Chapter 3

Sexual Orientation Microaggressions in South Africa

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Abstract

Discrimination against LGBTQ+ people in South Africa has shifted from overt hate crimes to covert microaggressions. Microaggression is a term used in psychology to describe casual discrimination against socially marginalised groups, and they occur in three forms: microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidations. Microassaults include verbal and non-verbal discriminatory behaviours. Microinsults include actions or statements which demean a person's identity, and microinvalidations negate the thoughts, feelings or lived experiences of a certain people. Microaggressions have detrimental impacts on lives of people experiencing them and on their interpersonal relationships. The chapter presents a focus on microaggression theory together with microaggression experiences of South African Indian LGBTQ+ people, who have been under-researched. Reference is made to interview extracts from research studies focusing on South African Indian LGBTQ+ people and from e-zine articles focusing on the experiences of South African Indian LGBTQ+ people.

Keywords: South African Indian; LGBTQ+; microaggressions; covert discrimination; mental health; homophobia

South African lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people as well as people who otherwise identify with minority labels for sexual orientation and gender identities (LGBTQ+) face violence, discrimination and oppression despite the presence of legal protections in South Africa (Marais, Nel, & Govender, 2022). South Africa's history of Apartheid led to racial segregation, and the

discrimination of LGBTQ+ people during the Apartheid regime meant that LGBTQ+ people of colour experienced discrimination on many different levels. Research shows that beyond the abolishment of Apartheid, discrimination against LGBTQ+ people continues to be influenced by factors such as race and class, where different population groups experience sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination in different ways (Davis, 2012). The experiences of ethnic and religious minority people in South Africa, such as LGBTQ+ people of Indian descent, also differ greatly from the promise offered by the unwavering Constitutional protection for gender and sexuality minorities (Khan, 2017).

Amongst South Africans of Indian descent, conservative values, patriarchy, religious beliefs and collectivist living are linked to the discrimination experiences of LGBTQ+ people (Khan, 2017; Pillay, 2017). In previous research findings of the author (Dayal, 2021), who conducted a recent study on the sexual orientation discrimination experiences of South African gay Indian men, it is identified that the discrimination against LGBTQ+ people within the South African Indian community is also covert in nature. This covert form of discrimination is known as sexual orientation microaggressions. Microaggressions can occur in several forms, and their intention is to mock, demean and negate the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people (Nadal, 2013). These microaggressions are written about by many journalists in news articles (Akoob, 2018; Igual, 2018; Jagmohan, 2017; Khan, 2017, 2018; Pillay, 2017). This chapter aims to uncover the foundations of microaggression theory, and how South African Indian LGBTQ+ people are affected by sexual orientation microaggressions. Some quotes and ideas from research studies and opinion pieces will be integrated with microaggression theory in order to make sense of the experiences of South African Indian LGBTQ+ men.

LGBTQ+ People's Experiences in South Africa

A landmark move in 2006 led to South Africa becoming one of the first countries in the world to introduce legislation that prevents the discrimination of citizens based on their sexual orientation (Bhana, 2012). These legislations allow for same-sex marriages, the ability of same-sex couples to adopt, and legal rights for same-sex couples to inherit from each other (Thoreson, 2008). Despite these advanced laws, LGBTQ+ people in South Africa face relentless discrimination and high rates of violence (OUT, 2016). This discrimination, being either overt or covert, happens across many different settings: schools, healthcare, government offices, workplaces, police stations and higher education institutions (Francis, 2017; Soeker et al., 2015). South African LGBTQ+ people therefore straddle worlds of protection and persecution. There are many factors which contribute to this condemnation, and the chapter on intersectional discrimination later in this volume will allow for a closer inspection of these intersectional influences.

The public views on same-sex relationships in South Africa continue to oscillate between acceptance and rejection. Empirical research conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council in South Africa, titled: *Progressive Prudes: A*

Survey of South African Attitudes to Homosexuality and Gender Non-Conformity, revealed that of the 3,000 participants, 72% of people had a firm belief that same-sex relationships were morally wrong (Sutherland, Roberts, Gabriel, Struwig, & Gordon, 2016). Also, 70% of the participants found same-sex sexual interactions to be wrong and disgusting. Two fifths of respondents in another study by Mahomed and Trangoš (2016) found identifying as gay as being against community values. In this study, some 12% of respondents approved of hate crimes as a response to gay men. The 'Love Not Hate' (2016) survey revealed a rise in negative attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people, where 14% of South Africans agreed to violence against LGBTQ+ people; and the percentage of respondents who believed in equal rights for LGBTQ+ people fell from 71% in 2013 to only 56% in 2015. These startling figures paint a bleak picture of the levels of acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in South Africa. Currently, there are organisations in South Africa that cater to the needs of LGBTQ+ people who face the challenges, and new legislation aimed to protect LGBTQ+ people against hate crimes continues to be passed. But these may not be enough to change public perceptions of LGBTQ+ people. The experiences of LGBTQ+ people of Indian descent in South Africa mirrors those of other communities in South Africa; however, there are some unique cultural influences which will be discussed next (Khan, 2017).

LGBTQ+ People in Indian Communities

Due to the cultural similarities between the people of Indian descent in South Africa and people of Indian descent in other countries, this section will discuss studies of LGBTQ+ people of Indian descent in the United Kingdom, India and lastly South Africa. An attempt will be made to integrate some direct quotations from studies in order to demonstrate the ideas and thoughts surrounding some of the experiences of LGBTQ+ people.

Despite the global presence of the Indian diaspora, most of the research on LGBTQ+ people of Indian descent has been conducted in India and the United Kingdom. These studies show that LGBTQ+ Indians experience prejudice and discrimination based on their gender identity and sexual orientation. This discrimination is perpetrated in many different settings and often by people in personal relationships with the victims, such as family members, employers, friends, and members of the schooling and healthcare sectors who are close to LGBTQ+ people (Bhugra, 1997a, 1997b; Jaspal, 2012, 2014; Kar, Mukherjee, Ventriglio, & Bhugra, 2018; Sharma & Subramanyam, 2020). The following two quotes from two gay men from a large study by Sharma and Subramanyam (2020) in India reveal the difficulties that are present within societies in India. They noted:

> It was suffocating for me to suppress my sexual desires during my childhood because of society. It made me have a distaste for sexual

> things. I remained isolated sexually for years and suppressed these feelings.
>
> (Sharma & Subramanyam, p. 10)

> I was extremely uncomfortable, partly because back then it was not accepted socially and culturally. There was no political correctness, and homophobia was extreme, which made me more uncomfortable with my sexuality. I realized that I am gay when I was in 11th but could not accept it. There was no support system. I considered it to be socially and politically incorrect.
>
> (Sharma & Subramanyam, p. 9)

These participants share how concealing their identities made them feel isolated and unsupported. Gay men experience internalised homophobia and emotional challenges due to stigmatisation within Indian communities. Psychological challenges are further alluded to in a study in the United Kingdom (Jaspal, 2012), where a British Indian gay man reveals:

> Everyday being gay is like getting harder for me because I can just see it in my head – mum is crying, dad is crying too and like just thinking 'he can't be my son' and my brothers would be like freaking out that I'm queer.
>
> (Jaspal, 2012, p. 773)

According to studies conducted in India and the United Kingdom, discrimination is linked to conservative community values, family honour, cultural practices, hegemonic masculinity, patriarchy and heterosexism (Bhugra, 1997a, 1997b; McKeown, Nelson, Anderson, Low, & Elford, 2010; Mimiaga et al., 2013; Sharma & Subramanyam, 2020). There have been many efforts by rights groups and LGBTQ+ organisations in India and the United Kingdom. However, talk about LGBTQ+ identities remains taboo and a challenging conversation to have within Indian communities (Bhugra, 1997a, 1997b; Jain, 2015; Jaspal, 2012). Discrimination is further perpetuated through Indian media, in particular within Bollywood movies, where gay men are portrayed in foolish roles involving comic relief (Kaur, 2017). All these societal restraints have led to some gay men being subjected to corrective therapy practices, where they are taken to psychiatrists in order to be 'cured' of same-sex attraction (Bhugra, 1997a; Jain, 2015).

Difficulties Experienced by LGBTQ+ People of Indian Descent in South Africa

South African Indian people constitute 2.6% of the South African population (Statistics South Africa, 2020). Although South African Indian people are quite visible within South Africa, there have been very limited studies which have

focused on the experiences of South African LGBTQ+ people (Pillay, 2017). Even fewer studies have selected the accounts of LGBTQ+ Indian people as a research focus. Most of the research that has been done has been in the form of graduate studies dissertations. The little research that has been conducted focusing on LGBTQ+ people of Indian descent in South Africa, such as that by Bonthuys and Erlank (2012), Dave (2011), Dayal (2021), Moonsammy (2009) and Nair (2020), reveals that LGBTQ+ people in South Africa do experience discrimination related to the expression of sexual orientation within the Indian communities.

Studies focusing on the 'coming out' experiences of lesbian women and gay men emphasised the ideologies related to heterosexism, stereotypical gender roles, community values, religious beliefs and conservative attitudes (Dave, 2011; Nair, 2020). Community beliefs would mostly be centred on concerns about appeasing the community and abiding by the rules and regulations set out by the community (Dayal, 2021; Moonsammy, 2009). As a participant in Dayal's (2021) study confirms:

> So particularly when coming out was things said [people from the community to participant's mother], 'Do you know that your son is doing this, this is not accepted, it's not part of our culture. How're you going to show your face within the community? This is a bad example for our children'. Those kinds of things affect just not only yourself, but your family as well. 'What will people say? What do people say?'
>
> (Dayal, 2021, p. 70)

The gay man in Dayal's (2021) study was made to believe that identifying as gay is wrong and that gay men follow lifestyles that are against cultural norms. The notion of family honour is seen as being deeply negatively affected by having family members who identify with sexual orientations that are not accepted. Family and community members find it difficult to accept LGBTQ+ people and there are often utterances that identifying as LGBTQ+ is a choice or a 'phase' and that it can be changed. These were noted in many studies, as highlighted by these selected quotes:

> Like I brought it up to my mom once that I like chicks and guys, and she was like oh my god you're just going through a phase. The 'you're going through a phase' quote is a thing that is just going to appear on my skin one day, I've heard it so often.
>
> (Nair, 2020, p. 58)

> I told my sisters one by one. The first one I told when I was about 18 and she was actually completely fine with it. I did have a problem with my eldest sister who didn't wanna accept it, she

said it was a phase that I was going through and that I'll grow out
of it.

(Dave, 2011, p. 20)

She [participant's mother] actually went very quiet, and she
actually said, 'Can you not try to not be gay?' And I told her,
'Can you try to grow an arm?' And she said, 'No!' And then I said,
'Well that's like asking me to not be gay'. And she said, 'No, it's
not the same'. I'm like, 'Yes it is the same'.

(Dayal, 2021, p. 66)

What can be concluded is that the family members of the participants in these
studies were adamant about the fact that they believed that identifying as
LGBTQ+ was a choice and that there was pressure placed on the participants to
change. These LGBTQ+ people also feared hostility from family members who
did not accept them (Moonsammy, 2009). The reasons behind the non-acceptance
of LGBTQ+ people are varied. However, some key ideas revealed from research
studies are that conservatism, traditional beliefs and fixed gender roles are often
used as anchors to discriminate against anyone who behaves in a way that is in
opposition to these fixed ideas (Dayal, 2021; Nair, 2020). This will be discussed in
a later chapter.

Microaggressions

In research findings and opinion articles, it is commonly understood that the
discrimination against LGBTQ+ people of Indian descent in South Africa is
mainly covert in nature (Akoob, 2018; Dave, 2011; Igual, 2018; Jagmohan, 2017;
Khan, 2017, 2018; Pillay, 2017). The fact that the violence is overt, not covert,
may be due to the legal protections offered to LGBTQ+ people in South Africa.
Still, the people who commit these microaggressions are labelled as 'perpetrators',
and they commit verbal and non-verbal homonegative acts of discrimination
against LGBTQ+ people (Sue et al., 2007).

Microaggression theory was first presented by Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez,
and Willis (1978), who defined microaggressions as 'subtle, stunning, generally
automatic and nonverbal "put-downs" of Black people by offenders' (p. 66). This
definition of microaggressions has been extended to sexual orientation micro-
aggressions, which affect people who define themselves by different sexual ori-
entations. These sexual orientation microaggressions often start early in the lives
of LGBTQ+ people. Initially, these sexual orientation microaggressions begin
with the implementation of traditional gender roles (Francis & Reygan, 2016).
Within society, gender usually begins with the identification of biological sex. Sex
assigned at birth is defined as a person being born as male, female or intersex
based on the appearance of genital organs at birth, whereas gender identity is a
person's sense of identifying as male, female, both, or neither, or another gender.

Society, however, commonly defines gender within the binaries of masculinity for males, and femininity for females (Beasley, 2005). This classification based on gender, and the equation of gender and sex, is criticised, as it presents a very narrow view on gender.

Judith Butler has famously offered a critique of this narrow definition, and argues that gender should be understood, rather, as a repetition of certain acts over a period of time (Butler, 1990). These acts are passed down from one generation to the next. Gender can be expressed free of binaries (Butler, 1990); however, within society, pre-existing 'traditional gender roles' legitimise gender binaries, reinforcing beliefs that men are supposed to be strong, dominant and unemotional; and women emotional and submissive. Early microaggression accounts begin when younger children express their gender differently to what society dictates (Eliot, 2009; Francis, 2012, 2017). For example, a young boy who enjoys toys that are usually reserved for young girls will be assumed to be gay and discriminated against. In this way, gender expression becomes linked to sexual orientation, before an individual even decides who they are attracted to romantically.

These sexual orientation microaggressions have been summarised by Sue (2010) and Nadal, Rivera, and Corpus (2010) into a taxonomy which allows us to categorise sexual orientation microaggressions. Some of the categories are quite similar. The first category, 'use of heterosexist or transphobic terminology' makes reference to utterances that demean LGBTQ+ people. The second category, 'endorsement of heteronormative or gender normative culture and behaviours' signifies the pressure that LGBTQ+ people face to behave in ways that endorse cisgenderism. 'Assumption of sexual pathology/abnormality' refers to the portrayal of LGBTQ+ people as being sexually deviant. The category 'denial of reality of heterosexism or transphobia' looks at how people who commit sexual orientation microaggressions may not be aware of the bias associated with their comments. 'Sinfulness' and 'assumption of abnormality' are two other themes which highlight that identifying as LGBTQ+ is associated with committing a sin, and is also seen as being unnatural. Finally, the last two categories of 'denial of heterosexism' and 'endorsement of heteronormativity' involves people that deny LGBTQ+ bias, and those who place an over-importance on heteronormative attitudes and behaviours. An additional category of the taxonomy presented by Nadal et al. (2010) is the category of 'exoticisation', where LGBTQ+ people are objectified. This may be linked to Sue's (2010) theme of 'over-sexualisation', where LGBTQ+ people are identified as being overly sexual beings by heterosexual people. Another theme signalled by Nadal et al. (2010) is that of the 'assumption of universal LGBT experience', where LGBTQ+ people are assumed to all experience their sexual orientation in the same way. Some of these themes will be practically illustrated with excerpts from research studies and e-zine articles.

Types of Microaggresions and Outcomes of Microaggressions

There are characteristically three types of microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidations (Nadal et al., 2011; Sue et al., 2007). Microassaults occur at interpersonal and environmental levels, and they may be seen to be similar to overt discrimination. They are direct actions that are aimed at demeaning recipients of these microaggressions. They can also be overt acts of non-acceptance, such as a gay man being refused service at a restaurant or signs that are anti-LGBTQ+. The use of derogatory words against South African Indian LGBTQ+ people is identified in some studies. In studies by Dayal (2021) and Nair (2020), the following was revealed by participants:

> They would use words like 'moffie' you know these types of…
> Basically it reflected that the greater part of society made fun of.
> They found gay people to be um a part of society that we
> discourage, that we make fun of, that they're a point of humour
> [nods head]. And that's on the outside of things. At the inside of it,
> gay people weren't [shakes head] accepted or encouraged to be gay
> or encouraged to be themselves or be true to themselves. It was
> very very [sniffs] strongly established and maintained that it's not
> acceptable, and there's no place for people like that.
>
> (Dayal, 2021, p. 60)

> I couldn't really understand this, but there was this attached level
> of shame and guilt from that point to why am I feeling this? And
> attempting to make sense of it because words like 'moffie' and
> 'faggot' were those words that the boys all around me would
> always use … that if you are not a boy, that's liking girls then
> you are a 'moffie'. If you are a boy taking part in a speech contest
> or in plays in school, then you are a 'moffie' – that was assigned to
> me from primary school.
>
> (Nair, 2020, p. 54)

'Moffie' is a derogatory word that is used to describe men who are seen as effeminate (Malan & Johaardien, 2010). Effeminacy is tied to 'individuals [who] appear to fall short of a more aggressive, masculine ideal' (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003, p. 406). These effeminate men are seen to oppose traditional gender roles and are often discriminated against. It was discovered that the word is frequently used in South Africa school settings when younger boys discriminate against their peers (Cilliers, 2017; Msibi, 2011).

'Faggot' is another word used to make derogatory reference to gay men. In an incident of cyber bullying, Naufal Khan (2018), the publisher of Indian Spice e-zine, was told that he is 'A faggot with a mouth' (Khan, 2018). The perpetrator, with the knowledge that Naufal Khan is an openly gay man, called him a 'faggot' in response to an article that he had written. What is alarming is that there is an

insinuation that gay men are supposed to be invisible, and should not 'have a mouth'. This further reflects the discrimination faced by gay men and the silence that they suffer within the South African Indian community.

Another type of microaggressions are microinvalidations. These types of microaggressions are typically more difficult to categorise as they are verbal or non-verbal messages that are usually subconscious or subtle in nature (Nadal et al., 2011). Microinvalidations negate the experiences of LGBTQ+ people, and they are deeply rooted in societal biases and social norms. An example of microinvalidations are instances when gay men are told that what they are going through is a phase or when the difficulties of a gay person are not spoken about by family members, and instead are simply ignored. In an article by Igual (2018), a South African movie about members of the South African Indian community is reviewed. In this review, discrimination against gay men is noted, where the uncle of one of the gay characters gives the gay man heterosexual porn in an attempt to assist him in becoming 'straight'. Igual writes: 'He [uncle] also hands him [gay character] a package of heterosexual porn claiming that watching it will turn a gay person straight' (Igual, 2018). The direct link to porn is also a micro-aggression on a second level linked to the over-sexualisation of gay men, where gay men are seen to have an unnatural interest in sex and sexual practices (Sue, 2010).

In an online blog on the experience of coming out by a South African media personality of Indian descent (Vagar, 2020), it is shared that due to strong link-ages to family honour in the South African Indian community, often talks around sexuality are concealed. He reveals:

> Hardwired into the Indian value-system, for example is a social or cultural code known as 'izzat', which can be translated to refer to everything from family honour, reputation and prestige to an individual's personal dignity. Similar to the concept of 'saving face' that is core to a lot of Asian cultures, the notion of izzat sounds like a pretty noble and decorous aspiration on paper, but it has a decidedly dark downside. As an unintended consequence, it also engenders a culture of 'don't ask, don't tell' behaviour that results in people concealing, suppressing or obfuscating the truth – or worse yet, simply denying its existence. As a result, important conversations are seldom had or ever brought up, difficult situations and pressing issues are left unaddressed and therefore, unresolved – and inconvenient truths and problems are just wished away or swept under the rug.
>
> (Vagar, 2020)

Another participant in Nair's (2020) study expressed that during the 'coming out' experience, there was a large amount of avoidance and secrecy surrounding talk around sexuality.

> Big sense of avoidance. Indians don't talk about things. It's swept under the carpet and bubbles up and bites …Very toxic, and as well it's a big thing they have to adjust to, and every other emotional response following that to any emotional issues is inevitably informed by that toxicity of not addressing the problem at hand … So, it's just like, Indian families in general are very invasive and there's no boundaries and I have to accommodate that.
>
> (Nair, 2020, p. 67)

A South African Indian gay man in the study by Dayal (2021) also revealed that his identity as a gay man was negated and denied. During his coming out experience, his mother 'assumed sexual pathology and abnormality' (Sue, 2010) and made reference to him seeking a cure to become 'normal'.

> I can remember about my mum is that when I came out to her, she was quite compassionate. Almost too compassionate to the point of saying, 'Don't worry, we'll take you for healing and find a cure for you. We'll make sure you get better'. Kind of you know treating me as somebody that's unwell or mentally infirm.
>
> (Dayal, 2021, p. 66)

All these experiences reveal a deeply rooted rejection of LGBTQ+ identities, where LGBTQ+ people are seen to not receive the necessary support from their friends, family and community. Their lived realities of identifying as LGBTQ+ and the challenges that arise due to this are not acknowledged. Furthermore, what they experience when speaking about their experiences makes them feel worse and discriminated against.

Microinsults are the final type of microaggressions. They include 'statements or actions that indirectly belittle a person and are often unconscious and unintentional' (Nadal, 2008, p. 22). Microinsults contain 'communications that convey stereotypes, rudeness and insensitivity and that demean a person's sexual orientation' (Sue, 2010, p. 31). These are reflected in the following extracts from Dayal's (2021) study where a gay man is subjected to being given gifts meant for a woman at a party. And there are also references made at his workplace to him owning a certain type of car, which is often stereotyped as being a car owned by gay men:

> At a Christmas party, we had this secret Santa theme, where we drew people's names and we didn't know who was going to buy us a gift. And the gift I received turned out to be a pair of bras. Which was very embarrassing. Because we had to open our gifts in front of everybody, and they laughed.
>
> (Dayal, 2021, p. 87)

> The other thing was my manager made a comment saying [participant] is a [type of hybrid car] kind of a guy. I knew what he was trying to insinuate. Because it's mostly gay people that drive cars like that.
>
> (Dayal, 2021, p. 87)

These messages display unconscious or possibly unintentional ways in which people commit microaggressions against gay men. These messages may be seen as harmless by the perpetrators of microaggressions but they cause harm and unsettling feelings to those who are recipients of these microaggressions.

Another microinsult is found in the online article by Igual (2018), where he comments on a discriminatory scene in a South African movie relating to a South African Indian community. Within the movie, a dominant male character makes hand gestures relating to sex between two men. His gesture suggests:

> Heterosexual sex is compared to a train going into a tunnel while gay sex is depicted as unnatural and compared to a train approaching another train, which will lead to a crash.
>
> (Igual, 2018)

Sex between two men is therefore portrayed as unnatural and is poked fun at. This may be seen as an act of comic relief by the perpetrator; however, the person at the receiving end of the microaggression does not receive it in the same way.

After outlining the different types of microaggressions, what becomes evident is that only one of them, microassaults, is seen as an overt form of micro-aggression, whereas microinvalidations and microinsults are unconscious acts of discrimination that negatively impact the recipients of microaggressions. Unconscious acts are often difficult to identify and to comment on, as they are experienced very differently by different recipients based on their subjective backgrounds. Microaggressions lead to minority stress experiences: LGBTQ+ people experience debilitating responses to distressing events, which may cause them great discomfort in their interpersonal and work lives (Dayal, 2021).

Conclusion

This chapter provides greater insight into the lives of LGBTQ+ people of Indian descent who reside in South Africa. The discrimination experienced by these LGBTQ+ people is mostly covert in nature, and these acts of discrimination are known as microaggressions. Microaggression theory and the practical catego-risation of the types of microaggressions were carefully unpacked in this chapter. These microaggressions create unpleasant environments and interactions for LGBTQ+ people and measures need to be instated to protect LGBTQ+ people against these discriminatory acts. Though 'violence' is often seen as something physical and overt – and is both constitutionally illegal and actively persecuted in South Africa – microaggressions, as I've shown here, constitute forms of sexual

and gendered violence that have the potential to harm their recipients and should therefore not be overlooked in any academic, legal, therapeutic or cultural context.

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