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Sexual Orientation Microaggressions, Coping Mechanisms, and Psychological Well-Being of Lesbian Professionals in Heteronormative Workplaces

Princess Mae C Galang [1*], Lourdes P Jusay [2]
[1, 2] University of Perpetual Help System Laguna, Philippines

* Corresponding Author: **Princess Mae C Galang**

Article Info

Abstract
This study explores the lived experiences of lesbian professionals in heteronormative workplaces, examining the sexual orientation microaggressions (SOMs) they face, their coping mechanisms, and psychological well-being. A descriptive-correlational design was utilized involving 40 lesbian professionals in Laguna, Philippines. Data were gathered using a validated researcher-made questionnaire. The most frequent SOMs experienced included assumptions of heterosexuality, exoticization, and stereotyping. Respondents employed problem-focused and avoidance coping mechanisms most frequently. Psychological well-being was moderately impacted by the presence of micro aggressions, with coping mechanisms showing a significant positive correlation to well-being. The findings underscore the importance of inclusive workplace policies and psychological support systems.

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Introduction

The increasing visibility of lesbian professionals in today's workforce represents progress toward inclusivity; however, heteronormative frameworks still dominate many organizational cultures, often resulting in subtle forms of exclusion. These professional spaces typically normalize heterosexuality as the standard, which fosters implicit biases that give rise to sexual orientation microaggressions (SOMs). Defined as subtle, everyday interactions or behaviors that communicate negative or derogatory messages to individuals based on their non-heterosexual orientation, these microaggressions have been linked to detrimental effects on mental health (Salerno, Lea, & Alcántara, 2024) [13].

Even though public support for LGBTQ+ rights and legal protections has gained traction, workplace environments can still perpetuate covert discriminatory practices. Lesbian professionals often find themselves in positions where their identities are not overtly challenged but are instead subtly devalued or erased (Nadal *et al*., 2021) [10]. This highlights the ongoing presence of microaggressions despite institutional declarations of inclusivity.

Although considerable research has addressed the implications of microaggressions on LGBTQ+ individuals more broadly, there remains a relative lack of focused studies on lesbian professionals specifically an oversight that ignores the unique challenges faced by this subgroup. Lesbian women often contend with overlapping forms of discrimination—both gender-based and heteronormative—which situates them at a particularly disadvantaged intersection (Lloren & Parini, 2022) [7]. Prior research has frequently generalized LGBTQ+ experiences, overlooking how lesbian women's navigation of professional environments might differ significantly (Denton & Rostosky, 2020). Moreover, investigations into how such individuals cope with persistent microaggressions and the psychological consequences thereof have been sparse, especially in non-Western, conservative contexts. To address this gap, the present study explores the lived experiences of lesbian-identifying professionals working within predominantly heteronormative institutions. It examines three focal areas: the specific types of SOMs encountered, the coping strategies utilized in response, and the resulting effects on psychological well-being. By narrowing its focus to this specific group, the research aims to uncover how professional norms shape not only identity management but also broader mental health outcomes.

Prior findings reveal strong correlations between microaggressions and negative psychological impacts such as depressive symptoms, reduced self-esteem, and lower job satisfaction among LGBTQ+ employees (Wang *et al.*, 2021; Velez, Hope, Lewis, & Cox, 2020).

This research holds dual significance. Theoretically, it enhances minority stress literature by analyzing how lesbian professionals deal with chronic stressors in the workplace, including identity concealment and institutional exclusion (Meyer, 2021) [9]. Practically, it offers insights for organizational leadership and human resource professionals by identifying cultural and structural patterns that contribute to exclusion. These findings offer guidance on how to construct environments that go beyond symbolic gestures of inclusion, promoting genuine psychological safety (Kaplow *et al.*, 2023) [5].

Additionally, this study challenges the homogenization of LGBTQ+ experiences in existing coping literature. Lesbian professionals often adopt distinct coping mechanisms shaped by the dual challenges of heterosexism and patriarchal norms. For instance, while identity concealment may offer temporary relief from discrimination, it often leads to emotional fatigue and a loss of authenticity in professional settings (Yoshino & Smith, 2021) [17]. As such, the study seeks to answer the following key questions: What are the forms of SOMs experienced by lesbian professionals in heteronormative workspaces? What coping strategies are employed? And what are the psychological repercussions of these responses?

By centering on lesbian professionals, a demographic often rendered invisible within LGBTQ+ studies, this research aims to highlight complex dynamics involving power, marginalization, and resilience within the workplace. It also contributes to ongoing efforts toward inclusive workplace practices. As organizations increasingly prioritize intersectional approaches to diversity, equity, and inclusion, this study provides timely and relevant insights for the fields of social psychology, gender studies, and organizational development.

Methodology

- **Research Design:** This study employed a descriptive-correlational design to determine the relationships among SOMs, coping strategies, and psychological well-being (Flick, 2019) [3].
- **Participants:** Forty self-identified lesbian professionals aged 20 and above, working in public or private institutions in Laguna, were selected via purposive sampling.
- **Instrument:** A researcher-made questionnaire was used and validated by field experts. It included subscales for SOMs (8 categories), coping mechanisms (problem-focused, emotion-focused, avoidance), and psychological well-being. Cronbach's alpha values were 0.85, 0.72, and 0.71, respectively.
- **Data Collection and Ethics:** Respondents provided informed consent before completing the survey via Google Forms or face-to-face interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly observed.
- **Data Analysis:** Weighted means were used to assess SOMs and coping mechanisms. Pearson's r was applied to test relationships between variables.

Results and Discussions

Table 1: Mean Distribution of Sexual Orientation Microaggressions Faced by Respondents

Microaggression Type	Mean	Interpretation
Assumption of Heterosexuality	3.08	Highly Faced
Exoticization and Objectification	2.97	Highly Faced
Denial of Homophobia	2.37	Less Faced
Differential Treatment	2.91	Highly Faced
Pathologizing or Assuming Abnormality	2.85	Highly Faced
Stereotyping	2.88	Highly Faced
Second-Class Citizenship	2.76	Faced
Forced Disclosure of Sexual Orientation	2.69	Faced

The table highlights the high frequency of microaggressions experienced by respondents, particularly assumptions of heterosexuality, exoticization, and differential treatment. These results reinforce how heteronormativity persists through casual comments and behaviors, forcing lesbian professionals to navigate invalidation and marginalization regularly. The high means suggest these are deeply embedded in organizational cultures.

Table 2: Coping Mechanisms Employed by Respondents

Coping Strategy	Mean	Interpretation
Problem-Focused Coping	3.11	Highly Employed
Emotion-Focused Coping	2.41	Less Employed
Avoidance Coping	3.00	Highly Employed

Respondents primarily relied on active strategies such as confronting issues and avoiding harmful interactions. Problem-focused coping reflects agency, while avoidance may reflect emotional fatigue or fear of retaliation. Emotion-focused strategies were least used, likely due to a lack of safe emotional spaces. These findings point to the need for support systems where emotional coping is validated.

Table 3: Psychological Well-Being of Respondents

Psychological Aspect	Mean	Interpretation
Overall Well-Being	2.69	Moderate

Respondents generally reported moderate psychological well-being, with recurring stress and burnout. This suggests that while coping mechanisms provide some relief, the psychological toll of microaggressions remains. The average score underscores the emotional resilience of the respondents but also signals areas of concern that require organizational attention.

Table 4: Correlation Between SOMs and Coping Mechanisms

Variables	r	Significance
SOMs and Coping Mechanisms	0.63	Significant (p < .01)

A strong positive correlation shows that more frequent experiences of microaggressions are associated with increased use of coping strategies. This suggests that respondents are actively responding to workplace stressors, but also that systemic issues are persistent enough to require frequent coping.

Table 5: Correlation Between SOMs and Psychological Well-Being

Variables	r	Significance
SOMs and Psychological Well-Being	-0.47	Significant (p < .05)

This inverse relationship shows that as microaggressions increase, psychological well-being decreases. The data reveal that SOMs are harmful to emotional health and highlight the need for preventive measures. It reinforces the literature on minority stress and workplace discrimination.

Table 6: Correlation Between Coping Mechanisms and Psychological Well-Being

Variables	r	Significance
Coping Mechanisms and Psychological Well-Being	0.58	Significant ($p< .01$)

There is a significant positive relationship between coping and psychological well-being. This finding supports the idea that while microaggressions are harmful, coping mechanisms—especially proactive ones—can buffer their psychological impact. It suggests that strengthening individual coping skills can improve mental health outcomes.

Conclusion
The findings of this study bring to light the pervasive nature of sexual orientation microaggressions that lesbian professionals encounter in heteronormative workplaces. These microaggressions, ranging from assumptions of heterosexuality to forced disclosure and second-class treatment, reveal a systemic issue of implicit bias and exclusionary practices. The consistent experience of such microaggressions not only undermines the professional identity of lesbian individuals but also imposes a chronic psychological burden that affects their overall well-being. While coping mechanisms such as problem-focused and avoidance strategies provide some relief, their frequent use signifies a survival-based response to a persistently hostile or invalidating work environment. The moderate levels of psychological well-being reported by respondents reflect this dual experience of resilience and strain. Furthermore, the significant correlations between SOMs, coping mechanisms, and psychological well-being affirm the interplay between external stressors and internal regulation strategies. This underscores the urgent need for structural interventions and culturally responsive mental health services that affirm the identities and lived experiences of lesbian professionals. By integrating inclusive policies, supportive leadership, and psychological safety into workplace frameworks, institutions can foster environments where lesbian professionals not only survive but thrive.

Recommendations
To ensure lasting change, organizations must prioritize the implementation of LGBTQIA+-inclusive workplace policies and establish anti-discrimination protocols that directly address sexual orientation microaggressions. Diversity and sensitivity training should be conducted regularly, focusing on recognizing and eliminating microaggressive behaviors. Additionally, companies should invest in the development of safe emotional spaces and peer support systems tailored for lesbian professionals to encourage open dialogue and mutual support. Leadership must be proactive and participatory in creating inclusive spaces, allowing lesbian employees to be part of decision-making processes that shape their work environments. Finally, further research—especially longitudinal and qualitative studies—should be encouraged to examine the evolving experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals in professional settings and evaluate the long-term effectiveness of coping strategies and institutional reforms on mental health outcomes.

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