this law in effect, it is argued that police officers would likely only target people of color to show their legal documents, while whites would not be targeted (because they would be assumed to be American born). Creators, enforcers, and supporters of Arizona SB-1070 may not uphold malicious intentions, and they may not recognize the underlying messages that this legislation communicates to people of color. Supporters of Arizona SB-1070 are likely to not consider themselves to be racist; instead, they genuinely believe that they have the best interests of the country in mind. However, the environment that is created when such legislation is enforced and supported may create feelings of discomfort, anger, sadness, and other negative emotions. Thus, such discriminatory laws fit the criteria of environmental microaggressions.

Previous research reports lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons, especially LGBT youth, experience sexual prejudice and discrimination, suggesting that microaggressions can also be based on sexual orientation and transgender identity (see Nadal, Rivera, & Corpus, 2010, for a review). For example, the literature on hate crimes (Herek, 2000, 2009; Herek & Capitano, 1999; Herek, Cogan, & Gillis, 2002), sexual/antigay harassment and prejudice (Burn, Kadlec, & Rexer, 2005; Herek, 2000; Lewis, Derlega, Brown, Rose, & Henson, 2009), sexual stigma (Herek, 2007), modern homonegativity (Morrison & Morrison, 2002), modern heterosexism (Walls, 2008), and transphobia (Hill & Willoughby, 2005) has all pointed to the detrimental impacts of discrimination on the psychological experiences of LGBT persons. Similar to other forms of discrimination, heterosexism and genderism toward LGBT individuals has also become less direct and more subtle (Hill & Willoughby, 2005; Walls, 2008), marginalizing LGBT individuals while praising and normalizing heterosexual and nontransgender people.

On a societal level, there have been attempts to decrease the pathologizing of LGBT experiences. For instance, antidiscriminatory US federal and state laws have been passed that protect LGBT individuals. Furthermore, the removal of "homosexuality" as a psychological disorder from the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* in 1973 required that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB)

identities and experiences not be viewed as abnormal (Chernin & Johnson, 2003). Another example includes the increase in advocacy for LGBT rights, as demonstrated by the American Psychological Association passing a resolution which declared that denying same-sex marriage rights is discriminatory and unfair (Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, & Miller, 2009).

However, LGBT persons are still denied many civil rights and continue to experience social discrimination. Despite the efforts to be inclusive of homosexuality, for example, transsexualism was added as a disorder in the *DSM* in 1980, and gender identity disorder is still endorsed by both the American Psychiatric Association and American Psychological Association. In addition, at the time of this writing, LGBT people are allowed to get married in only five US states and Washington, DC (Human Rights Campaign, 2010), and some states have denied same-sex couples from adopting children. In addition, according to a report by the US General Accounting Office in 2004, same-sex couples are denied 1,138 benefits, rights, and protections, which negatively impacts policies concerning Social Security, taxes, employee benefits, and medical care (Levitt et al., 2009). Furthermore, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (1964) prohibits workplace discrimination based on sex, race, color, religion, and national origin, but it does not directly cover sexual orientation or gender identity (Berkley & Watt, 2006).

Given this discrimination on societal, institutional, and interpersonal levels, LGBT individuals may feel marginalized in American society and experience excess social stress or “minority stress” (Meyer, 1995, 2003), which in turn makes them more prone to mental health problems than heterosexual people. In a meta-analytic review, Meyer (2003) found that gay and lesbian individuals were 2.5 times more likely to have a mental health problem in their lifetimes compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Also, Cochran (2001) found that LGBT individuals suffer from more mental health problems such as depression, substance abuse disorders, and suicide than their heterosexual counterparts. Because of these disparities, it becomes necessary for educational systems, government, and other institutions to recognize and validate the stressors experienced by LGBT persons, especially in areas where anti-LGBT policies and legislations are more prominent (Levitt et al., 2009; Nadal, 2008; Sue & Capodilupo, 2008).

Nadal and colleagues (2010) proposed a theoretical taxonomy on sexual orientation and transgender microaggressions, citing several categories of microaggressions that may target LGBT persons.

1. *Use of heterosexist and transphobic terminology* occurs when someone uses derogatory heterosexist language toward LGBT persons (e.g., saying words like “faggot” or “dyke,” an employer refusing to use individuals’ preferred gender pronouns, or people using phrases like “That’s so gay!”).
2. *Endorsement of heteronormative or gender normative culture/behaviors* transpires when an LGBT person is expected to act or be heterosexual

- or gender conforming. For instance, a heterosexual person telling a gay individual not to “act gay in public” and a parent forcing her or his child to dress according to birth sex would be both examples of endorsing heteronormative or genderist values.
3. *Assumption of universal LGBT experience* occurs when heterosexual people assume that all LGBT persons are the same (e.g., stereotyping all gay men to be interested in fashion or interior design or assuming all lesbian women to act or look “butch”).
  4. *Exoticization* microaggressions take place when LGBT people are dehumanized or treated as objects. This can be exemplified by heterosexual people stereotyping LGBT people as being the “comedic relief” or asking transgender people intrusive questions about their genitalia.
  5. *Discomfort/disapproval of LGBT experience* occurs when LGBT people are treated with disrespect and criticism, such as when a stranger stares at an affectionate lesbian couple with disgust or a heterosexual or nontransgender person tells an LGBT individual that she or he is “going to hell,” they are expressing their disapproval or discomfort.
  6. *Denial of societal heterosexism or transphobia* transpires when people deny that heterosexism and homophobia exist (e.g., a coworker telling a gay friend that he’s being paranoid thinking someone is discriminating against him).
  7. *Assumption of sexual pathology/abnormality* microaggressions come about when heterosexual or nontransgender people oversexualize LGBT persons and consider them as sexual deviants. For example, many people may assume that all gay men have HIV/AIDS or are child molesters or that transgender women are sex workers.
  8. Finally, *denial of individual heterosexism/transphobia* occurs when non-LGBT people deny their own heterosexist and transgender biases and prejudice (e.g., someone saying, “I am not homophobic. I have a gay friend!”).

One study examined the ways that LGB people react to and cope with sexual orientation microaggressions (Nadal et al., 2011). Using qualitative methods, participants reported the various ways that they perceive microaggressions when they occur. *Behavioral reactions* included different ways that LGB individuals reacted behaviorally to microaggressions (e.g., being passive, being confrontational). *Cognitive reactions* involved various cognitive processes that LGB individuals reported during and after experiencing microaggressions (e.g., conforming to general society, accepting microaggressions, or feeling empowered or resilient). *Emotional reactions* consisted of the various types of emotions LGB people experienced when or after experiencing microaggressions. Finally, participants reported the various types of mental health problems that they experienced as a result of microaggressions, as well as the range of systems or groups that enact microaggressions.

The goal of the current study was to explore and understand the specific types of sexual orientation microaggressions that LGB individuals experience in their everyday lives. Because there has been substantial research that has supported the specific types of microaggression that people of color, women, and persons with disabilities experience (Capodilupo et al., 2010; Keller & Galgay, 2010; Sue, Bucci, et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2008), it was important to examine the various types of microaggressions that LGB persons encounter as well. Thus, several research questions were created to examine the experiences of sexual orientation microaggressions:

1. What types of microaggressions do LGB persons experience?
2. Do lesbian women, gay men, bisexual women, and bisexual men experience different forms of microaggressions?
3. How do LGB individuals react to microaggressions when they occur?

When seeking rich data, particularly on unstudied topics, qualitative methods can provide an appropriate approach to answering research questions (Morrow & Smith, 2000). Although there has been considerable research examining various forms of discrimination toward LGB persons, few studies have focused on LGB discrimination through the lens of the microaggressions framework. Thus, this current study involved focus group discussions and directed content analysis to systematically classify transcribed data into the themes proposed by Nadal and colleagues (2010).

Directed content analysis is a qualitative method that is widely used to validate an existing theory or prior research of a phenomenon that is incomplete or would benefit from further description (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Furthermore, the researchers replicated the existing qualitative research examining microaggressions that have focused on race (Sue, Bucci, et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2008; Sue et al., 2009), gender (Capodilupo et al., 2010), and ability (Keller & Galgay, 2010), by implementing the use of focus groups, similar types of interview questions, and parallel qualitative analyses. Focus groups were used instead of individual interviews or surveys in order for participants to share their experiences with others, while triggering other participants to brainstorm potential microaggressions they may not have initially recalled. The use of focus groups has been found to be a more effective method in studying previously unexamined phenomena (Krueger & Casey, 2008).

This study focused solely on sexual orientation microaggressions or microaggressions experienced in everyday lives by LGB people. Although there may be similarities between sexual orientation and transgender microaggressions (i.e., microaggressions experienced by transgender or gender-nonconforming people), there are complex differences between these two groups, warranting separate studies. In addition, because it is important not to conflate sexual orientation and gender identity, the researchers believed

it was important to examine the experiences of these two groups separately. Finally, while there are also differences between lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, examining these three groups provides an opportunity to compare and analyze their unique experiences.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were recruited in two ways. Many participants were solicited from a large public college in a northeastern metropolitan area. These students enrolled in introductory psychology classes and were required to participate in research studies on campus as part of their grade. Participants were also recruited through the general community; recruitment e-mails were sent to local LGBT college student organizations, and website advertisements were posted on the Craigslist (<http://craigslist.org>) website. Participants from LGBT community groups received light refreshments, while online participants earned \$10 for their participation.

A total of 26 individuals (11 men and 15 women) participated, comprising five focus groups (mean: 5.2 participants). Five participants identified as lesbian, 11 as gay men, and 10 as bisexual women. None identified as transgender or gender-nonconforming. Ethnicities were White ( $N = 11$ ), Latina/o ( $N = 10$ ), Black ( $N = 2$ ), Multiracial ( $N = 2$ ), and Asian ( $N = 1$ ). The mean age of participants was 25.7 years,  $SD = 10.43$  years, with a range from ages 18 to 55. Majority of the participants ( $n = 21$ ) were between the ages of 15 to 24, aligning with the United Nations' definition of youth (United Nations, 2010). Sixteen participants were students, and 10 were working professionals.

### Researchers

Six individuals comprised the research team: one Asian male professor, two white female graduate students, one Arab female graduate student, one Latina female graduate student, and one Asian female graduate student. The principal investigator (PI) is an assistant professor of psychology who has been trained in and has conducted qualitative research methods (namely, content analysis, consensual qualitative research, and community-based participatory research) for more than ten years and has studied microaggressions extensively for the past five years. The PI trained the graduate researchers extensively on qualitative research, particularly on directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Researchers were not required to disclose their sexual orientations to the rest of the research team, but one researcher

openly identified as gay, another researcher identified as bisexual, and four researchers identified as heterosexual.

Before creating research materials and collecting and analyzing data, the research team discussed their assumptions about sexual orientation microaggressions. This practice of openly identifying personal biases allows the researchers and potential readers to evaluate the extent to which researcher biases influence study design and interpretation of results. Hence, by discussing, pronouncing, and staying aware of one's biases, researchers should minimize such biases through all stages of the methodology and analysis (Hill et al., 2005).

The research team identified several general assumptions that were discussed prior to collecting data. Some of these biases included that discrimination does exist toward LGBT people, and general society (e.g., media, public policy, or religion) has an influence in the perpetuation of sexual orientation microaggressions. Other discussions ensued about gender differences within the LGBT community, including that gay men may experience more physical violence than lesbian women and that lesbians may be more sexually exoticized than are gay men. Biases involving bisexuality were disclosed, ranging from individuals questioning the validity of bisexuality to recognizing the discrimination that bisexuals experience from both heterosexuals and from lesbians and gays. Power dynamics were also discussed in which all researchers agreed to be able to share their opinions openly and candidly, regardless of rank, education, status, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, gender, or other identities.

## Measures

Each participant completed a demographic form including information about her or his sexual orientation, age, race, ethnicity, level of education, occupation, religion, and number of years in the United States. Focus groups were organized with a semistructured interview guide designed by the research team. This guide included open-ended questions and possible follow-up questions that were replicated from previous qualitative microaggression studies (see Capodilupo et al., 2010; Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2008). For example, one question asked participants to "think about a time when you may have been subtly discriminated against because of your sexual orientation. Describe the scenario as best as you can." This question was followed with additional probing questions, such as, "How did you react in this situation?," "What do you perceive was the message that was being conveyed to you?," and "How did you feel after the event?" Interviewers asked participants to think about experiences throughout their lifetimes in order to elicit responses from their adulthood, as well as their childhood and adolescence.

## Procedures

Focus groups were conducted in a private room at the researchers' home institution between January and May 2009. At the beginning of each focus group, a focus group leader greeted participants who then were introduced to two additional researchers observing the group. Each participant read and signed an informed consent form, which also notified participants about the use of audio recording. The group leader explained that participation was completely voluntary. Each participant was also given a list of local counseling resources in the unlikely event that the focus group discussion caused any psychological distress. The focus group leader then explained the nature of the focus group process, and the group agreed to confidentiality. The leader asked open-ended questions about experiences with sexual orientation microaggressions, allowed participants to respond in their own time, and probed with follow-up questions when appropriate. Focus groups, lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, were audio-recorded to maintain the integrity of the discussion and later transcribed verbatim by the research team.

Transcripts were analyzed in accordance with directed content analysis. The goal of directed content analysis is "to validate or extend conceptually a theoretical framework or theory" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). In the context of this study, researchers began with the theoretical sexual orientation microaggression classification system proposed by Nadal and colleagues (2010). Next, all research analysts reviewed each of the five focus group transcripts independently from the group with the task of categorizing statements into one of seven microaggression themes. (For example, all researchers used a red highlighter to connote statements that aligned with the first theme, "Use of heterosexist language.") Researchers also independently made note of potential unidentified categories or themes absent from the original taxonomy. They highlighted these themes and examples with a different color of their choice and brought back these potential themes for group discussion and analysis.

After this independent coding, the research team met to compare codes and notes. Researchers began the process by stating a category from the taxonomy and then identifying each quote that could accurately be labeled in the category. When there were discrepancies, members of the team discussed the statement(s) in question and reached consensus about the most appropriate microaggression theme code. When a quote could potentially fit under more than one category, researchers discussed the item and consensually agreed on one category that it could be labeled. Researchers also discussed potential themes that were not included in the taxonomy and consensually agreed whether these new themes warranted additional categories.

Next, the researchers provided an external auditor, a self-identified gay male professor of psychology well versed in the microaggressions literature as well as other LGBT-related topics in psychology, with the themes and

examples of quotes under each theme. After independently reviewing the group's coded transcripts and chosen quotations for accuracy, he provided feedback to the team. The team reconvened, discussed the auditor's feedback (mostly involving the need to provide clearer examples and rename certain themes), and resubmitted their work to the auditor. After the auditor's approval, the team then collaborated to select the most fitting quotations from the transcripts that best illustrated the identified themes. The auditor reviewed the final analysis and approved the teams' collaborative work.

## RESULTS

Eight themes emerged from the participants' responses. Seven of these themes matched those proposed by Nadal and colleagues (2010). These themes include

1. use of heterosexist terminology,
2. endorsement of heteronormative culture/ behaviors,
3. assumption of universal LGBT experience,
4. exoticization,
5. discomfort/ disapproval of LGBT experience,
6. denial of the reality of heterosexism, and
7. assumption of sexual pathology/abnormality.
8. An eighth theme, threatening behaviors, emerged from the data and was independent from the original taxonomy.

All eight themes included incidents reported by multiple participants from the different focus groups. Incidents described by participants were examined thoroughly to discover hidden messages and intentions of the enactor of the microaggression.

### Theme 1: Use Of Heterosexist Terminology

This first theme refers to microaggressions that occur when heterosexist language is used to degrade LGB persons. This form of microaggression may not be intended to be hurtful toward LGB individuals and may take the form of heterosexist jokes or comments. Participants described certain words such as "faggot" and "dyke" as denigrating to them, sending the message that it is inferior or undesirable to be LGB. For example, one gay male participant shared:

I recently opened up to my friend about [being gay] and he's a guy . . . and just the other day I was at his house and were talking about other

people and he would describe them as like, “faggot,” and it would get to me.

Hearing such negative words was commonplace and even acceptable in everyday life. For example, one participant shared: “When you’re angry at someone, you can call them a ‘faggot’ and that’s still okay.” Others reported people consciously used pejorative language, particularly out of anger. One participant talked about a group of bullies at school: “They came up to me and they told me . . . they were very, very tough, saying ‘You’re a fucking lesbian, and go to hell and leave my family alone.’” Participants also described that peers used the word “gay” in negative contexts (i.e., as synonymous to “bad” or “weird”). According to the participants, hearing such remarks was hurtful, distressful, and made them feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

Such language could be classified as microassaults, in that the perpetrators are consciously using hurtful words to denigrate or poke fun at others; however, because such language may not be viewed as intending to injure or threaten others, perpetrators (and bystanders) may perceive such communication as being harmless and acceptable.

## Theme 2: Endorsement Of Heteronormative Culture/Behaviors

This theme occurs when LGB persons are expected to be or act like heterosexuals. Participants shared that they are often looked down upon or treated negatively in social situations, such as in family gatherings, public places, and workplace settings. Reactions from others about their sexual orientation often made participants feel forced to change their dress, mannerisms, or communication styles in order to feel accepted. Many reported that it was necessary to “act straight” in certain social situations in order to feel safe or accepted. A female participant talked about how she changed who she was in her parents’ home because her mother is “old-fashioned”:

[My mother] knows that I’m a lesbian, but she is in denial. She doesn’t want to see it, so I have to act a certain way. You know, act heterosexual, not mention anything about me having a girlfriend or anything like that to make her feel uncomfortable or make her say anything offensive toward me. So, I have to act completely different at home.

Another described a situation in which her father pressured her to change her Facebook profile in order to get a job:

He’s assuming that for the purposes of that I should hide my identity online . . . because future employers, who he assumes will be un-gay-friendly, will see that and just say “Okay, don’t even interview her.” And

I think, part of this is because he was raised in Texas in the '50s, so he thinks everybody else in the country takes a fairly dim view of us.

These incidents may be considered microinsults, in that the perpetrators may not be aware of how their words and actions communicate offensive messages to LGB people.

In addition, many of the participants described how they had to make others feel comfortable around them. They reported doing so by changing their behaviors and compromising parts of their identities.

One participant noted that her relationship with her grandmother changed because of the need to hide her sexual orientation. "Every time I call my grandmother, I have to hear about my cousin . . . and his beautiful girlfriend. . . . I don't think they ever talk about my beautiful girlfriend." Another female participant described how her mother suggested she not disclose she had a girlfriend or hold hands in public. This participant expressed her frustration with being closeted and wanted her family to take her relationship seriously.

A third female participant talked about how lesbians are often encouraged to dress in more gender-conforming ways:

My girlfriend . . . she dresses a little boyish. [And this man] looks at her and . . . he kept telling her, "Why do you dress like that? You're a girl, what are you doing? You're supposed to wear, you know, girly clothes. . . . Why do you dress like a guy? Why do you look like a guy?"

This experience was especially common for female participants who were taught explicitly by their loved ones and strangers that they should dress more femininely. Again, these types of microaggressions may be considered to be microinsults; the intention of the perpetrators is conscious but not malicious, while the victim feels hurt and offended.

### Theme 3: Assumptions Of Universal Lgb Experience

Here heterosexual individuals assume that all LGB persons and their experiences are the same. One participant talked about how his close friends made assumptions about him as a gay individual:

One day I had asked my friend, 'cause he was on the football team, and he was the most popular, and I said, you know, "I want to try out for football." He just stood there and kind of laughed at me. I felt, you know, "What are you laughing at?" He was like, "Come on, you're gay! You can't play football!"

Another male participant talked about how assumptions about LGB persons are common in society, especially in workplace settings:

They're making it seem like everybody is sexual and smutty-buddy and, you know, every gay man is an interior decorator or sells hair for a living, you know. Even at my job . . . if you work in stocks, then it's a straight guy, but if you're on the beauty floor and/or you're a cashier, you're gay.

One female participant described assumptions about the way she dressed: "Since I dress a little bit more feminine than most other lesbians they might take [my identity as a lesbian] as a joke or make offensive statements." Because this participant did not fit the stereotype of what lesbians are supposed to look or dress like, others assume she is heterosexual, becoming the victim of microinsults rooted in the fallacious assumption of a universal LGB experience.

#### Theme 4: Exoticization

When LGB persons feel they are dehumanized or treated like an object, they experience exoticization. An example of this type of microaggression was illustrated by one gay male participant:

This woman came up to me one night and she said . . . I think I made some joke or something and she said, "Do you know who you remind me of?" and I knew what was coming, I just knew what was coming. She's like, "You're just like that Jack on *Will and Grace*. You're so funny." And I looked at her, and I said, "Ma'am, no offense, but that's actually not a compliment." And she was like, "What do you mean? What do you mean? No, no, I was saying you're funny, and you're cute, and you dress nice."

He told the focus group, "I feel like straight people kinda think it's funny how I behave, you know what I mean, like it's amusing to them."

Another participant discussed how heterosexual people often glamorize his life and assume that all gay people live a "fantastic and fabulous" life. Relaying people's assumptions that he is "out every night and at all the clubs," he responded:

No, I'm not. I'm really not. It's not like I never do that, but it's not like I am out. I haven't done that in twenty years. . . . What bothers me are—where I get a little annoyed or where I feel weird about it is when I feel like they're using me as a fantasy projection for what they wish their life was.

Again, although the intention of the perpetrator is to be complimentary, the victim experiences a microinsult.

A bisexual female participant described feeling objectified and exoticized by heterosexual males: “A lot of guys would think, you know, because I’m into both guys and girls that I’ll be like down with the threesome kinda thing, and it’s like ugh, get over yourself.” Other bisexual female participants agreed with this sexual objectification by heterosexual males.

### Theme 5: Discomfort/Disapproval Of The Lgb Experience

An example of disapproval was relayed by one female participant:

I was in college, and I came out to a friend who was very conservative Christian, and she didn’t say “I’m going to stop being your friend,” but she did say she was sorry to hear that because “I believe you are condemned.”

This same participant also described situations where strangers showed disapproval toward her because of her sexual orientation. She revealed, “Well, like if we’re marching in a [LGBT Pride] parade, there will be occasionally, like, counter protesters . . . who tell us we’re going to hell.”

In two other cases, individuals were uncomfortable with same-sex public displays of affection by participants; one reaction was subtle (slight facial expressions of disapproval) and another explicit (laughing). A female participant relayed an instance

where I was with my girlfriend on the train, and she was holding me and kissing me, and there were people sitting there, and they just made a face. They didn’t—I didn’t see them say anything to us. It’s just the face—you can kind of tell, the manner, their facial expression is kind of like “whoa.”

More overt discomfort from heterosexual people was shared by a male: “One time I was kissing my boyfriend on my front porch, and this guy walked by us and started chuckling.”

Another male participant described attending a wedding with a male date. Later he shared pictures to a female coworker. One picture showed him kissing his date. The coworker reacted: “Oh, gross, I really don’t want to see that. I really, really don’t want to see that.” This participant believed that the coworker would not have been uncomfortable if the picture had been of two heterosexual people kissing.

Many bisexual participants talked about how they were often assumed to be gay and lesbian and how their experiences as bisexuals were not valid. One discussed how others often assume that heterosexuality and homosexuality are the only two sexual orientations:

I actually went to a taping of [a talk show] recently, and it was an episode about gay marriage and gay issues and [the host] had everyone in the audience wear T-shirts that they gave us that said either “straight” or “gay” or whatever on them. It was really cheesy, but they didn’t have a shirt that said “bi.” They had a straight shirt, a gay shirt, and then a shirt with a question mark on it. I was like, “What the fuck is this?” I’m like, my sexual orientation is *not* a question mark. I didn’t like how it could be implied that I’m confused.

This microaggression upset her because it conveyed that bisexuality is abnormal and that one needs to choose to be either heterosexual or homosexual. Bisexual participants in all focus groups reported similar microaggressions and labeled them as common experiences.

There, too, were several environmental microaggressions in which society (e.g., the media, academic institutions, government, and religious groups) evidenced disapproval or discomfort toward LGB persons. The media messages that these participants relayed were that

1. LGB persons cannot disclose their sexualities;
2. it is unsafe for LGB persons to do so; and
3. if LGB persons are visible or present, they are portrayed in a negative manner.

Participants talked about the heterosexist laws that are enacted by the federal or state governments, including California’s Proposition 8 (which eliminated same-sex marriage) or the recently overturned “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” policy (which prohibited gays and lesbians from being “out of the closet” while serving in the military). “They should just remove that question,” offered one participant, “especially that thing with the military. . . . Like, that blows my . . . that ‘Don’t Ask Don’t Tell.’ . . . Like, it shouldn’t even matter. What the hell . . . You’re still defending your country. . . . Like, what difference does it make?”

Participants also discussed how religious institutions enact environmental microaggressions that convey disapproval of or discomfort with LGB persons. One person, who shared his negative reactions to religious groups, said:

Now I’m just not—I’m not just offended by the whole evolution thing. Now I get to be offended by, you know, “God hates fags” and the Mormon Church . . . Prop 8, and anytime the Vatican opens his mouth . . . This is such a religious country.

Many participants shared how Christian groups often campaigned heavily in support of California’s Proposition 8 in order to ban same-sex marriage and discriminate against LGB people.

## Theme 6: Denial Of Reality Of Heterosexism

This sixth theme refers to instances when a heterosexual individual denies that heterosexist or homophobic experiences exist. One female participant described an instance that occurred with a professor:

My professor, who is overseeing my dissertation in [chemistry], really wants me to become a professor of [chemistry]. And I tried to explain to him that it wasn't very easy for me, that there are very few jobs, and they are all like in Ohio or Oklahoma or in places I personally wouldn't want to live. And also I have a partner, who because of her visa situation is tied to [New York], and I tried to explain to him. I can't just get married to my partner and take her with me where I go because of federal laws, the Defense of Marriage Act. And so I didn't appreciate his guilt trip when I decided to leave the academy and his sort of lack of understanding around, Do I give up my personal life and who I am and maybe go to a place where I have to be closeted just because he think I should? And I would say his lack of understand might be a subtle form of discrimination.

This experience may be considered a microinvalidation. The professor in this situation exemplified a lack of understanding and compassion, as well as a denial of the reality that LGB people experience in a heterosexist society.

Denial of the reality of heterosexism also includes individuals who deny that they themselves are heterosexist. For example, in an aforementioned incident where a woman compared a gay male participant to a flamboyant character from the *Will & Grace*, he reacted to her negatively and pointed out her microaggressive behavior. In response, she denied that she was being heterosexist and instead claimed she was paying him a compliment. This experience is similar to the previous research on racial microaggressions in which whites often deny that they are racist or enact racist acts. These defensive statements may be degrading and hurtful to the recipient of the microaggression who experiences such microinvalidations regularly.

## Theme 7: Assumption Of Sexual Pathology/Abnormality

LGB individuals have been thought to be oversexualized, sexual deviants, or both. One female participant mentioned that, "Well, in my case, I've actually had some friends stop being my friends, because they were like, 'Oh, since you're bisexual and you might try come on to me' so they stopped being my friend." She felt that heterosexuals assume that they are going to be preyed upon just because of their heterosexual orientation. Another assumption based on this theme is that LGB persons are infected with HIV/AIDS. One participant whose heterosexual roommate was attending medical school "found out that I was gay and he had brought the cup that I had drank out

of ... and he was, like, freaking out. Like ‘Do [I have to take] an HIV test now?’”

Another participant reported:

My mom took me to the church to donate blood because they [*sic*] had the blood bank ... the mobile thing, blood bank. ... So, I was going through it ... but they had you fill out a questionnaire before ... and one of the questions was, Have you had sex with a man since 1978? ... That was one of the questions ... and I put “Yeah,” thinking nothing of it, ‘cause, you know, whatever. I had sex with a man ... so ... they took the questionnaire and five minutes later they told me I couldn’t donate blood because of that fact, because of the whole HIV thing.

This discriminatory action and policy sends the indirect message that all gay or bisexual men must have HIV/AIDS since they don’t practice safe sex. Similar to other aforementioned examples, this microinsult perpetuates negative stereotypes.

Several gay male participants also discussed assumption by others of being sexual predators or child molesters. One participant, a former schoolteacher, revealed:

I remember being very careful about interacting with the kids. Because I was gay, I knew that people made assumptions and kept watch over me ... like we were all sexual predators or something.

While not hearing blatant statements about being a sexual predator, he observed that others treated him differently than other heterosexual teachers when interacting with children. Relaying such microinsults, he expressed distress, frustration, and hurt.

### Theme 8: Threatening Behavior

A few participants discussed how they were the victims of assaults, threatening behavior, or both. Some of these experiences could easily be classified as hate crimes. But other experiences may be labeled as microassaults, in that the perpetrators may have been conscious of their behavior yet may not have been physically assaultive.

Participants reported being called a range of slurs from “faggot” to a “stupid lesbian.” While these verbal attacks were blatant, they can be classified as microassaults in that the enactor may not have had any intention of physically harming the victim. Yet the lack of physical injury does not preclude psychological damage, leaving the victim feeling unsafe, vulnerable, or endangered. One male participant discussed how strangers on the street made him feel physically threatened:

I was walking with three friends of mine—all male, all gay. . . . It was pretty late, probably about two in the morning, and two guys were standing near a park, and we just passed by them, and one of them said, “What did you say?” We didn’t respond . . . and then they continued and said, “Did you just call me gay? Did you just call me a faggot?” They followed us for about two blocks and tried to start a fight.

He believed these strangers verbally harassed him and his gay friends because of their presumed sexual orientation.

There, however, were stories of physical assaults. One participant described how she was bullied during her adolescence: “When I was in school, like in sixth grade until ninth grade, middle school to the beginning of high school, I was really harassed because of it. I was beaten up and sent to the emergency room.” While this physical assault is clearly an assault (and not “micro” in any way), the unsafe and hostile environment that was created prior to the assault may have had qualities of microassaults (i.e., the perpetrators consciously may have used hurtful and degrading language that they believed was harmless, while observers who did nothing to prevent such behaviors sent a denigrating message that anti-LGBT behavior is acceptable).

## DISCUSSION

The current study supports and extends the LGBT microaggression taxonomy proposed in Nadal and colleagues (2010), indicating that LGB people experience a variety of microaggressions. However, one difference with this study is that participants reported examples of both overt discrimination and covert discrimination. This trend was different than studies with people of color (Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007; Sue, et al., 2008) and women (Capodilupo et al., 2010), in which reported microaggressions manifested predominantly as subtle and covert interactions.

Conversely, participants in this study shared experiences in which heterosexual individuals were subtly uncomfortable or disapproving (e.g., body language that conveyed uneasiness or condemnation) as well as blatantly uncomfortable or disapproving of LGB persons (e.g., being told that LGB persons are going to hell). Participants in this study also reported that they perceived others to be both conscious and unconscious of their use of heterosexist language (e.g., some perpetrators consciously used slurs to denigrate LGB people, while some perpetrators seemed unaware of the negative impacts of using the phrase, “That’s so gay!”). This finding is similar to a study with seventh-grade students, which found that some adolescents who use homophobic name-calling may identify it merely as an innocuous insult, while others may attribute such behavior as being an LGB slur or gender-identity putdown (Athanasos & Comar, 2008).

This study provides support that sexual orientation microaggressions manifest in the proposed three forms: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults toward LGB persons are conscious acts by the perpetrator and include everything from being called heterosexist slurs to overhearing people tell homophobic jokes. Microassaults also include being told directly to “not act gay” to being told that one will be “condemned.” Microinsults include statements and behaviors that are often unconscious yet send denigrating messages to the victims. A common example of a microinsult from this study is a heterosexual individual who displays discomfort or disapproval with LGB public displays of affection; this individual may not recognize that her or his behavior is insulting, demeaning, and hurtful to the LGB recipient. Finally, microinvalidations are instances in which the LGB individual’s experiences are nullified or negated. In this study, this was exemplified by the female participant who described an experience with a professor who implied that heterosexism does not exist by stating that she should feel comfortable getting a job and moving to any area, regardless of her sexual orientation.

Findings from this study suggest that LGB people experience various types of microassaults and microinsults, suggesting that LGB persons may still experience overt discrimination on a more regular basis. In addition, it appears that lesbians, gay men, and bisexual women and men experience some microaggressions differently. For example, only lesbian and bisexual women reported feeling objectified when heterosexual people sexually propositioned them; only gay men reported being accused of having HIV/AIDS or of being a sexual predator. Thus, future research should explore differences based on gender and sexual orientation. Perhaps interventions and public campaigns that dispel these stereotypes may be helpful in minimizing these types of microaggressions.

In experiencing these microaggressions, almost all of the participants reported feeling distressed immediately after the incident. Participants shared an array of emotions, ranging from anger, frustration, and sadness to belittlement and hopelessness. Many participants discussed how experiencing these microaggressions may have negatively impacted their ability to be comfortable with their LGB identities or ability to come out of the closet. Several participants revealed that experiencing these microaggressions led to detrimental relationships with their family members, friends, coworkers, and others. Some participants discussed chronic mental health effects from this discrimination, including negative impacts on their self-esteem and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These findings align with previous literature on LGB discrimination (Burn et al. 2005; Herek, 2000, 2007; Herek & Capitano, 1999; Herek et al., 2002; Morrison & Morrison, 2002; Walls, 2008), which suggests that LGB persons suffer mental health disparities because of their experiences with heterosexist and homophobic behaviors. Thus, while microaggressions may be more subtle and covert than blatant discrimination

and hate crimes, they still have a negative impact on LGB individuals' mental health.

Participants described microaggressions that occurred in their adult lives, but many described instances that occurred during their youth. For example, many talked about instances of being bullied in school or hearing heterosexist language from their adolescent peers. Because adolescence is a time where individuals develop their personalities and self-esteem, microaggressions may negatively influence an adolescent's ability to feel self-worth. Experiencing heterosexism during one's youth can also negatively impact one's ability to gain a positive self-efficacy or navigate successfully in her or his academic and professional life. For example, many studies discussed how LGB youth who experience school violence, heterosexist threats, or damage to their property may avoid going to school altogether (Garofalo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, & DuRant, 1998; Grossman et al., 2009). Thus, microaggressions affect school achievement for LGB youth in ways that heterosexual youth are not affected.

Previous literature has also found that LGB youth also experience higher rates of emotional distress, higher amounts of suicide attempts, risky sexual behavior, and substance abuse (Garofalo et al., 1998; Remafedi, Frenth, Story, Resnick, & Blum, 1998; Resnick et al., 1997). Two national reports cite that reasons for these disparities may include everything from bullying to feelings of isolation, lack of safety, lack of resources, and lack of family support (Just the Facts, 2008; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). While it is clear that more overt forms of discrimination (e.g., bullying, physical assaults) may lead to these negative outcomes, some reported microaggressions or subtle forms of discrimination influence LGB adolescents' emotional distress. Some students, for instance, reported that they regularly overheard homophobic/heterosexist remarks by their teachers and other staff members (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). Accordingly, it is clear that both intentional and unintentional forms of discrimination are negatively impacting LGB youth.

Clearly, microaggressions may hinder an individual's identity development process. If an adolescent experiences microaggression on a regular basis, the individual may attempt to deny her or his LGB identity and may internalize that LGB people are bad or abnormal. If an adolescent experiences microaggressions from loved ones, she or he may feel unable to live one's life as an out and proud LGB individual. This aligns with a study by Hesp and Brooks (2009) who found that male college students in fraternities may feel hindered to accept their gay identities due to the overt and subtle heterosexism they experienced regularly.

## LIMITATIONS

Although this study is very important in understanding sexual orientation microaggressions, the results have to be interpreted with caution since the

study is not without its limitations. The sample was not balanced in terms of gender and sexual orientation, particularly as there were no bisexual men in the sample. Substantial recruitment advertisements were made to various parts of the LGBT community college student organizations, community centers, and online social networks. One reason for this discrepancy may be due to the notion that many bisexual men may not feel comfortable or accepted in the larger LGBT community and therefore do not participate in LGBT organizations (LeBeau & Jellison, 2009). As a result, recruiting through these means may not be an effective way to attract bisexual male participants.

In addition, the focus groups' dynamics could have influenced the participants' responses. Some individuals might have provided answers to conform to group norms, and some responses might have been hindered because of the participants being shy or overwhelmed with speaking openly about this sensitive issue.

Perhaps the most pressing limitation is the notion that the questions were developed by the research team and embedded within a specific model (Sue, Bucciari et al., 2007; Sue, 2010) and a specific taxonomy (Nadal et al., 2010). While this may have confined the array of topics covered, the directed content analysis that was used is a qualitative method used has effectively and appropriately been used to examine new and unexamined phenomena (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR LGBT YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

There are many implications for theory, research, and practice with LGBT youth. First, the findings support that microaggressions do exist toward lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, and that these microaggressions may negatively impact mental health. Thus, in order to prevent microaggressions, practitioners who work directly with youth (e.g., teachers, administrators, after-school program coordinators, coaches) must take care in recognizing how microaggressions may impact lives of LGBT youth, as well as come up with strategies to prevent microaggressions from occurring in youth settings. Sexual orientation microaggressions can take many forms in schools—between students, between students and staff members, between administrators and students, etc. Consequently, individuals on all levels in school systems must be aware of their potential microaggressive behaviors and the cumulative impact these have on the campus climate. More specifically, faculty and staff members must be conscious of the language that they use directly toward students as well as heterosexist remarks that may be overheard (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). Microaggressions can also manifest in families—from parents, children, siblings, and other relatives. Accordingly, it is important for individuals to be aware of their behaviors, even in their personal lives, as they may have an impact on youth who identify as (or are struggling to identify as) lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Just the Facts, 2008).

This study also advocates for education about microaggressions to be addressed on systemic and institutional levels. Government leaders must examine how microaggressions manifest in policies and laws, knowing that these negatively impact the mental health of their LGBT constituents. These policies may be blatantly heterosexist in content (e.g., laws that ban same-sex marriage or adoption), as well as subtly heterosexist (e.g., sexual orientation not included in many hate crime or sexual harassment policies). Leaders in school systems must recognize how microaggressions may manifest on various levels—from elementary school to high school—and how these microaggressions may have damaging effects on LGBT youth's mental health and identity development. For example, educating students to not use phrases like "That's so gay" is one step that teachers and educators can take to assist in creating a safe space for students and to allow LGBT students to become more comfortable with their identities at an earlier age. Employers must recognize how microaggressions may exist in workplace settings and how these may negatively impact group dynamics and work ethic. Thus, integrating microaggressions into human resources policies can be essential to maintain a safe, diverse work environment, while complying with equal opportunity policies.

Specifically, there are many ways that institutions can prevent microaggressions from occurring toward LGBT youth. On institutional levels, the absence of LGBT-affirming spaces, role models, programs, policies, and organizations can be construed as a microaggression in itself. High schools and afterschool programs should provide opportunities to create "safe spaces" on campus (particularly an LGBT center or office), so that LGBT individuals feel visible, valued, and celebrated. Administrators, staff, and faculty members must be trained on diversity issues so that they can recognize when microaggressions occur and be able to deal with them accordingly. Policies must be created to protect individuals from experiencing microaggressions and to implement practices that promote LGBT safe spaces.

In future studies, it would be beneficial to integrate both quantitative and qualitative measures. Developing a quantitative measure that assesses LGBT microaggressions could be useful in order to sample more participants more efficiently, while obtaining a more objective and empirical view of the problem. Future quantitative studies can be used to assess mental health (e.g., depression, PTSD, and anxiety), in order to objectively assess the psychological impact of LGBT microaggressions. In addition, many participants in this study discussed how microaggressions either prevented their coming-out processes or led to various problems with family members, friends, and coworkers. Because many LGBT individuals learn to explore their sexual orientations and accept their identities during their adolescence and early adulthood, it may be necessary for institutions to prevent these microaggressions in order to promote healthy LGBT identities and LGBT-affirmative spaces for individuals to explore those identities. Finally, further research

examining the experiences of transgender microaggressions would be necessary in order to understand how microaggressions impact the entire LGBT community.

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