

Operationalizing Microaggressions: Definitions, Conceptualization and Typologies

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Abstract

Microaggressions are a form of subtle everyday discrimination. Originally proposed in the 1970s, the concept of microaggressions has received increasing attention, particularly in the current cultural focus on social justice. However, recent research has presented a challenge,

as several authors have redefined microaggressions and proposed various conceptual frameworks and typologies based on the context of the deed. In this study, a systematic literature review of mainstream definitions, typologies and conceptual features of microaggressions was conducted to consolidate these frameworks. In total 108 research items were found; after screening, 39 research items were included in the review. The main findings suggest that microaggressions are a real form of subtle everyday discrimination, often committed unknowingly by the aggressor. They can take the form of microinsults, microassaults and microinvalidation. While many of the typologies in the research are linked to the minority status of the victim, all microaggression conceptualizations share a distinct but linked set of actions and reactions. The study concludes that there is a need to reconsider the context-specific use of microaggression conceptualizations. In addition, future research should attempt to work within a universal conceptual framework that can be applied across target groups and environments. This will contribute to the development of a larger and more credible body of knowledge, as research findings can then be conceptually linked, opening up possibilities for meta-analyses. Overall, this research provides a summative and inclusive definition and central typology for microaggressions, which will aid in conceptualization and assessment in various contexts.

Keywords: Microaggressions, literature review, conceptualization, definitions, psychometric assessment and South Africa.

1. Introduction

Socio-political movements against discrimination, coordinated policy interventions and directives from global organizations have contributed to reducing the prevalence of blatant discriminative systems (Geddes & Guiraudon, 2006; Williams, 2020). However, some literature indicates that a more subtle type of discrimination, known as microaggressions, has increased (Williams, 2021a). Microaggressions are subtle forms of verbal and non-verbal discrimination (Williams, 2020). The concept of microaggressions was initially explored and conceptualized by Pierce (1970), who examined it as a ‘discrete’ form of racism experienced by African Americans. Since the seminal work by Pierce (1970), the topic has received more attention from prominent authors such as Sue et al. (2007), who extended the focus to sex and sexual orientation. Recent research from Williams (2020) reports on additional ‘marginalized’ groups and intersectional groups (see Keum et al., 2018; Lewis & Neville, 2015).

The increased interest in the subject matter might be due to the increased interaction between individuals from a wide array of different backgrounds as a direct result of globalization (Kharroubi, 2021). Organizations have also identified the value of a diverse workforce, including advantages such as innovation, creativity and enhanced problem-solving among diversified organizations (Joubert, 2017). This diversification and increased multicultural contact between individuals from diverse backgrounds have also led to more frequent reports of microaggressions experienced by underrepresented or minority groups in modern organizations (Williams et al., 2021a). Although research on microaggressions has increased, authors continue to be challenged by the conceptualization of its key features and

characteristics owing to varied and competing views and overlapping constructs (Williams, 2021b).

1.2 Research Objectives and Questions

The primary objective of this study was to view, analyse and arrange key definitions, typologies and conceptual features in the field of microaggressions. Considering this objective, the study will aim to answer the following research questions:

- a) What could be an agreed and inclusive definition of microaggressions?
- b) What are the key theoretical typologies and conceptualizations of microaggressions?
- c) Which conceptualization of microaggressions is supported by empirical evidence?

Once these objectives have been achieved, researchers will better understand recently formulated definitions of microaggressions, the variety of theoretical typologies, and empirical findings on theoretical conceptualizations of microaggressions. This will allow for the development of a larger and more credible body of knowledge, as research findings could then be conceptually linked, creating opportunities and possibilities for meta-analyses.

2. Literature Review

This literature review emphasizes the importance of definitions and typologies in the development of a scientific field. According to Mouton (2013), a thorough literature review is fair towards original authors, topical, organized and exhaustive. Mouton (2013) describes the first steps of a literature review as a hierarchal process that researchers follow to examine applicable theories, models and definitions of a selected phenomenon, and organise findings in chronological and functional order. The hierarchical order follows the development and understanding of a scientific field, where the most basic units comprising concepts, constructs and variables. These lead to statements, including definitions, propositions and hypotheses, and are followed by conceptual frameworks, classified by typologies, models and theories and, finally, paradigms (Mouton, 2013).

The current research focus is on microaggressions. Although microaggressions can also be considered a single word or verbal identification of observations, microaggressions are also considered a concept within a scientific field (Williams, 2020). Microaggressions qualify as a concept as previous investigations have explored, found and confirmed a clear and logical demarcation of microaggressions through definitions, typologies and frameworks, explaining the specific phenomenon as a construct of subtle discrimination (Williams, 2020, 2021b). According to Mouton (2013) and De Vos et al. (2011), a concept within a given scientific environment is derived from key terminology used to make sense of a specific observation. In essence, concepts within a scientific domain or field hold the key to a clear understanding or meaning of a selected phenomenon by providing sensible and figurative interpretations (De Vos et al., 2011). Given the seminal work by Sue and colleagues (2007) and the clear demarcation provided by Williams (2021b), the term ‘microaggressions’ is indeed considered a concept within the field of organizational behaviour referring to a form of subtle discrimination.

The next section discusses the characteristics and purpose of definitions. According to De Vos et al. (2011) and Mouton (2013), definitions are statements. Only one conceptual framework will be addressed, namely typologies. As is explained in the discussion, there are several permutations of typologies, but this research will focus on only one.

2.1 Statements – Definitions

Statements differ from concepts in that they include constructed definitions, hypotheses or propositions within a given field of study (De Vos et al., 2011; Mouton, 2013). Fundamentally, a statement is a constructed sentence that expresses true knowledge of a selected concept using words or phrases.

As indicated, definitions are suggestions formulated based on statements within the specific area of inquiry, and are aimed at providing clear and concise descriptions of specific concepts (De Vos et al., 2011). There are two types of definitions, namely theoretical definitions and operational definitions. A theoretical definition gives insight into the specific meaning of a concept through clear verbal identification, while an operational definition gives insight into operational aspects such as the measurement of activities relevant to a concept (De Vos et al., 2011).

2.2 Conceptual Frameworks – Typologies

Conceptual frameworks and models aim to organize or provide an understandable image of the statements and definitions formulated from propositions for the specific observation under investigation (De Vos et al., 2011; Mouton, 2013). Conceptual frameworks and models are aimed at providing insight into or examining possible relationships between observations, constructs or phenomena, whereas typologies are aimed at classifying or categorising the specific area of investigation. The main objectives of examining typologies within conceptual frameworks are to provide clear, concise and exhaustive descriptions of similarities and differences between researchers' approaches to the area of study. In essence, an examination of typologies should aim to give insight into commonalities, differences and specific areas within the field of study that might require further refinement (De Vos et al., 2011).

The focus on definitions and typologies in the present study was justified by the wide array of proposed definitions of microaggressions and the phenomenon that discrimination against a target victim is not only based on gender and race, but may be aimed at any other characteristic that distinguishes a minority group (Nadal, 2019; Nadal et al., 2015, 2019; Williams, 2020, 2021b). Preliminary findings revealed opposing views among researchers and an array of operational definitions of microaggressions (Lilienfeld, 2017). However, many researchers are working towards further clarification of and consensus on the concept of microaggressions in an attempt to achieve a valid and credible understanding of their commonalities and differences, and to overcome these differences.

3. Method

The following section covers two specific areas: (1) An examination of the methodology

applied to the systematic literature review; and (2) How the information obtained from the literature can be organized and disseminated to contribute to the general body of knowledge on microaggressions.

3.1 Systematic Literature Review

Systematic reviews allow researchers to examine and organise scientific concepts in a structured manner (Aromataris & Pearson, 2014). Authors further conduct literature reviews to determine the current body of knowledge, examine the historic development of topics, determine whether scholars have reached consensus on subject matter and identify limitations or research gaps (Aromataris & Pearson, 2014). Authors further conduct systematic reviews to formulate an objective view on the current state of the topic and to avoid self-biased opinions that might not align with the views of the general scientific community (Pati & Lorusso, 2018; Wright et al., 2007). In an attempt to identify concepts and organize findings, literature reviews follow a standardized set of steps acceptable to the general scientific community. In essence, criteria are set for the location, selection, review and organising of literature findings on the selected subject matter (Wright et al., 2007). The main function of a clearly described methodology for a systematic literature review is to ensure that the process is thorough, credible and of a high standard, and may be replicated in future studies (Harris et al., 2014). The initial step is to develop a clear framework for inquiry. For this study, a framework for examining microaggressions was considered based on definition statements, typologies and conceptual features.

3.2 Research Design and Methodology

In essence, systematic literature reviews follow five key steps to ensure credibility and quality assurance (Pati & Lorusso, 2018; Wright et al., 2007). For this study, the key steps described by Khan and colleagues (2003) were followed. They are: (1) Framing questions for a review. These questions should be clear, structured and unambiguous. Preliminary reviews of the literature indicated that research would be required to review and organize definition statements and typologies for microaggressions to answer the research question. (2) Identifying relevant work from multiple credible sources by formulating clear inclusion and exclusion criteria to answer the proposed research question. (3) Assessing the quality of studies with set parameters to present a relevant and credible overview of the definitions and typologies of microaggression. (4) Summarizing the key findings to provide scholars with concise information and insights for future research directions on microaggressions. (5) Interpreting the findings to highlight key insights and opportunities.

3.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Although the field of microaggressions is receiving more attention from scholars, the scientific field is not as elaborative as other similar areas (Williams, 2021b). Therefore, no date limits were set to formulate a comprehensive understanding of where the concept had been initiated and developed. To ensure credibility, only research published in accredited, peer-reviewed journals was included. The third criterion was that all publications had to have been published in English to ensure that their content was interpreted accurately. Sources

such as editorial reviews, newspapers and other printed media that had not been peer reviewed were excluded. The set inclusion and exclusion criteria were in line with the proposed criteria from a methodology perspective (Meline, 2006).

3.4 Search Strategy and Retrieval of Studies

Several databases were consulted to ensure a high likelihood of finding studies related to microaggressions. The databases consulted included Ebscohost, Academic Search Complete, Proquest and APA PsychArticles. In addition, Google Scholar was also used to ensure that a complete search was conducted. The terms ‘microaggressions’, ‘definition’, ‘typology’ and ‘measurements’ were used interchangeably.

4. Findings

In total, 108 studies dating from 1970 to 2022 were found. Once duplications, non-related articles and articles not meeting the inclusion criteria had been removed and reference lists from the initial 108 articles had been studied, a total of 53 articles from 39 journals were included for further analysis. The following sections indicate the main findings according to the framework of definitions, typologies and conceptual features of microaggressions.

4.1 Definition Statements for Microaggressions

This section summarizes key definitions from seminal works on microaggressions.

The original seminal work by Pierce (1970) specifically examines microaggressions as an offensive mechanism used to discriminate against persons based on their race, specifically African Americans. According to Pierce (1970, p 65) these microaggressions as a form of offensive mechanisms can be considered “offensive mechanisms, the small, continuous bombardments of microaggression by whites to blacks as the essential ingredient in race relations and race interactions”. Pierce and colleagues (1977) further define racial microaggressions as “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and nonverbal exchanges, which are ‘put downs’ toward people of colour”.

Following the work of Pierce (1970) and Pierce et al. (1977), the conceptualization of microaggressions was expanded to include the nature of aggression and its consequences as experienced by the victim (Sue et al., 2007). Sue and colleagues (2007, p. 73) define microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group”. The form of microaggression considered by Sue and colleagues (2007) is also a form of discrimination against an individual’s race. Sue (2010) further develops this view on microaggression to include gender and sexual orientation, and consequently defines microaggressions as the constant and continuing everyday reality of slights, insults, invalidations and indignities visited upon marginalized groups by well-intentioned, moral and decent family members, friends, neighbours, co-workers, students, teachers, clerks, waiters, employers, health care professionals and educators (Sue, 2010). This view includes an additional important view that the perpetrators are usually unaware that they have engaged in an exchange that demeans

the recipient of the communication (Sue, 2010). It confirms that microaggressions are not only a subtle form of racial discrimination but an unknowing form of bias from an aggressor against marginalized groups, including from individuals close to the victim (Nadal, 2011). Following the work of Sue (2010) on the definition and view of microaggressions, the author Nadal (2011) documents that “individuals may not consciously be racist, but their biases and prejudices may manifest in more subtle and unconscious ways” (Nadal, 2011, p. 238).

Subsequently, microaggressions have been further investigated from a racial perspective. According to Torres-Harding and colleagues (2012), racial microaggressions are “racial indignities, slights, mistreatment, or offences that people of colour may face on a recurrent or consistent basis” (Torres-Harding et al., 2012, p. 153). Huynh (2012), considers microaggressions to be “a form of everyday, interpersonal discrimination that is ambiguous and difficult to recognize as discrimination” (Huynh, 2012, p. 831). Following the extensive work on microaggressions on race and ethnicity, the authors have turned their focus on both race and gender in the same equation. In this regard, Lewis and Neville (2015) define microaggressions as “subtle and everyday verbal, behavioural, and environmental expressions of oppression based on the intersection of one’s race and gender” (Lewis & Neville, 2015, p. 292).

Like Lewis and Neville (2015), Keum et al. (2018) focus on the examination of gendered racial microaggressions, but specifically towards Asian Americans. The specific focus of Keum and colleagues (2018) has resulted from the high rate of mental health disorders and suicide among Asian American women, which might be due to discriminative behaviour and sexism towards these women. According to Keum and colleagues (2018), the original view held by Sue and colleagues (2007) remains applicable and extends to the conceptual view that microaggressions are everyday subtle discrimination experienced by Asian American women. The conceptual view of Keum and colleagues (2018) has also been expanded to also include elements described by the intersectional theory. The intersectional theory explains how continued systems of oppression eventually influence behaviour towards minority groups, at times unknowingly (Crenshaw, 1989).

In a review of concerns with the topic of microaggressions, Lilienfeld (2017, p. 143) continues to propose that microaggressions are “subtle snubs, slights, and insults directed toward minorities, as well as to women and other historically stigmatized groups, that implicitly communicate or engender hostility”. Although the views of Lilienfeld (2017) are criticized by Williams (2020), Lilienfeld (2017) also states that victims of microaggressions should include historically marginalized groups and that microaggressions are not only a form of discrimination against someone's race.

According to Fleras (2020, p. 4), microaggressions are considered the new “racism 3.0 by exposing how [they represent] a micro-racial bias that operates ‘under the radar’ through thinly veiled compliments, aversive (re)actions, and seemingly neutral language”. The “new” form of racism is a micro-covert type of situational discrimination and is dependent on the victim’s or target’s view of discrimination (Fleras, 2020). Fleras (2020) even considers this new form of racism as “boring, egregious, routine rather than exceptional, mundane rather

than extraordinary, insidious rather than invidious, implicit rather than explicit, consequential rather than intentional, constructed rather than inherent, and fundamental rather than accidental” (Fleras, 2020, p. 4). Fleras’s (2020) views confirm that microaggressions are silent everyday forms of discrimination, and at times perpetrators are not even aware that their behaviour or statements are offensive.

When considering the above and attempting to be inclusive, microaggressions could be defined as unconscious, everyday subtle forms of discrimination committed by an offender against an individual considered to be part of a minority group. The unconscious, subtle discrimination might be based on any demographic attribute that might be considered a differentiating characteristic of the victim.

4.2 Microaggression Typologies

Pierce’s (1970) seminal work describes several offensive mechanisms experienced by African Americans, especially from fellow white American individuals. These mechanisms would serve as the foundation of theoretical microaggressions typology.

One of the offensive mechanisms is “the pat and promise”, which refer to an act of good faith before something “outrageous or ridiculous” is demanded from the African American (Pierce, 1970, p. 272). Additionally, “fragmentation and atomization” are an offensive mechanism used by white individuals when they request some sort of “racial experience” in order to display a form of consciousness (Pierce, 1970, p. 272). Pacification is another offensive mechanism. White individuals use pacification to seek the attention of African Americans explicitly as a deceptive demonstration of interest (Pierce, 1970). Pierce (1970) further explains that white Americans would explicitly indicate to African Americans that “they” may request any form of assistance, implying that the white individual is going out of their way to assist African American.

According to Pierce (1970), white offenders also frequently remark that African Americans regularly suffer from some form of mental illness. A regular reference to goodwill towards African Americans is also considered to be an offensive mechanism. This typically takes the form of a remark from a white American such as “We are always good to you” (Pierce, 1970, p. 275). Remarks such as “We whites are always right” are also considered to be offensive mechanisms as they imply superiority (Pierce, 1970, p. 277).

Sue and colleagues (2007) have paved the way for conceptualizing microaggressions. Although their initial focus has been on racial microaggressions, several authors use the conceptual framework developed by Sue et al. (2007) as the foundation of their research on microaggressions based on gender, religion, sexual orientation and professions (Williams et al., 2021a). According to Sue (2010) and Sue et al. (2007), microaggressions can be classified into microinsults, microassaults and microinvalidation.

Often unconscious, microinsults are “behavioural/verbal remarks or comments that convey rudeness [and] insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage or identity” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 282). Microassaults, which are generally conscious acts or behaviour, are “explicit racial derogations characterized primarily by a violent verbal or nonverbal attack meant to

hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behaviour or purposeful discriminatory actions” (Sue et al., 2007). Microinvalidation is generally an unconscious act and includes “verbal comments or behaviours that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of colour” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 274).

Following the taxonomy and typology of Sue and colleagues (2007), the literature on microaggressions has been expanded to examine sexual orientation and transgender microaggressions (Nadal et al., 2010). According to Nadal and colleagues (2010), microaggressions also apply to sexual orientation and can take eight forms: “(a) Use of heterosexist and transphobic terminology occurs when someone uses derogatory heterosexist language toward LGBT persons; (b) Endorsement of heteronormative or gender normative culture/behaviours transpires when an LGBT person is expected to act or be heterosexual; (c) Assumption of universal LGBT experience occurs when heterosexual people assume that all LGBT persons are the same; (d) Exoticization microaggressions take place when LGBT people are dehumanized or treated as objects; (e) Discomfort/disapproval of LGBT experience occurs when LGBT people are treated with disrespect and criticism; (f) Denial of societal heterosexist or transphobia transpires when people deny that heterosexism and homophobia exist; (g) Assumption of sexual pathology/abnormality microaggressions come about when heterosexual or non-transgender people oversexualize LGBT persons and consider them as sexual deviants; (h) Finally, denial of individual heterosexist/transphobia occurs when non-LGBT people deny their own heterosexist and transgender biases and prejudice” (Nadal et al., 2011).

After constructing a conceptual framework for transgender and sexual orientation microaggression, Nadal (2011) identified similar and additional concepts within the microaggression framework. Nadal (2011) has found and documented additional and key types of microaggressions, namely (a) assumptions of inferiority, (b) second-class citizens and assumptions of criminality, (c) microinvalidations, (d) exoticization/assumptions of similarity, (e) environmental microaggressions, and (f) microaggressions in and related to the workplace and school environment.

Microaggressions have been re-examined by Torres-Harding et al. (2012) from a racial perspective. Their examination of the conceptualization of racial microaggressions has led to the identification of eight key concepts or themes. The concepts and themes identified are the following: (a) Alien in own land: Which is considered when an individual is treated as a foreigner. (b) Colour blindness and denial of individual racism: Considered as minimization, invalidation of racial or cultural issues and accused of hypersensitivity regarding racial issues. (c) Criminality or assumption of criminal status: When an individual is treated as a danger, threat, aggressive or likely considered to conduct criminal activities. (d) Exotified: When an individual is to be overly sexualized due to his/her racial background. (e) Myth of meritocracy: When someone is considered incompetent or when the success of a member of a minority group is considered exceptional. (f) Pathologizing cultural values and communication styles: When individuals emphasize negative, dysfunctional or problematic aspects and another person's background or expect a minority to assimilate to another culture

considered superior. (g) Second-class citizenship: Treating another person as a lower-status individual. (h) Environmental invalidations: “[The] perception of negative environmental messages deriving from the absence of people from one’s racial background in school or work settings, being in contexts where an individual is the “only person of colour,” and observing [that] those visible or powerful roles in one’s community do not include people from one’s racial background” (Torres-Harding et al., 2012, p. 152). Invisibility: When an individual with a minority status is treated as not visible or is dismissed or delegitimized (Torres-Harding et al., 2012).

Following the work of Torres-Harding and colleagues (2012), additional authors have explored the conceptualization of microaggressions based on an individual’s race or ethnicity, specifically focusing on individuals from the Latino and Asian American demographic groups (Huynh, 2012). According to Huynh (2012), microaggressions can be considered conceptually based on how frequently victims experience subtle discrimination in three forms, namely emphases on differences, the denial of racial reality and negative treatment (Huynh, 2012). An emphasis on differences is a form of microaggression when a victim is considered to be a foreigner, while denial of racial reality takes the form of comments that are passed to invalidate the reality of bias or subtle discrimination by the offender (Huynh, 2012). The negative treatment of victims entails treating victims as inferior or “second-class citizens” (Huynh, 2012, p. 836).

According to Lewis and Neville (2015), gendered microaggressions involve projected stereotypes, being silenced and marginalized (being ignored in your workplace or professional setting) and discriminatory assumptions about an individual’s style or beauty (Lewis & Neville, 2015).

In this regard, Keum and colleagues (2018) focus on four multidimensional factors when they consider gendered racial microaggressions, specifically those against Asian Americans. These factors include ascribed submissiveness, Asian fetishism, assumption of universal appearance and media invalidation (Keum et al., 2018). According to Keum and colleagues (2018), Asian females are subjected to the constraints of traditional hierarchical systems, often predominantly regarded as sexual objects that are always submissive, all said to look alike and almost always portrayed in similar roles (Keum et al., 2018).

The most extensive review of the taxonomy since the seminal work by Sue et al. (2007) has been conducted by Williams et al. (2021a). In their review, Williams and colleagues identify 16 categories of microaggressions. These categories include: “(a) Not being a true citizen of the specific country of residence; (b) Racial categorization and sameness; (c) Assumptions about intelligence, competence, or status; (d) False colour blindness/invalidating racial or ethnic identity; (e) Criminality or dangerous; (f) Denial of individual racism; (g) Myth meritocracy/race is irrelevant for success; (h) Reverse-racism hostility; (i) Pathologizing minority culture or appearance; (j) Second-class citizen/ignored and invisible; (k) Tokenism; (l) Connecting via stereotypes; (m) Exotification and erotization; (n) Avoidance and distancing; (o) Environment exclusion, and (p) Environmental attack” (Williams et al., 2021a, p. 999). The extended view of Williams and colleagues (2021a) is considered a full

view of the taxonomy and typologies of microaggressions for future research.

More recent studies have explored the experience of microaggressions based on profession and the aggressor's belief that a certain gender cannot be part of a selected profession. In the study by Ahmad and colleagues (2022), female physicians report higher observations of subtle discrimination from patients. According to the qualitative view of Ahmad and colleagues (2022), physicians frequently report 12 aspects of microaggressions. These include "(a) Role questioning, disrespect of title, or use of non-professional terms; (b) Lack of trust and challenges to physician expertise; (c) Assumption of inexperience or younger age; (d) Racially and/or gender discriminatory comments, intersectional discrimination; (e) Comments on physician appearance; (f) Altered physician behaviour or appearance due to microaggressions; (g) Interprofessional microaggressions from colleagues and nurses; (h) Sexual harassment and unsafe work environment; (i) Institutional and career impacts; (j) Comparison to male physician experience; (k) Effect of practice environment on microaggressions; and (l) Perception of nonharmful microaggressions" (Ahmad et al., 2022, p. 525).

Recent research has shown that microaggressions can take on several forms and be manifested in subtle discriminative actions or behaviours against victims who are members of specific minority groups. These minority groups have differentiating characteristics such as their gender (Basford et al., 2014; Sue, 2010), sexual orientation (Nadal et al., 2011; Sue, 2010) or religion (Dupper et al., 2015). They may include transgenders (Nadal et al., 2012), professionals from minority groups (Smith et al., 2022), HIV-positive individuals (Eaton et al., 2020), gender non-conforming and agender individuals (Pulice-Farrow et al., 2020), or adoptees (Baden, 2016). They may even experience microaggressions because their profession is regarded as inappropriate for someone of their sex (Ahmad et al., 2022; Kay et al., 2022).

4.3 Empirical Evidence Affirming Conceptualizations of Microaggressions

Researchers in the field of microaggressions follow different distinctive routes to develop conceptual frameworks. Critical questions about conceptualization are raised by Wong and colleagues (2014), including what exactly is considered to be microaggressions, specifically racial microaggressions; why the concept of microaggressions is an important topic that must be investigated; and how the concept is currently studied. It has been recommended that the field of racial microaggression should pay attention to the clarification of the concept of microaggression; explore how different racial and ethnic groups experience racial microaggressions; elucidate the perspectives of perpetrators; and identify the long-term mental and physical health effects of racial microaggressions on victims (Wong et al., 2014).

Areas for improvement in microaggressions research are partially addressed by Williams (2021a), who has examined microaggressions from an offender's perspective. According to Williams (2021a), microaggressions are a form of aggression that is unknowingly committed by an offender, although empirical findings indicate that offenders tend towards hostile and aggressive behaviour.

The challenge posed by the concept in literature remains that authors have continued to conceptualize microaggressions from the perspective of the victim and not as a form of aggression committed by the aggressor (Williams, 2021a). The most popular conceptual framework for microaggressions is proposed by Sue and colleagues (2007), who consider microaggressions to be microinsults, microassaults and microinvalidation. The challenge in the microaggressions literature is that this conceptual approach is not applied consistently to a type of aggression. Eaton and colleagues (2020) have examined microaggressions towards HIV patients and state that the conceptual features depict microaggressions as internalized, enacted and anticipated stigmas, and not as unconscious aggression or subtle discrimination (Eaton et al., 2020). This has also been observed by Gartner and colleagues (2020), who conclude that researchers conceptualize and develop measures for microaggressions in the context of either the environment or the population sample under investigation. The challenge posed by these interchangeable conceptualization approaches is that the measurements developed based on these frameworks lack psychometric validation and scientific rigour (Gartner et al., 2020). Unique discriminative views are also differentiating features of microaggressions. For example, research among Asian American females has described and examined conceptual features such as Asian fetishism and the assumption that all members of the Asian American female sample group look alike (Keum et al., 2018)

It is evident that the field of microaggressions literature does not provide sufficient empirical evidence to support a universal conceptual framework for microaggressions. This is mainly due to the diverse backgrounds of minority targets, unique discriminative observations investigated by researchers and research conducted in context-specific environments.

5. Conclusion

The following section reviews the key findings of the present study and then provides concluding remarks.

5.1 Ensuring Future Quality of Microaggressions Methodology

The future validity and credibility of microaggressions methodology lies in the ability of the literature to identify and recognize that subtle discrimination is a reality in the modern workplace regardless of the minority status of the target victim. In addition, scholars should be able to disseminate qualitative views to develop applicable conceptual frameworks and models, and test and apply these frameworks and models in developed and Western environments. In the South African environment, such examinations would be considered invaluable, especially as prejudice and discrimination continue to be reported (Carrim, 2017; Carrim, 2019; Moloto et al., 2014). Researchers have been able to identify critical areas where individuals may experience subtle forms of discrimination. What remains unanswered is how this methodology and conceptualization will operationalize in the South African context and how they should be examined in future studies. The application, development and subsequent validation of traditional microaggression measurements in the South African environment are non-existent and therefore provide an opportunity for future South African researchers to contribute to the body of knowledge about microaggressions.

5.2 Customized Definitions to Fit the Environment

In terms of the definitions, it is evident from the literature that microaggressions have evolved from a noble form of research to quantify the subtle forms of discrimination still witnessed in our societies to a fully-fledged theme within the broader scope of examining how individuals operate in diverse environments. Although there are several overlapping themes, especially in terms of the typologies and taxonomy, literature on selected areas is inconclusive.

The definition statements indicate that the majority of scholars agree that microaggressions are a subtle and daily form of discrimination. The central element of each definition includes terminology such as “subtle” or “everyday”, which indicates that microaggressions are a form of discrimination that frequently occurs. The majority of definitions include statements that refer to the unconscious behaviour of the offender or aggressor, indicating that microaggressions are a form of discrimination that is committed unknowingly by the offender. Finally, definition statements refer to a group of minority individuals in the environment where microaggressions occur, and microaggressions can be based on a victim's race, gender, sexual orientation, profession or religion. Therefore, a proposed inclusive definition such as the following should be considered: Microaggressions are an unconscious, everyday subtle form of discrimination by an offender against an individual who is considered to be part of a minority group.

5.3 A Recommended Shift in Focus

The development and application of microaggression literature in highly developed, industrialized and Western societies have paved the way for future research. What is required is a standardized conceptualization, operational features and subsequently a methodology that can also be applied in post-colonial environments such as South Africa. Scholars’ tailor conceptual frameworks and operational features to suit the initially identified discriminative behaviour. This has led to multiple taxonomies, definitions, conceptual frameworks and operational features. As a result there is an opportunity for future researchers to standardize the concept and develop a validated, empirical conceptual framework that can be applied in several environments and adapted by altering references to the intended victim.

5.4 Theoretical Taxonomy of Microaggressions

A review of previous research into microaggressions has shown that the conceptualization phases of studies base their typology and taxonomy mainly on the differentiating feature of the victim. For example, Huynh’s (2012) predominant taxonomy is based on denial and failure to recognize victims’ ethnic background. In contrast, the conceptual taxonomy of Balsam and colleagues (2011) is aimed at examining microaggressions towards the LGBTIQ community. The research studies done by Huynh (2012) and Balsam et al. (2011) have both developed measuring scales to assess microaggressions. However, the difference in conceptualization and eventual scale items for the developed measurements was based on the targeted victim. The same argument can be applied when comparing the conceptual taxonomy and measurement developed for Asian Americans by Keum and colleagues (2018)

and the central themes indentified by Ahmad and colleagues (2022), who have examined and found subtle discrimination against physicians. In these cases the victims were the major distinguishing factor. Consequently, the conceptual route followed by authors in the field of microaggressions is predetermined by the selected victims. This view is supported by Mekawi and Todd (2021), who state that the conceptual framework for microaggressions should include the view of the “target” (Mekawi & Todd, 2021). Table 1 below illustrates how the taxonomy has developed over time, focusing on a selected victim of microaggressions. The main central themes of previous conceptual developments in microaggressions studies are depicted in Annexure A.

Table 1. Microaggression Conceptual Development over Time

	Earlier research ->	Later Research ->	Present research
Theme	Race (ethnic minorities)	Race (ethnic minorities) Sexual orientation Minorities in general	Race (ethnic minorities) Sexual orientation Professional minorities Minorities in general Gender
Intersectionality	No intersectionality	Single layer intersectionality	Multiple layers of intersectionality
Seminal authors	Pierce, 1970; Pierce et al., 1977	Sue et al., 2007	Balsam et al., 2011; Huynh et al., 2022; Williams, 2021a, Williams et al., 2021a

5.5 Affirmation of Taxonomies of Microaggressions

There seems to be consensus on the conceptualization of microaggressions, especially as a result of Williams’ (2021a) comprehensive review. However, a review of the literature indicates that there are no universal conceptual features of microaggressions. In their review, Williams et al. (2021a) briefly explain that any examination should be put in context and the conceptual route should consider the possible victim (Mekawi & Todd, 2018, 2021). Consequently, when authors selected minority groups to examine, their minority status was taken into consideration and possible subtle discrimination was considered during the conceptual review. As a result, several measures were used and no single measurement could be “contextually” adapted to measure the agreed features of microaggressions.

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Authors contributions

Prof. Renier Steyn and Dr. Sean McCallaghan was responsible for study design and

revising. Dr. Sean McCallaghan collected data for the review. Dr. Sean McCallaghan drafted the manuscript and Prof. Renier Steyn provided input, comments and revised it. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Annexure A. Central themes for microaggression conceptualization

(Williams et al., 2021a)	(Ahmad et al., 2022)	(Torres-Harding et al., 2012)	(Nadai, 2011)	(Nadal et al., 2010)	(Sue et al., 2007)	(Pierce, 1970)	(Huynh, 2012)	(Lewis & Neville, 2015)	(Keum et al., 2018)
Not a true citizen	Alien in own land								
Racial categorization	Comparison to male physician experience	Emphasis on differences							
Assumptions about ability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack trust and challenges physician expertise Assumption of inexperience or younger age Role questioning disrespect of title 	Myth of meritocracy	Assumptions of inferiority			Remarks such as "whites are always right"		Discriminatory assumptions about an individual's style or beauty	
Color blindness	Denial of individual racism								Assumption of universal appearance
Assumption of criminality	Assumption of criminal status		Assumptions of criminality						
Denial of individual racism	Discriminatory comments			Denial of individual transphobia			Denial of racial reality		
Race is irrelevant for success	Institutional and career impacts				Microinsults				
Reverse racism hostility									
Pathologizing culture or appearance	Pathologizing cultural values and communication styles			Endorsement of heteronormative or gender normative					
Second class citizen	Second-class citizenship			Assumption of universal LGBT experience occurs					
				Assumption of sexual pathology					

(Williams et al., 2021a)	(Ahmad et al., 2022)	(Torres-Harding et al., 2012)	(Nadal, 2011)	(Nadal et al., 2010)	(Sue et al., 2007)	(Pierce, 1970)	(Huynh, 2012)	(Lewis & Neville, 2015)	(Keum et al., 2018)
Tokenism									
Connecting via stereotypes									
Intersectional discrimination									
Sexual harassment and unsafe work environment									
Exotification									
Exotified									
Exoticization									
Assuming similarity									
Exoticization									
Microassaults									
Negative treatment									
Asian fetishism									
Avoidance									
Environment exclusion									
Effect of practice environment on microaggressions									
Environmental invalidations									
Microaggressions within workplace and school									
Environmental microaggressions									
Being silenced and marginalized									
Environmental attacks									
Comments on physician appearance									
Perception of nonharmful microaggressions									
Interprofessional microaggressions from colleagues and nurses									
Altered physician behavior or appearance due to microaggressions									
Microinvalidation									
Microinvalidation									
Media invalidation									
Microinvalidation									
Use of heterosexist and transphobic terminology									
Denial of societal heterosexist or transphobia									
The pat and promise									
Fragmentation and atomization									
Pacification									
Seeking of goodwill									
Ascribed submissiveness									