"You look good, I would never tell you are trans!": A Narrative Review on Microaggressions against Transgender People

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Abstract

The present article reviews research conducted in the last decade on microaggressions toward transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) individuals. In Western culture, overt forms of discrimination have become increasingly less accepted, leaving space for more subtle forms of discrimination. Microaggressions are subtle day-to-day discriminations that are particularly detrimental for psychological health and well-being. After a brief introduction to the key concepts of microaggression theorisation, the present work aims to provide an overview of existing literature that examined TGNC experiences with microaggressions. Implications for psychological work with TGNC people are discussed.

1.   Introduction

Prejudice and overt discrimination against transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) people are widely studied phenomena. In Western culture, overt forms of discrimination have become increasingly less accepted and socially desirable, leaving space for more subtle forms of discrimination. Nadal (2013) refers to the construct of microaggression to explore these kinds of experiences in TGNC people. The term 'microaggression' was introduced by Chester Pierce (1970) who used the prefix 'micro-' to impart the day-to-day and ordinary nature of subtle racist interactions (Torino *et al.*, 2019). The microaggression theory was later extended to other marginalised groups, namely lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people (Nadal, 2013; Nadal, Skolnik and Wong, 2012; Sue, 2010). What makes microaggressions particularly detrimental, making them qualitatively and quantitatively different from a generic insult that everybody can experience, is their unending and cumulative essence (Torino *et al.*, 2019). Although they may appear to be insignificant comments or small matters, the negative impact of microaggression on TGNC mental and physical health is starting to be clearly recognised in the scientific literature (Torino *et al.*, 2019).

1.1.   Microaggression theory: key concepts

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"Microaggressions are the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group" (Torino *et al.*, 2019, p. 5). This definition comprises all the key concepts developed within the microaggression theorising. Firstly, microaggressions communicate prejudice and biases that can be delivered implicitly or explicitly through various communication channels (Sue, 2010). Secondly, these aggressions are delivered just because of the marginalised status of the targeted individual or group. And thirdly, these kinds of assaults differ from overt forms of discrimination and violence that occur more sporadically, because of their everyday nature.

Microaggressions have been categorised on the basis of their manifestations in three subtypes: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue, 2010).

Microassaults are conveyed, in most cases, consciously and deliberately to attack and explicitly hurt the individual or the group identity. The ultimate goal of these messages is to threaten the target individual or group, or to demean them (Sue, 2010). Microassaults are quite similar to heterosexist and transphobic forms of discrimination with an essential distinction. Whereas both microassaults and discriminative behaviours consist of overt and deliberate acts, microassaults are more likely to be expressed under conditions that offer some sort of safeguard to the perpetrator (Sue, 2010). When some degree of anonymity is present, or when perpetrators are in the presence of people who share their same believes and values, some kind of protection is ensured. Another situation in which people engage in microassaults and publicly display a biased attitude is when they lose control of their feelings (i.e., anger outbursts).

Microinsults are behaviours or messages that most of the time are outside the perpetrator's awareness (Sue, 2010; Torino *et al.*, 2019). The underlying sense of these communications is insulting, rude, or insensitive of the person's identity. Microinsults often refer to stereotypes. For instance, in a situation where a person who expresses comments towards a good-looking transwoman along the line of "You must have dated a lot of guys", the message conveys and layers together two meanings: probably, the intention of the person was to make a compliment on their appearance, but the second meaning relies on the stereotype that transwomen are hypersexual and have a promiscuous sexual life.

Finally, *microinvalidations* are messages that exclude or deny the personal experience, emotions or thoughts of an individual (Sue, 2010; Torino *et al.*, 2019). These comments could be intentional or unintentional and are directed to undermine the other person's experience. Comments like "You're just too sensitive! I'm not being transphobic" or "You talk about discrimination all the time" are examples of microinvalidations.

2.   Method

A comprehensive search of three online databases, *Google Scholar*, *PsycINFO*, and *PubMed*, was conducted. The search terms were 'transgender', 'gender non-conforming', and 'microaggression'. Articles were included in the current narrative review if their focus was specific on transgender or gender non-conforming individuals. Therefore, studies in which TGNC people were conflated in the broader category of LGBTIQ+ population were not included. All articles were published in peer-reviewed journals.

3.   Literature on microaggression towards TGNC people

The last few years have been characterised by a flourishing and growing body of literature on TGNC microaggressions that supported empirically the theoretical work carried out at the beginning of the last decade on TGNC experiences of microaggressions (Sue, 2010; Nadal, Rivera and Corpus, 2010).

The credit for having clearly defined a taxonomy of microaggressions towards TGNC people goes to Nadal, Skolnik, and Wong (2012). Using a qualitative approach, the authors identified specific themes in TGNC individuals' experiences of microaggressions. The direct content analysis they carried out revealed 12 themes: (1) using transphobic or incorrectly gendered terminology; (2) the assumption of a universal transgender experience; (3) exoticization; (4) discomfort/disapproval for transgender experience; (5) endorsement of gender-normative and binary culture or behaviour; (6) denial the existence of transphobia; (7) assumption of pathology or abnormality; (8) physical threat; (9) denial of individual transphobia; (10) denial of bodily privacy; (11) familiar microaggressions; and (12) systemic microaggressions regarding the use of public restrooms, the criminal justice system, healthcare and identification documents (Nadal, Skolnik and Wong, 2012; Nadal *et al.*, 2016).

Another line of research has explored the experiences of microaggressions towards TGNC people in different relationship contexts. With regard to friendships, Galupo, Henise, and Davis (2014), using a mixed-method study, highlighted that there was a different propensity in perpetrating microaggressions across the sexual orientation and gender identity of a friend. Cisgender heterosexual friends are most frequently behaving micro-aggressively, but participants reported the most hurtful experience was when the microaggression came from a friend with a similar identity (Galupo, Henise and Davis, 2014). Microaggressions that come from a friend are especially detrimental since they are experienced as particularly upsetting (Galupo, Henise and Davis, 2014) and interpersonally aggressive (Chang and Chung, 2015). Pulice-Farrow, Clements, and Galupo (2017) described and compared the experiences of transfeminine, transmasculine, gender non-conforming and agender individuals with microaggressions that occurred from a close friend. Across all four gender identities, three main themes emerged with different connotations. The first theme enclosed all the situations in which the 'realness' or the authenticity of individuals' identity was questioned or challenged (Pulice-Farrow, Clemens and Galupo, 2017). The patterns of microaggressions challenging authenticity differed between binary and non-binary identities: while binary identities were questioned about not being 'real women' or 'real men', non-binary identities were doubted about being 'real trans' (Pulice-Farrow, Clemens and Galupo, 2017). The second theme identified in friendship relationships referred to visibility, and it included passing (i.e., being seen as a cisgender person) or the use of incorrect pronouns. This theme emerged as transition-dependent, namely people referred a change in experiencing microaggressions depending on the stage of transition they were navigating. Again, differences emerged between binary identities that were misgendered by being referred to with their gender assigned at birth and non-binary ones that were misgendered using a binary language (Pulice-Farrow, Clemens and Galupo, 2017). Additionally, transfeminine people reported discrimination in spaces designated for women only, while transmasculine people reported an increased social power and privilege, and non-binary identities reported being passively rejected, and a push-back experienced especially in feminist contexts (Pulice-Farrow, Clemens

and Galupo, 2017). Transgender microaggressions within friend relationships impact the closeness and trust toward the friend, leading to disruption of social support (Galupo, Henise and Davis, 2014).

Another acknowledged resource for TGNC mental health and well-being is romantic relationships (Meier *et al.*, 2013). Thus, experiencing microaggressions within a romantic relationship might have a very negative impact, given the importance and the closeness of the relationship (Pulice-Farrow, Brown and Galupo, 2017). A qualitative study by Pulice-Farrow, Brown, and Galupo (2017) showed interesting findings: although microaggressions are defined as especially detrimental for their day-to-day nature, the authors found that, in romantic relationships, even single, isolated events could have a tremendous impact. The study highlighted how the pervasiveness of gender binary assumptions of the partner affected all aspects of the relationships, from expectations during sexual intimacy to the experience of gender role behaviour within the relationship (Pulice-Farrow, Brown and Galupo, 2017). The consequences were not limited to the individuals involved but affected how they negotiated the relationship when interacting with the outside world (Pulice-Farrow, Brown and Galupo, 2017).

3.1. Emotional, cognitive and behavioural reactions to microaggressions

As microaggression theorists proposed, reacting and responding to microaggression implies several cognitive and emotional processes (Sue *et al.*, 2007; Nadal *et al.*, 2014). The double-messages underlying a microaggression might complicate the process. In fact, experiencing an unpleasant situation or event triggers targeted people to try to understand if the 'incident' was motivated by their gender (or sexual, ethnic, etc.) identity or not, eventually deciding how to respond (Sue, 2010; Nadal *et al.*, 2014). A qualitative study conducted by Nadal *et al.* (2014) investigated the process that TGNC people undergo when they experience microaggressions, focusing on their emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses. As regard to emotions, a microaggression triggers feelings of anger, betrayal, distress, hopelessness, and not being understood (Nadal *et al.*, 2014). Cognitively, participants reported dealing with the struggle of these ambiguous situations with rationalisations, vigilance, and self-preservations (Nadal *et al.*, 2014). On the one hand, these cognitive strategies could assure safety and be very adaptive in some contexts to navigate a hostile social environment; on the other hand, repeated episodes of microaggressions could elicit an expected response of discrimination. The result of this process is a hypervigilant attitude that leads the TGNC person to search for hostility (vs. safety) clues in every context (Sue, 2010). Behaviourally, TGNC people adopt three main strategies to cope with microaggressions: direct confrontation, indirect confrontation, and passive coping. A direct confrontation consists in reacting to a microaggression with some sort of verbal assertion: from providing education, correcting the use of improper language or pronouns to stronger reactions in replying to more explicit transphobic comments (Nadal *et al.*, 2014). Indirect confrontations consist in establishing clear boundaries, clarifying that any inappropriate trespass will not be tolerated. A more passive coping strategy consists in avoiding situations in which there could be a direct or indirect confrontation (Nadal *et al.*, 2014).

3.2. Impact of microaggression on health and consequences for clinical practice

Microaggression theory and research yield several implications for clinical practice. The continuous experience of microaggressions and overt discrimination in several contexts of TGNC people's lives may have a detrimental impact on their physical and mental health. Unfortunately, literature explicitly focusing on the impact of microaggressions in TGNC population is lacking, but it would be fair to hypothesise such negative consequences according to two scientifically-based arguments.

Firstly, the negative impact of microaggressions has been reported for other marginalised groups (i.e., sexual minorities and racial-ethnic minorities; see Owen, Tao and Drinane, 2019). A review conducted by Owen, Tao, and Drinane (2019), that included 21 studies investigating the consequences of microaggressions on mental health of diverse minorities, revealed how microaggressions were associated with several aspects of psychological functioning: depressive traits, self-esteem, anger, substance use, psychological distress and well-being, rumination, and stress.

Secondly, although the consequences of microaggressions have not been studied in isolation for TGNC population, there is strong evidence of the impact of overall discrimination on mental health and well-being (Anzani, Prunas and Sacchi, 2019). The higher risk for mental disorders (e.g., depression, anxiety, suicide risk) in TGNC people have been widely demonstrated in studies based on the minority stress model (Bockting *et al.*, 2013; Budge, Adelson and Howard, 2013; Tebbe and Morandi, 2016). However, these studies did not separate the effects of overt forms of biases from subtler and more indirect types of microaggression. Further investigations are necessary to study the different impact of these forms of discriminations in the TGNC population.

Thus, understanding how minority stress (including microaggressions) affects TGNC people's lives becomes essential in clinical practice (Nadal, Skolnik and Wong, 2012). Psychologists should offer a non-judgmental environment and must be careful not to replicate in a clinical setting microaggressions TGNC people are already exposed to. Furthermore, taking a step further, mental health professionals could also provide coping strategies and support in dealing with and overcoming such discrimination (Nadal, Skolnik and Wong, 2012). The acknowledgement of hetero-cis-normativity (Worthen, 2016), as the backdrop of the social world we live in, could represent the first step in this direction (Anzani, Morris and Galupo, *in press*).

Another essential aspect to keep in mind both in research and clinical practice concerns intersectionality. Social identity is a complex construct that reflects people's sense of whom they are based on their group membership (Tajfel, 1978). Of course, gender identity is one of the most salient variables that constitute an individual's social identity, but it is not the only relevant one. Ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, social class, and religiosity are some of the other facets of social identity. An intersectional approach in psychological research tries to consider this complexity (Cole, 2009). The intersection between different facets of social identity might results in a conflict, i.e. being trans and have strong Catholic faith (Nealy, 2017). It could also be that an individual is part of different marginalised groups (i.e., an African-American transgender woman). In this sense, intersectionality has particularly relevant implications. In clinical practice, it is important not to focus on one single element of social identity but consider the individual as a whole: a person with multiple characteristics, which might be in conflict among each other or make the client more vulnerable to develop health disparities (Sue, 2010).

4.   Conclusions

Microaggressions theorisation highlights the relevance of subtle forms of discrimination, recognising their negative impact on the mental health and well-being of marginalised social groups. Research on microaggressions perpetrated towards TGNC individuals has experienced a significant expansion in the last decade. Researchers explored the specific content of microaggressions experienced by TGNC individuals, the relational contexts in which microaggressions are enacted, as well as the victims' emotional, behavioural, and cognitive reactions. Future research should focus on the specific consequences of microaggressions on the health of TGNC individuals and, as healthcare professionals, how to create a more affirmative environment for our clients.

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