

Section: *Special articles*

MICROAGGRESSIONS AS A SYMPTOM: UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING SUBTLE HOSTILITY IN POSITIVE PSYCHOTHERAPY



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Abstract

This article examines the history, complexity, and psychotherapeutic approaches to microaggressions, everyday verbal, nonverbal, or environmental slights that convey hostile messages to marginalised individuals. The concept traces back to the works of Derald Wing Sue, with microaggressions often related to discrimination, stereotypes, and prejudices, causing psychological harm. The Positive Psychotherapy (PPT) approach uniquely addresses microaggressions by transforming negative experiences into opportunities for personal development. The article further delves into the interconnectedness of aggression and microaggressions in contemporary society, highlighting the influence of power dynamics, capitalism, and critical social theories. Methodological recommendations and mindfulness-based interventions are also discussed, emphasising self-awareness, non-judgmental acceptance, emotional regulation, empathy, and cognitive flexibility. Addressing microaggressions necessitates a collaborative effort to promote understanding, empathy, and respect for diversity and difference in all aspects of life.

Keywords: microaggressions, positive psychotherapy, aggression, social justice, cultural competence

Introduction

Microaggressions, subtle and unintentional slights, are a significant concern in psychotherapy, impacting marginalized groups significantly. These slights, often borne from discrimination or prejudice, have deep psychological and social roots, but also serve as an adaptive mechanism in a society discouraging overt aggression. While integrating perspectives from various psychotherapeutic schools, this paper focuses on elucidating the intricate nature of microaggressions and proposes specific strategies from Positive Psychotherapy to manage and mitigate their impact.

Methodology

Our methodology, grounded in comprehensive literature review, drew from seminal theories of aggression and power

dynamics (Freud (in Read, 1934); Lorenz, 1966.; Foucault, 1990; Fisher, 2009; Lindsay & Pluckrose, 2020). Positive Psychotherapy (Peseschkian, 1987) and its transformative approach were central to our discussion, alongside mindfulness-based interventions renowned for enhancing self-awareness and emotional regulation. We also considered multicultural psychotherapy approaches (Pedersen, 2000) and the importance of therapists' self-reflection (Norcross & Guy, 2007) to avoid unconscious biases and potential microaggressions. The influence of microaggressions on mental health, as outlined by Sue (2010, 2016, 2022), Constantine (2007), Nadal et al. (2010, 2014) and Kaplan (2014), provided key insights. This methodology aimed to interweave these diverse perspectives to offer a nuanced understanding of microaggressions in psychotherapy.

Discussion

In recent decades, microaggressions in psychotherapy has become a pressing issue. Theoretical studies of microaggressions in psychotherapy can be traced back to the works of Derald Wing Sue and his colleagues (Sue et al., 2007), who developed a classification system for different types of microaggressions:

"Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership."

In the context of psychotherapeutic approaches, microaggressions can be defined as implicit, indirect, or unintentional expressions of aggression, which often manifest in everyday interpersonal interactions (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions may be related to discrimination, stereotypes, or prejudices, and can cause significant psychological harm to marginalised groups (Nadal et al., 2014).

Microaggressions can also be considered as symptoms of deeper psychological and social processes, as well as a means of adaptation to a situation where aggression is increasingly prohibited in modern society (Kaplan, 2014). In conditions of suppressing open aggression, microaggressions can serve as an indirect means of expressing negative feelings and, more importantly, indicating existing needs of the individual.

Various psychotherapeutic schools have their approaches to working with aggression. For example, Freudian psychoanalysis and Konrad Lorenz's theory consider aggression as a fundamental instinct that can be sublimated or processed by the psyche. Nossrat Peseschkian's positive psychotherapy emphasizes the importance of transforming negative emotions, such as aggression, into positive qualities and resources for personal development. Peseschkian argues that it can be transformed into a positive force for self-development and personal growth. In this way, PPT (positive psychotherapy) approach provides a unique perspective on working with aggression and microaggression in the therapeutic context.

3.1. Why microaggressions is not about small things, but about complex things

The works of Freud (2018) and Lorenz (1966) provide a foundational understanding of aggression as an instinctual and powerful force in human nature. Freud proposed the concept of two opposing instincts: the life instinct (Eros) and the death instinct (Thanatos). According to Freud (in Read, 1934), aggression is an integral part of human nature, and it can be directed outward (towards other people) or inward (towards oneself) in the form of guilt, masochism, or depression. Lorenz similarly viewed aggression as an innate and instinctual force in animals and humans, which can be channeled into productive or destructive behaviors.

Aggression and microaggressions are interconnected, and understanding their relationship are crucial in addressing both. The modern world order has created conditions that suppress open aggression, leading to the rise of subtle and implicit forms of aggression such as microaggressions. Cancel culture and the increasing demand for conformity have created a climate of resentment and hostility, further fueling the prevalence of microaggressions.

The works of Foucault, Fisher, and Lindsay provide insight into the underlying processes that contribute to the prevalence of microaggressions in contemporary society. Foucault's analysis of power and biopolitics highlights how power dynamics shape social interactions and contribute to the creation and maintenance of inequality. This framework can be used to understand how subtle forms of aggression, such as microaggressions, emerge because of uneven power structures and the desire to maintain control over others.

Mark Fisher's "Capitalist Realism" argues that capitalism has become the dominant cultural, economic, and political system, leading to a sense of inevitability and resignation among individuals. In this context, microaggressions can be seen as a symptom of the alienation and dissatisfaction that result from living within a capitalist society that perpetuates inequality and fosters competition.

James Lindsay's "Cynical Theories" critiques the highly politicized ideas that have emerged from critical social theories, arguing that they contribute to division and conflict within society. These theories often emphasize systemic oppression and inequality, which can lead to an

increased focus on microaggressions as a manifestation of these issues. In this way, microaggressions can be understood as both a product of and a mechanism for perpetuating the social divisions highlighted by these theories.

3.2. Positive Psychotherapy and Microaggressions

Positive Psychotherapy (PPT) focuses on exploring the positive aspects of a person's personality and experience, emphasizing their potential for self-healing and growth. In the context of working with microaggressions, PPT provides a unique perspective that can help individuals transform negative experiences into opportunities for personal development.

As Nossrat Peseschkian once said: "Aggression is the instinct that drives us towards success and development, but it can also be the root of all destruction." (Peseschkian, 1987).

PPT views aggression as a force that can be sublimated and transformed into a positive resource for personal development. This approach emphasizes the importance of developing skills to control and direct aggressive impulses in a positive direction. According to PPT, this can be achieved through several methods, including developing assertiveness, learning to communicate effectively, and practicing empathy and understanding.

In PPT, the therapist aims to help the client to identify and work with their strengths and potential for growth rather than just focusing on their problems and deficits. This approach enables individuals to develop a positive self-image and focus on their potential for change and development, leading to greater resilience and adaptability to life's challenges.

Working with microaggressions in PPT involves specific techniques such as appreciative inquiry to reframe the microaggression experience, focusing on inherent strengths to develop resilience, and fostering positive interpersonal relationships to dilute the negative effects of microaggressions. These steps help individuals to develop a positive outlook on the experience, identify opportunities for personal growth and development, and enhance their psychological fortitude.

For example, if a person experiences a microaggression related to their race or ethnicity, the PPT approach would involve exploring how this experience can help them better understand their cultural identity and

what positive resources and strengths can be derived from it.

The PPT approach to microaggressions also emphasizes the importance of developing positive communication skills, including assertiveness, empathy, and active listening. These skills can help individuals effectively express their needs and boundaries while also understanding and respecting the perspectives of others.

3.3. Strategic Guidelines for Addressing Microaggressions

Numerous methodologies can be employed in psychotherapy to address microaggressions:

Detecting and acknowledging microaggressions: A crucial phase in therapy revolving around microaggressions is the recognition and pinpointing of these understated, unintentional acts of discrimination (Sue et al., 2009). This paves the way for an open dialogue and efforts towards eradication.

Establishing constructive coping mechanisms for microaggressions: Therapeutic sessions can facilitate the development of advantageous strategies to handle microaggressions, encompassing self-defence skills, assertiveness, and resilience (Nadal et al., 2010). These skills equip clients to manage the adverse implications of microaggressions in their routine life.

Cultivating cultural competency among therapists: This involves therapists gaining cognizance of their inherent biases, stereotypes, and potential microaggressions towards clients (Constantine, 2007).

Formulating and applying techniques for discussing and processing microaggressions during therapy: For instance, the SLUJ method (Speak Up, Listen Up, Understand, and Join) provides a structured format for microaggressions discourse (Sue, 2016).

3.4. Positive Psychotherapy: A Practical Approach to Addressing Microaggressions

Understanding the principles of PPT and applying them to instances of microaggressions can bring about personal development and transformative growth. Let's consider a practical example to illustrate this.

Imagine a client who regularly experiences microaggressions related to their ethnicity at their workplace, which has resulted in feelings of

alienation and stress. In a PPT context, the therapist may first acknowledge these experiences, validating the client's feelings. Subsequently, they would guide the client to explore the positive aspects of their ethnic identity and the strengths it brings, such as resilience, a rich cultural heritage, and a unique perspective on life.

The therapist might encourage the client to develop assertiveness and communication skills to navigate these microaggressions more effectively. For instance, they could role-play scenarios with the client, allowing them to practice articulating their feelings and setting boundaries. This process aids in transforming negative emotions into positive qualities and personal development resources.

Incorporating mindfulness interventions is another key strategy that aligns with PPT. Mindfulness helps the client to stay present, cultivate acceptance, and regulate their emotional responses. For example, the client may be guided to practice mindfulness exercises that cultivate awareness of their feelings when they encounter microaggressions, without judging or denying these emotions. This self-awareness can promote accountability and inspire change in how the client responds to future occurrences of microaggressions.

3.5. Mitigating Microaggressions via Mindfulness-Based Interventions

Therapeutic strategies like Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), known for their efficacy in dealing with psychological issues, have grown increasingly popular. These approaches foster the cultivation of present-moment cognizance and non-judgmental acceptance of personal thoughts, emotions, and experiences.

In Positive Psychotherapy, implementing mindfulness-based interventions is a key strategy in addressing microaggressions. This approach offers several benefits:

- Augmented self-awareness: Encouraging present-moment awareness can heighten individuals' perception of their thoughts, emotions, and actions, including potential microaggressive behaviors. This self-awareness forms the basis for recognizing and addressing microaggressions.
- Non-judgmental acceptance: Practicing mindfulness encourages the development of a compassionate, non-judgmental attitude towards oneself and others. This allows individuals to identify and accept their microaggressive behaviors without harsh self-criticism or denial, fostering a sense of accountability and behavior modification.
- Emotional regulation: Mindfulness aids in the development of effective emotional regulation skills, particularly useful in managing emotions that underpin microaggressive behaviors, such as anger or frustration.
- Empathy and compassion: Mindfulness practices can boost empathy and compassion, enhancing understanding of the impact of microaggressive behaviors on others and motivating behavioral change.
- Cognitive flexibility: Mindfulness facilitates cognitive flexibility, empowering individuals to challenge and reshape negative thought patterns that may contribute to microaggressive behaviors.

Incorporating these strategic recommendations, psychotherapists can more effectively aid clients grappling with microaggressions, promoting a more inclusive, empathetic therapeutic atmosphere. Additional strategies comprise:

- Integration of multicultural approaches in psychotherapy, considering various cultural, ethnic, racial, and social facets of the client's personality to enhance therapeutic interactions (Pedersen, 2000).
- Reflection and self-reflection, as crucial elements of professional development for therapists (Norcross & Guy, 2007). Therapists' awareness of their biases, stereotypes, and potential microaggressions is key to effective work with diverse clients. Regular reflection helps identify and eliminate unintentional microaggressions and improves the quality of psychotherapeutic work.
- Creating a safe space for discussing microaggressions during therapy. Therapists can employ diverse techniques to foster an environment of trust and openness, allowing clients to express their

experiences with microaggressions (Sue, 2016).

- Application of an intersectional approach in therapy, accounting for clients' multiple, intersecting social identities and experiences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, microaggressions are an essential issue in contemporary society that requires greater attention and understanding. The complexity of this phenomenon is related to the deep-seated psychological and social processes that contribute to its manifestation.

By recognizing and working with microaggressions in psychotherapy, individuals can develop greater resilience, adaptive coping strategies, and positive communication skills. The PPT approach, through its unique focus on amplifying positive attributes and applying mindfulness techniques, provides an effective strategy for working with microaggressions. This approach underscores the importance of identifying an individual's strengths and leveraging these for growth amidst the challenges posed by microaggressions.

At the same time, it is essential to recognize that the issue of microaggressions is related to broader contemporary social and cultural issues, such as various types of inequality, political and social polarization, refugees and forced displacement, resentment, spreading the culture of cancellation, that could fuel further dividing society. Therefore, addressing these root causes of microaggressions requires greater attention to social justice and cultural competence in all areas of life.

Ultimately, working with microaggressions requires a collaborative effort from individuals, communities, and society to foster greater understanding, empathy, and respect for diversity and difference.

As Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay (2020) noted in their book "Cynical Theories," "We need to be able to confront social injustice without creating new injustices." It is our responsibility as mental health professionals to address microaggressions in a way that is ethical, effective, and compassionate.

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