LGBT Microaggressions in Counselor Education Programs

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LGBT MICROAGGRESSIONS IN COUNSELOR EDUCATION PROGRAMS

by

Sarah Bryan

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people report they experience microaggressions, small daily insults and indignities that affect their well-being. For LGBT students, microaggressions have been shown to affect well-being and academic engagement. In order to serve LGBT students and model affirming behaviors, counselor educators must be able to recognize and address LGBT microaggressions when they occur; however, there is currently a paucity of research on LGBT microaggressions in counselor education programs. Most studies on attitudes toward LGBT people in such programs neglect the experiences of LGBT students. Moreover, the few existing studies of the experiences of LGBT people in counseling programs do not examine microaggression experiences specifically.

This qualitative study examined the microaggression experiences of 12 LGBT students in counselor education programs. Each participant was interviewed about their experiences of both LGBT and other types of microaggressions (e.g., racial microaggressions) to provide an intersectional exploration of these experiences. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to examine recall of how participants experienced microaggressions in the moment, and how they made meaning of their microaggression experiences. Themes were identified for each participant to allow examination of differences across cases, and common themes were identified among participants.
Analysis of the data yielded five common themes: (1) there are multiple microaggression experiences, (2) microaggressions prompt evaluation of perpetrators and relationships, (3) microaggression experiences figure into overall evaluation of the program and the profession, (4) costs and benefits are weighed in determining response, and (5) microaggressions have a long-term impact. The data extends previous work on LGBT microaggressions by presenting a more detailed picture of variations of “in the moment” experiences of these events. It suggests contextual factors may influence both immediate and long-term reactions to microaggressions, allowing counselor educators to prepare LGBT students for these experiences and assist them through such experiences. It also provides a summary of microaggressions commonly experienced by LGBT students in counselor education programs, which may enable counselor educators to anticipate and avoid specific microaggressions. Implications for counselor education practice and research are discussed.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank my 12 participants. While I conducted the interviews, analyzed transcripts, and described what was said, the ideas presented here come from the experiences these participants shared. Participants, I am grateful for your willingness to share your stories. I learned a great deal from you, and I believe your stories will influence the conversation about how to make counselor education programs more welcoming for all students.

To Dr. Mary L. Anderson, my dissertation chair: I am grateful for your excellent feedback and patient assistance through the writing and editing process. Your kind encouragement kept me going through long days when completing this project seemed like a distant dream. To Dr. Glinda Rawls, my second committee member: You always offered conceptual comments and ideas that prompted me to think a little more deeply about microaggression theory and how to apply it in this research. To Dr. Patricia Reeves, my third committee member: Your expertise in qualitative research methodology was invaluable to this process. You were incredibly generous with your time and feedback.

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Sarah Bryan
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

During the past several years, a significant shift has taken place towards greater public acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, along with increased legal recognition of LGBT rights. Between 1978 and 2010, the percentage of Americans who believe same-sex relationships are wrong dropped from 62% to 43% (Montopoli, 2010). More LGBT people are coming out to family and friends, and increased media attention to LGBT issues and celebrities has made this community much more visible (Montopoli, 2010). In 2010, the repeal of Department of Defense Directive 1304.26, colloquially known as “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,” allowed lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people the right to serve openly in the military without legal recrimination (Don’t Ask Don’t Tell Repeal Act of 2010). In 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court held that marriage to a partner of one’s choice is a right protected by the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution; therefore same-sex marriages must be recognized by all states (Obergefell v. Hodges, 2015). This decision effectively legalized same-sex marriage throughout the United States.

A similar shift has taken place within the counseling profession, as attention to LGBT concerns has become more apparent within the profession’s ethical standards and training requirements. Recent legal cases (e.g., Ward vs. Wilbanks, 2010) have required the profession to clarify its position regarding equal treatment of LGBT clients (Herlihy, Hermann, & Greden, 2014;
Hermann & Herlihy, 2006). The ACA Code of Ethics was recently updated to forbid practitioners and students from referring clients when their religious or cultural beliefs conflict with the client’s (ACA, 2015), a stipulation that addressed the actions of counselors who refused to treat LGBT clients. The profession has also adopted competencies for working with LGB and transgender clients (ALGBTIC, 2009; Logan & Barret, 2006).

At the same time, current political events make it clear that prejudice and discrimination toward LGBT people persists. In February of 2017, the current U.S. president, Donald Trump, withdrew the federal order issued by former president, Barack Obama, which directed schools receiving federal funding to allow transgender students to use the bathroom of their choice (deVogue, Mallonee, & Grinberg, 2017). A similar executive order rescinded the requirement that federal contractors prove they are in compliance with the non-discrimination policies Obama set in place (which included LGBT protections), removing the enforcement mechanism for these policies (Villareal, 2017). Political developments also confirm biases against LGBT clients in the counseling profession persist. Last year, the Tennessee Senate passed Bill 1556, making it legal for counselors and therapists to refuse to serve LGBT clients (Almasy, 2016). LGBT individuals continue to face discrimination. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (2011) reported, for example, that of the 6,450 transgender individuals they surveyed, 90% experienced harassment or mistreatment at work, 55% lost a job due to bias, 51% had experienced harassment in K-12 education, 61% had experienced physical assault, and 64% had experienced sexual assault. The consequences of such discrimination are dire; 41% of participants shared that they had attempted suicide. This survey provides a snapshot of the dramatic impact of discrimination, and the importance of combatting social prejudice against LGBT individuals.
Despite the current political climate, increasing affirmation of LGBT identities in society
and in the profession have made it less acceptable for counseling professionals to overtly express
sexual prejudice, defined as negative attitudes based on sexual orientation (Dermer, Smith, &
Barto, 2010, p. 328), and cissexist prejudice, defined as negative attitudes based on gender
identity (Bauer & Hammond, 2015). These changes, however, do not guarantee such prejudice
will be eliminated in the counseling profession. Professional non-discrimination policies may
merely ensure such prejudice is expressed in covert ways more difficult to recognize and
address, such as through microaggressions.

Nadal (2008) defined microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal,
behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate
hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward members of oppressed groups” (p. 23).
Research has demonstrated LGBT people frequently experience such indignities (Nadal,
Davidoff, Davis, & Wong, 2014; Nadal, Skolnik, & Wong, 2012; Nadal et al., 2011; Platt &
Lenzen, 2013). Counseling professionals may also perpetrate microaggressions against LGBT
people. Shelton and Delgado-Romero (2011) conducted a qualitative study of LGBT clients’
experience in counseling, and found these clients report they experience bias from their
counselors, such as counselors assuming all problems are due to their clients’ sexual orientation
heterosexism in the counseling and counseling psychology professions. While they did not
specifically examine microaggressions, many of the experiences described by LGBT students
and faculty in their study fit the description of microaggressions, such as hearing LGBT people
characterized as sinful, or being shunned by others when their LGBT identity was known.
Microaggressions against LGBT people have negatively affected their well-being and caused psychological distress (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011) and emotional reactions ranging from anger to sadness to shame to hopelessness (Nadal et al., 2011; Nadal et al., 2014). Experiencing microaggressions also requires LGBT people to do a great deal of cognitive processing and to engage in decision-making about how to respond (Nadal et al., 2012; Nadal et al., 2014). The effort involved in responding to these experiences repeatedly may result in psychological and even physical exhaustion (Sue et al., 2007). According to Helms, Nicolas, and Green (2010), people who repeatedly experience microaggressions may develop trauma symptoms, as they are reminded of their vulnerability in a society where they are faced with the constant possibility of violence.

The ACA Code of Ethics (ACA, 2014, Standard C.5) prohibits counseling professionals from engaging in discrimination of any kind, with discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation being specifically mentioned. The ACA Code of Ethics also requires counselors to advocate for clients against barriers to their growth and development (ACA, 2014, Standard A.7.a). Moreover, counselors are required to advocate for clients who experience individual or systemic barriers to their well-being (ACA, 2014, Standard A.7.a). In order to fulfill these ethical obligations, counseling professionals must learn to understand and empathize with LGBT people’s experiences with microaggressions, to advocate against microaggressions, and to examine themselves to avoid perpetrating such microaggressions.

Counselor education is an important arena in which to address LGBT microaggressions. Encountering microaggressions in their educational or work environment damages the well-being of LGBT students, making it imperative for faculty and administrators to recognize and address microaggressions (Russell & Horne, 2009). While there is a lack of research exploring
how LGBT students respond to microaggressions in counselor education programs, existing research suggests those who experience microaggressions in their programs may feel marginalized or alienated, especially if faculty do not effectively address the issue (Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012). This feeling of being marginalized or alienated may lead to feeling isolated and unsafe in their programs, which may cause withdrawal from others. It may also lead to feeling unsafe in forming collegial or mentoring relationships with other students or faculty. These factors, in turn, may limit access to available resources and academic opportunities, thus limiting LGBT students and faculty’s professional and personal growth throughout their programs. Students or faculty may even disengage from their programs entirely if microaggressions are pronounced or frequent. Alternatively, students and faculty may confront the microaggressions; if microaggressions are frequent, the effort of confrontation may leave them feeling exhausted (Nadal et al., 2012; Nadal et al., 2014; Sue et al., 2007). Many LGBT students might also experience prejudice and discrimination outside of their programs. This is especially the case for those who belong to more than one oppressed group (e.g., LGBT people of color, LGBT people with disabilities) (Balsam et al., 2011).

Microaggressions in counseling and psychology programs may be experienced as especially harmful or demoralizing, since these professions are ostensibly committed to promoting human well-being (Constantine, 2007). LGBT students may bring deeply held values and hopes for human equality and justice to their work. Encountering discrimination within their program may cause profound discouragement, even despair about the possibility of achieving equality in general. Without adequate knowledge of LGBT microaggressions, faculty may fail to recognize when they occur (McCabe, Dragowski, & Rubinson, 2013). They may also perpetrate microaggressions themselves. Some faculty may do so unintentionally, through a lack of
awareness of LGBT experiences. Others may do so intentionally, and their actions may go unrecognized and uncorrected. Lack of faculty response to microaggressions may leave LGBT students feeling vulnerable, sending the message that their concerns and experiences are unimportant. Lack of attention to these issues may leave counseling students ill equipped to work with LGBT clients. Previous research demonstrates that counselors do perpetrate microaggressions against LGBT clients (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011). When microaggressions are unrecognized or ignored, faculty may give students tacit approval to behave in similar ways in future counseling relationships. Faculty may even teach students microaggressive behaviors. Conversely, counselor educators may create safe spaces for LGBT students and model effective advocacy by addressing microaggressions; however, little research currently describes LGBT student experiences of microaggressions in their programs. Research into LGBT microaggressions in counselor education is necessary to enable counselor education programs to recognize and address them when they occur.

Statement of the Problem

There is very little research on LGBT student experiences in counselor education programs. Several studies have explored counselors’ and counselor education students’ attitudes toward LGB people; however, these studies tend to rely on self-report instruments, which measure consciously held attitudes toward LGB people. There is a lack of research on counselor trainees’ attitudes toward transgender people. Results of these studies show that although counseling professionals overall may report somewhat positive attitudes toward LGB individuals (e.g., Barrett et al., 2002; Liddle, 1995; Mohr et al., 2001; Newman et al., 2002; Rainey et al., 2007; Satcher et al., 2007), there is a good deal of variation in attitudes between individuals, and even those with positive attitudes may demonstrate biased behavior (Miller et al., 2007; Rudolph,
These studies may underestimate counselor bias against LGBT people, as responses on self-report instruments may be influenced by social desirability, and most studies do not adjust for this factor. Given the counseling profession’s stated commitment to equal treatment of LGB individuals, students may minimize their own biases to protect themselves from professional censure. Self-report instruments that measure consciously held beliefs might also fail to capture implicit bias. In addition, most existing studies focus on counselor attitudes toward LGB people; there is very little research that explores counselor attitudes toward transgender people.

Most studies on counselor attitudes toward LGBT people in counselor education programs neglect to examine the experiences and perceptions of LGBT counselors and counselor trainees within the profession. Existing research is primarily quantitative and measures attitudes of all counselors toward LGBT people. Some samples included LGBT participants, but their experiences and attitudes were not explored separately. In order to gain a complete picture of how sexual prejudice and cissexism affect counselor education programs, programs must solicit the input of their LGBT students.

This author could identify only three studies that explore LGBT students’ experiences in counselor education programs. Two of these studies do not investigate microaggressions specifically, but suggest LGBT students experience microaggressions in their programs. The third attempted to ascertain the presence of LGBT microaggressions in counselor education programs, but did not look at specific types of microaggressions are students’ subjective experiences of them.

Croteau et al. (2005) offered a collective of narratives from 18 LGBT counselors and counseling psychologists, including graduate students, program faculty, and counseling professionals practicing in the field. They identified 10 thematic types of overt homonegativity...
that were common to these narratives. Authors of the narratives reported hearing homophobic jokes and name-calling, and hearing LGB people labeled as deviant and sinful. They reported having homophobic or biphobic stereotypes applied to themselves and others. They observed that those around them reacted to LGB people and issues by becoming uncomfortable or ostracizing them, or by ridiculing or criticizing LGB-affirmative ideas. Many reported they were actively discouraged from engaging in LGB-related professional activities. Authors reported others sometimes questioned their professional competence because they were LGB, and some were pressured to alter their appearance or behavior to de-emphasize their sexual identity. Some were even denied employment, or were targets of vandalism. In addition to these overt experiences, Croteau et al. (2005) observed that participants commonly experienced “covert and elusive homonegativity and heterosexism” (p. 192) that was often ambiguous and seemingly unintentional or even well intentioned (e.g., expressing concern that a student’s interest in doing LGB-related research would negatively affect his or her career). In addition, participants often experienced silence about LGB issues from their programs.

Most of the experiences recounted in these narratives are microaggressions; however, Croteau et al. (2005) did not specifically ask participants to describe microaggressive experiences, and their analysis did not center on training experiences. Their work, therefore, may not fully describe microaggressions that occurred in these settings. Asking participants to describe small daily insults and slights may generate a more detailed and thorough understanding of microaggressions than asking them to describe their experiences broadly. In addition, this collection consisted of narratives from both counselors and counseling psychologists. Research focusing on counselor education programs specifically could serve to illuminate issues that are most salient to the counseling profession.
The second study exploring LGBT student and faculty experiences in counselor education programs addressed educational contexts more specifically. Lark and Croteau (1998) interviewed 14 LGB doctoral counseling psychology students about their experiences with mentoring relationships in their programs. While the study did not focus on eliciting participants’ negative experiences in these relationships, participants described both faculty behaviors (e.g., ignoring students’ LGB identities) and program-level practices (e.g., discouraging students from doing LGBT-related research) that are microaggressive in nature. Since the study did not specifically examine microaggressions, additional research might generate more comprehensive descriptions of these experiences. In addition, the study did not explore mentoring relationships in counselor education programs, so results may not be applicable to counselor education contexts.

The third study was conducted quite recently. Pollock and Meek (2016) conducted a short survey that asked 43 lesbian and gay students in counselor education programs to indicate whether they had ever experienced microaggressions or heterosexist comments (these categories were not clearly distinguished from each other). Several participants agreed that they experienced heterosexist comments from other students (50%) and faculty members (30%). Several also agreed that they had experienced microaggressions from other students (46%) and faculty (25%). This study provides evidence that lesbian and gay students do experience microaggressions in their programs. However, it provides no data about how LG students react to these experiences. It also looked only at lesbian and gay students, so the experiences of bisexual and transgender participants were not explored.

In addition, there is a lack of research that looks at LGBT counselor education students’ microaggression experiences from an intersectional lens (i.e. looking at how more than one
identity shapes experience). The Croteau et al. (2005) work included narratives of LGBT students and faculty with a broad range of other identities. Several of their participants experienced marginalization based on more than one aspect of their identity (e.g. sexual orientation and race). However, as this work did not explore microaggressions specifically, it does not provide a complete picture of how microaggression experiences may be shaped by multiple identities.

While previous studies provided quantitative findings regarding counselor education students’ attitudes toward LGB people and a beginning exploration of LGBT experiences in counselor education programs, there is a dearth of research that specifically examines LGBT microaggressions in counselor education programs. Without such research, counselor educators may lack the knowledge to address microaggressions. It is notable that only three studies (Croteau et al., 2005; Lark et al. 1998; Pollock et al., 2016) from the last 30 years describe these experiences, and they were separated by years of silence. This neglect suggests the impact of heterosexist and cissexist experiences on LGBT students has been overlooked. This absence may reflect the influence of a societal belief that members of the LGBT community should remain invisible. Indeed, LGB counselors and counseling psychologists report being pressured to stay in the closet or appear less gay, and are discouraged from doing LGB-related research (Croteau et al., 2005).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the current study was to explore LGBT students’ experiences of microaggressions in counselor education programs. A qualitative, phenomenological study design was used to explore participants’ experiences of microaggressions. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is an approach to qualitative research that focuses on how
people experience phenomena in the moment, and how they make meaning of their experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This approach allowed the author to focus both on themes among participants and on individual participants’ meaning-making simultaneously (Smith et al., 2009). LGBT students and recent graduates were interviewed to generate an in-depth description of their experiences with microaggressions within their programs. Qualitative, phenomenological research methodology allows the researcher to capture the nuances of participants’ experiences more accurately and more sensitively than quantitative research (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2014). Croteau (2008) argued research that presents the lived experience of oppression is important for helping researchers and clinicians develop empathy with LGBT people, and is necessary for developing the depth of understanding necessary to adequately address heterosexism in the counseling professions. The current research gives counselor educators the opportunity to experience their programs through the eyes of those affected by heterosexism and transsexism.

Several studies have explored the subtle forms of discrimination that LGBT people experience. Some researchers have interviewed members of the LGBT population to identify thematic microaggressive experiences (Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014; Nadal et al., 2011; Nadal et al., 2012; Nadal et al., 2014; Platt & Lenzen, 2013). Others have used existing taxonomies and expert opinion to form instruments for measuring microaggressions among the LGB population as a whole (Wright & Wegner, 2012), LGB people of color (Balsam et al., 2011), and LGB students on college campuses (Woodford, Chonody, Kulick, Brennan, & Renn, 2015). A few have used such instruments to examine the psychological effects of microaggression experiences (e.g., Hong, Woodford, Long, & Renn, 2016; Woodford, Kulick, Sinco, & Hong, 2014).
Most of these studies look at LGBT microaggressions in general, and not at experiences in a specific context, although some studies use convenience samples of undergraduate college students and therefore may most accurately describe college contexts. While some microaggressions may be similar across contexts, others may be specific to the context in which they occur. For example, Shelton and Delgado-Romero (2011) investigated microaggressions LGB clients experienced in therapy. While many of these microaggressions fit into the broad general categories described by researchers elsewhere, others were quite specific to the therapy context. Participants reported, for example, that their counselors assumed LGBTQ people should be in therapy, and even pressured clients to remain in therapy after presenting issues had been resolved. Counselors also sometimes assumed all clients’ presenting issues were related to their sexual orientation.

Since microaggressions are shaped by the context in which they occur, LGBT students in counselor education programs may experience microaggressions that are particular to these programs. The present study addresses the need for current research that describes LGBT microaggressions in the specific context of counselor education programs. The study examines LGBT microaggressions from an intersectional lens, as microaggression experiences vary depending on the combination of social group identities held by the individual (e.g., Balsam et al., 2011). Research suggests that while LGBT people may experience microaggressions that are common to all, some subgroups of the LGBT community may experience microaggressions that encompass more than one aspect of their identity (Balsam et al., 2011; Nadal et al., 2012; Nadal et al., 2015). This study explores how participants perceive their microaggression experiences in the context of all their identities (e.g., race, gender identity, sexual identity, age, and ability).
This research may assist counselor educators in recognizing and addressing microaggressions when they occur. It may also aid them in creating a deliberately welcoming and affirming program climate. Description of LGBT microaggressions may also influence the content of training, suggesting common beliefs or behaviors that may be addressed preemptively.

**Research Questions**

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are LGBT counselor education students’ lived experiences of LGBT microaggressions?

2. What are LGBT counselor education students’ lived experiences of microaggressions around any other identity?

3. How do participants make meaning of microaggression experiences?

4. How do participants make meaning of their microaggression experiences in the context of their multiple identities?
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides a review of the literature related to this dissertation. It begins with a brief discussion of terms necessary to understanding this research. It then explores the development of microaggression theory, and discusses research and conceptual literature concerning microaggressions in general and LGBT peoples’ experiences of microaggressions specifically. It also presents research on LGBT students’ experiences of prejudice on college campuses and how their experiences affect their well-being and academic performance. In order to explore the environments LGBT students may encounter in counselor education programs, the chapter reviews previous research about counselor trainees’ and counseling professionals’ attitudes toward LGBT people, as well as their competencies to work with LGBT clients. It then concludes with a discussion of existing literature on LGBT students in counselor education and the need for further research on their experiences, specifically their experiences of microaggressions.

Definition of Terms

The following paragraphs provide definitions of terms central to the literature reviewed in this study. These terms include: cisgender, cissexism, cissexist prejudice, heteronormativity, heterosexism, intersectional microaggressions, intersectionality, microaggressions, non-binary, queer, sexual prejudice, and transgender. The term microaggressions will be discussed in more detail in the next section.
Cisgender

*Cisgender* is a term used to describe persons whose gender identity coincides with the gender designation they were given by others birth, usually based on their biological sex (Chang & Chung, 2015, p. 217). The term describes both identification (i.e., how individuals describes their gender) and conformity with socially acceptable norms of behavior (e.g., dressing or speaking in a way that is considered appropriate for one’s gender).

Cissexism

Bauer et al. (2015) defined *cissexism* as “The set of beliefs and resulting actions that privilege, validate, and essentialize cis identities to the exclusion of trans identities; cissexism formulates trans identities and trans bodies as less real, valid, and desirable than cis identities or bodies” (p. 2). By this definition, cissexism encompasses both anti-transgender attitudes, as well as systemic policies and practices that disenfranchise transgender individuals. In order to distinguish between individual-level and system-level oppression in this dissertation, the term cissexism is used to describe system-level oppression; that is, policies and practices that systematically disenfranchise, disempower, or discriminate against those who hold transgender identities.

Cissexist Prejudice

The term *cissexist prejudice* is used in this research to denote anti-transgender attitudes to maintain consistency with the distinction between individual-level and system-level bias proposed by Dermer et al. (2010). For the purposes of the current research, cissexist prejudice describes any individual-level bias against transgender people, whether consciously or unconsciously held.
**Heteronormativity**

*Heteronormativity* is a term used to describe a socially sanctioned and privileged notion of family that defines the normal family as heterosexual, headed by a married (i.e., monogamous, cisgender) couple, White, and middle class (McNeill, 2013). It describes the way in which the dominant cultural ideal of heterosexuality encompasses more than sexual orientation alone, but also race, class, and other characteristics.

**Heterosexism**

Dermer et al. (2010) defined *heterosexism* as “A systematic process of privilege toward heterosexuality relative to homosexuality based on the notion that heterosexuality is normal and ideal” (p. 327). Heterosexism encompasses policies and practices of organizations or institutions that may systematically disenfranchise, disempower, or discriminate against persons whose sexual identity is not heterosexual. Heterosexism is distinct from sexual prejudice in that it describes social/cultural ideologies and practices, rather than individual-level prejudice (Dermer et al., 2010).

**Intersectional Microaggressions**

*Intersectional microaggressions* refer to slights or insults that encompass more than one aspect of a person’s identity (e.g., race and sexual orientation). Nadal et al. (2015) defined intersectional microaggressions as “microaggressions that occur due to multiple identities” (p. 148); that is, microaggressions that can be attributed to more than one type of bias or oppression. These authors provide several examples of types of microaggressions that are specific to individuals who hold more than one oppressed identity (e.g., exoticization of women of color).
Intersectionality

*Intersectionality* is a term used to describe the interaction of different identities and systems of oppression and privilege in shaping individuals’ lived realities. The term was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to describe the way in which race and gender interact in the lives of Black women. Crenshaw (1989) argued that the experiences of Black women could not be adequately understood by examining their experiences of racism and sexism separately. The term has since been applied more broadly. Collins (2015), for example, defined intersectionality as “the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena” (p. 1).

Microaggressions

Nadal et al. (2015) defined *microaggressions* as “Brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward members of oppressed groups” (p. 23). This term is explored in more detail throughout the literature review.

Non-binary

*Non-binary* is a term used to describe gender identities that do not conform to a binary, male/female system of gender (Richards, Bouman, Seal, Barker, Nieder, & T’Sjoen, 2016). The term non-binary encompasses a broad range of gender identities. Some people with non-binary identities may identify as agender or gender neutral (i.e., having no gender). Others may identify as both male and female, while others may describe their gender as fluid or flexible. Still others may question the notion of gender completely and may identify as genderqueer (Richards et al.,
People with non-binary identities are often described by the term transgender as well (Nadal et al., 2012).

**Queer**

The term *queer* was originally used in a derogatory way, as a slur against LGBT people (Galinsky et al., 2013). More recently, some LGBT people have reclaimed the term as an identity label to express a sense of group pride and power (Galinsky et al., 2013). There is, in fact, a good deal of variation in how this word is used and defined. The term has been used to denote the entire LGBT community (e.g., Clawson, 2014), or to describe an identity category that is separate and distinct from the terms lesbian, gay, or bisexual (e.g., McNair et al., 2016). For some, the term queer carries connotations derived from queer theory, a body of work that seeks to question and problematize the boundaries of all identity categories, including those of gender, sexual orientation, race, etc. (Bartle, 2015; Shugar, 1999; Slagle, 2003). For some individuals, the terms gay, lesbian, and bisexual do not adequately describe their sexual identity, as they assume a binary gender construction (i.e., that people are attracted to one or both of only two genders). Some people, therefore, use the term queer to describe a sexual identity that is not expressed within the gender binary. At other times, people may claim the term queer to express an even broader sense of identity fluidity or openness that may encompass not just sexual orientation and/or gender identity, but also how they construct their families and their lives in non-heteronormative ways (e.g., Bartle, 2015; Stone, 2013).

**Sexual Prejudice**

Dermer et al. (2010) defined *sexual prejudice* as “Negative attitudes based on sexual orientation” (p. 328). Sexual prejudice refers to individual-level bias against non-heterosexual people, and is distinct from heterosexism (i.e., social/cultural-level privileging of
heterosexuality) (Dermer et al., 2010). In this research, the term sexual prejudice is used to refer to any prejudice against non-heterosexual people, consciously or unconsciously held.

**Transgender**

*Transgender* is “An umbrella term that can be used to refer to anyone for whom the sex she or he was assigned at birth is an incomplete or incorrect description for herself or himself” (Nadal et al., 2012, p. 55). The term encompasses both binary and non-binary gender identities.

**Microaggressions**

**Origin and Theory Development**

Early microaggressions literature was solely concerned with racial microaggressions. Psychiatrist Chester Pierce (1978) first coined the term *microaggressions* to describe the type of racism demonstrated in television commercials at that time. Microaggressions, also described as *contemporary racism, modern racism, symbolic racism, or aversive racism*, were explored occasionally during the subsequent decades, but did not receive significant attention in professional literature until 2007 when Dr. Derald Wing Sue of Teachers College, Columbia University adopted the term and with a team of colleagues began to describe this concept in more detail to explain the ways White therapists might manifest subtle racism in therapy (Nadal, 2013; Sue et al., 2007).

Sue et al. (2007) defined *racial microaggressions* as “brief and commonplace daily behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271).

According to Sue and his colleagues (2007), expression of racial prejudice evolved in the United States from more blatant forms to less overt, more indirect forms as direct expression of racism became less socially acceptable. They described these less overt, more indirect forms of racism
as three broad types of subtle discrimination frequently experienced by people of color: microinsults, microinvalidations, and microassaults. Sue and Capodilupo (2008) and Sue (2010) later extended this discussion to articulate how members of other groups (e.g., women, LGBT people) might experience these three types of microaggressions. The following discussion of these types reflects this broader conceptualization of microaggressions.

*Microinsults* are described by Sue (2010) as “communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage” (p. 29). Common microinsults involve stereotyping another group or implying that all members of a group are similar (e.g., implying all Asian Americans are good at math or science). They may also convey the sense that members of another group are inferior or do not deserve equal treatment (e.g., ignoring a work colleague with a disability). Microinsults are often unconscious on the part of the perpetrator; they may not be expressed with the intent to harm or degrade members of another group.

*Microinvalidations* are “communications [that] exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality” of members of an oppressed group (Sue, 2010). Microinvalidations may at times be unconscious, but are nevertheless particularly harmful because they represent the power of privileged groups to define reality for others (Sue, 2010). Microinvalidations often take the form of denying that another group exists or that they can accurately describe their own identities or experiences. An example of this might be when heterosexual people express the belief that people choose to be gay, denying that LGB people have the ability to accurately understand and communicate who they are. Sue (2010) offered the example of messages that imply Asian Americans are perpetual foreigners, denying many Asian Americans’ perceptions of their identities. In both cases, it is implied that group membership and identities may be imposed from outside, as what matters is the perception of the privileged
group. Microinvalidations may also involve denial of discrimination toward other groups. This may be expressed as a universal belief that discrimination toward a particular group does not exist or is not a frequent occurrence, such as expressing a belief that racism does not play a significant role in society anymore (Sue, 2010). It may also be expressed as denial of personal bias, for example, saying one is not racist because one has Black friends (Sue, 2010).

*Microassaults* are different than microinsults and microinvalidations in that they are usually intentional and meant to demean or cause harm to members of another group (Sue, 2010). Microassaults may include verbal attacks such as the use of slurs (e.g., “fag”) or name-calling (Sue, 2010). They may also take symbolic forms (e.g., displaying a swastika or a Confederate flag) (Sue, 2010). Essentially, the category of microassaults includes any message that is explicitly designed to perpetuate hostility and discrimination towards another group (e.g., teaching that LGBT people are immoral or sinful or warning one’s children against marrying members of other racial groups) (Sue, 2010). Sue (2010) remarked that this type of microaggression is similar to what he calls “old fashioned racism,” but that it differs from traditional expression of racism in that microassaults are usually expressed in ways that protect the perpetrator from repercussions (Sue, 2010). Microassaults may be expressed indirectly or under conditions of anonymity (Sue, 2010). They are more likely to be expressed in situations wherein the perpetrator believes those around them agree or are unlikely to confront them, or when the perpetrator is under stress or loses control in some way (Sue, 2010).

Sue and colleagues (2007) identified nine microaggression themes commonly experienced by people of color. Sue and Capodilupo (2008) and Sue (2010) extended and refined this list to include gender and sexual orientation microaggression themes. The resulting list of twelve microaggressions included both microaggressions that are particular to specific groups and those
that pertain to more than one group. Sue (2010) describes these microaggressions in detail. The first, Alien in One’s Own Land, occurs when perpetrators assume that Asian Americans or Latinx Americans are foreign, not native to or belonging in the U.S. The second, Ascription of Intelligence, occurs when perpetrators make assumptions about the intelligence of an individual based on their race or gender. The third, Color Blindness, occurs when White people deny the existence of racism or refuse to talk about race. The fourth, Criminality/Assumption of Criminal Status, occurs when perpetrators assume that people of color in general are dangerous or criminal. The fifth, Use of Sexist/Heterosexist Language, refers to terms that demean women or LGBT people—this microaggression will be discussed in greater detail in the next section. The sixth, Denial of Individual Racism/Sexism/Heterosexism, describes statements in which a perpetrator refuses to acknowledge that they possess or evince prejudices toward members of other groups. The seventh, Myth of Meritocracy, describes the assumption that those who succeed do so purely on the basis of individual effort or merit, and that race, gender, or other identities play no part in promoting or hindering that success. The eight, Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles, described communications that assume that non-dominant cultures are inferior to dominant cultures. The ninth, Second-Class Citizen, describes microaggressions that occur when a member of a marginalized group is given fewer privileges or advantages on the basis of their identity. The tenth, Traditional Gender Role Prejudicing and Stereotyping, conveys assumptions about ideal roles and ways of being for women and men. The eleventh, Sexual Objectification, described the way in which women are sometimes treated as objects of sexual desire for men. The twelfth, Assumption of Abnormality, concerns LGB identity specifically, and describes microaggressions that convey that being LGB is abnormal. This microaggressions will also be discussed further below. These themes illustrate how the
three broad types of microaggressions may be expressed. Microaggressions may be conveyed through verbal, nonverbal (e.g., ignoring), or environmental messages (e.g., displaying racialized sports team mascots) (Sue, 2010).

Sue (2010) suggested that members of oppressed groups often confront dilemmas because of the subtle, sometimes ambiguous nature of microaggressions. Sue et al. (2007), for example, described a “clash of racial realities” that occurs when the racial worldviews of White people and people of color come into conflict (p. 277). The authors explained that while White people believe racism is no longer a significant force and see their own behavior as unbiased, people of color believe White people frequently express racial bias toward them. As a result, when people of color experience small, daily, ambiguous acts of bias, they are faced with the dilemma of proving the bias even occurred (Sue et al., 2007). The subtle and sometimes unintentional nature of the bias makes this a difficult task. People of color who confront these situations may find their experience invalidated or denied, or be accused of misinterpreting or overreacting (Sue et al., 2007). These accusations leave the person of color with the task of determining for themselves whether bias was involved, and of deciding whether and how to respond, which involves substantial cognitive and emotional labor (Sue et al., 2007). Sue (2010) described how similar dilemmas arise for members of other groups (e.g., women, LGBT people) when bias is denied or rationalized.

Using data from two research studies (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Riversa, 2009), Sue (2010) developed a Microaggression Process Model that described five phases of response and reaction to racial microaggression experiences. Phase One is the experience of the event itself. Phase Two involves perception, as the person forms a belief about whether the incident expressed some form of bias from the perpetrator. This phase
may involve intense questioning and re-examination of the incident to determine if bias was involved. Phrase Three describes the person’s cognitive, behavioral, and emotional reactions to the incident. Sue (2010) described thematic responses to the event in the two samples studied. Participants in these studies responded by developing healthy paranoia, interpreting the event from a position of guardedness, and filtering it through past experiences of discrimination.

According to Sue (2010), the thematic responses observed in his samples seemed to help participants minimize the energy they spent on questioning the nature of the event and allowed them to avoid simply accepting the perpetrator’s explanation of the incident as fact. Participants in these studies also responded by doing a sanity check, describing their experiences to other members of their group to confirm their perceptions of the situation. Participants responded by affirming and validating themselves and their own perceptions, rather than allowing themselves to be blamed for the incident. They also at times responded by trying to rescue the offenders, trying to protect the offenders from discomfort, or expressing understanding for the offender’s actions.

Phase Four of Sue’s (2010) Microaggression Process Model involves interpretation and meaning, making sense of the message communicated by the microaggression (e.g., you do not belong). Phase Five involves the impact of the microaggression on the person over time. Sue (2010) mentioned several themes from participants in the above-mentioned studies. Some participants mentioned that they felt powerless, invisible, or lacking integrity if they did not protest the incident. This model illustrates the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral labor that may be involved in making sense of and responding to microaggressions.
Research on Microaggressions

Since the groundbreaking work of Sue and colleagues (2007), extensive research has been conducted to test and extend microaggression theory. Numerous qualitative studies have explored racial microaggressions toward specific groups. The concept of microaggressions has also been extended to include subtle expressions of bias towards other marginalized groups, including women (Gartner & Sterzing, 2016; Makin & Morczek, 2016; Owen, Tao, & Rodolfa, 2010), people with mental illness (Gonzales, Davidoff, DeLuca, & Yanos, 2015; Peters, Schwenk, Ahlstrom, & McIalwain, 2017), immigrants (Nienhusser, Vega, & Carquin, 2016; Shenoy-Packer, 2015), Muslims (Hussain & Howard, 2017), and LGBT people (Robinson & Rubin, 2015). A substantial body of research examines the microaggression experiences of specific groups, and the effects of microaggressions on mental health and well-being.

Experiencing microaggressions has been linked to depression (Donovan, Galban, Grace, Bennett, & Felicié, 2012; Huynh, 2012; Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit, & Rasmus, 2014; Torres & Taknint, 2015), traumatic stress responses (Torres et al., 2015), emotional distress (Ong, Burrow, Fuller-Rowell, Ja, & Sue, 2013; Wang, Leu, & Shoda, 2011), lower self-esteem (Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff, & Sriken, 2014), somatic symptoms (Huynh, 2012; Ong et al., 2013), mental health problems (Nadal et al., 2014; Nadal, Wong, Sriken, Griffin, & Fujii-Doe, 2015), and suicidal ideation (O’Keefe, Wingate, Cole, Hollingsworth, & Tucker, 2015). As hypothesized by Sue and colleagues (2005), coping with microaggressions requires victims to engage in complex cognitive processing of the event and a process of decision-making about how to respond (Shenoy-Packer, 2015).
LGBT Microaggressions

In 2010, two taxonomies were developed for LGBT microaggressions (Nadal, Rivera, and Corpus, 2010). Nadal, Rivera, and Corpus (2010) proposed a taxonomy of LGBT microaggressions they derived from their own personal and professional expertise, as well as from consultation with other LGBT individuals and professionals. Sue (2010) proposed a similar taxonomy of sexual orientation microaggressions. The taxonomies are compared in Table 1:
Table 1

*Comparison of Microaggression Taxonomies*

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use of heterosexist or transphobic terminology</td>
<td>Heterosexist language/terminology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endorsement of heteronormative or gender normative culture and behaviors</td>
<td>Endorsement of heteronormative culture and behaviors</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Discomfort with/disapproval of LGBT experience</td>
<td>Sinfulness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumption of sexual pathology/abnormality</td>
<td>Assumption of abnormality</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Denial of individual heterosexism</td>
<td>Denial of individual heterosexism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial of the reality of heterosexism or transphobia</td>
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<tr>
<th>Dissimilar Categories</th>
<th>Exoticization</th>
<th>Oversexualization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assumption of universal LGBT experience</td>
<td>Homophobia</td>
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In the taxonomy developed by Nadal, Rivera, & Corpus (2010), the first category of microaggression, *use of heterosexist or transphobic terminology*, refers to the use of terms or expressions that degrade or mock LGBT people. Microaggressions falling into the second category, *endorsement of heteronormative or gender normative culture and behaviors*, occur when an LGBT person is pressured to act straight or cisgender. Assumption of universal LGBT experience describes microaggressions that assume all LGBT people are the same or conform to
stereotypes of the LGBT community. Exoticization happens when LGBT people are objectified (e.g., treated as objects of curiosity). Microaggressions demonstrating discomft with or disapproval of LGBT experience are those involving dislike or moral condemnation from others. Heterosexual or cisgender individuals may attempt to deny or discredit LGBT experiences of heterosexism or transphobia. Assumption of sexual pathology/abnormality means some heterosexual or cisgender individuals may make comments that portray LGBT people as sexually promiscuous or deviant. Denial of individual heterosexism is demonstrated through statements that deny one has biased attitudes toward LGBT people.

Sue (2010) hypothesized that LGB individuals experience seven thematic types of microaggressions (see Table 2). The first, oversexualization, is demonstrated when heterosexuals think of LGB people primarily in terms of their sexual activities. The second, homophobia, is demonstrating a belief that one might become gay by associating with LGB people. Heterosexist language/terminology includes microaggressions that assume heterosexuality as normative or superior. The fourth microaggression, sinfulness, concerns the assumption same-sex relationships are inherently immoral and wrong. The fifth, assumption of abnormality, refers to the idea that same-sex attraction is pathological. The sixth, denial of individual heterosexism, involves denying that one has anti-LGB bias. Finally, the seventh theme, endorsement of heteronormative culture and behaviors, reinforces heterosexuality as a cultural default (e.g., asking a woman if she has a boyfriend).

The categories proposed by Nadal et al. (2010) and Sue (2010) are quite similar. Assumption of abnormality, sinfulness/disapproval of homosexuality, use of heterosexist language, denial of individual heterosexism, denial of social and personal heterosexism, and endorsement of heteronormative culture appear in both. Two categories appear exclusively in

Nadal et al. (2011) attempted to validate Nadal et al.’s (2010) taxonomy of sexual orientation microaggressions through a qualitative study of 26 LGB people (primarily young adults, most White or Latina/o), who were interviewed about their microaggression experiences in two focus groups. They used directed content analysis to assign microaggressions to the pre-existing categories described in the taxonomy. Microaggressions that did not fit into these categories were used to generate potential new themes. Results provided support for all categories of the taxonomy, although denial of heterosexism and denial of individual heterosexism were combined into one category in the final results. An additional category, *threatening behavior,* was also identified from the interviews, including both verbal and environmental microaggressions that supported anti-LGB violence.

Platt and Lenzen (2013) also interviewed 12 LGB individuals (primarily White) in two focus groups to examine their experience of sexual orientation microaggressions. Sue’s (2010) typology was used as the basis for data analysis. Microaggressions that did not fit into Sue’s (2010) categories were used to generate additional categories. Five of Sue’s (2010) categories were supported by the data: endorsement of heteronormative culture, sinfulness, homophobia, heterosexist language/terminology, and oversexualization. Two additional themes were identified: *undersexualization;* that is, dismissal or tolerance of their sexual orientation until participants were in a same-sex relationship, and *microaggressions as humor,* or microaggressions that are passed off as jokes.
More recently, studies have suggested lesbian, gay, and bisexual people may not have homogenous microaggression experiences. Bostwick and Hequembourg (2014) studied bisexual-specific microaggressions among a sample of 10 bisexual women (9 white, 1 biracial) recruited from the Chicago area using listservs, flyers at community organizations, and networking. Participants in this study reported experiencing microaggressions that were quite specific to bisexuality. Seven themes were identified through qualitative data analysis. Specifically, participants reported that: (1) others demonstrated hostility toward bisexuality and sometimes these individuals were lesbian or gay; (2) others often denied or dismissed their experiences because bisexuality was not seen as a real or credible identity; (3) others sometimes demonstrated confusion or difficulty understanding their bisexuality (unintelligibility); (4) they were often pressured to change, particularly by female partners, to identify as lesbian as partners sometimes assumed bisexuality was a transitional identity resulting in a need for participants to adopt what their partners saw as a more stable identity; (5) members of the LGBT community often questioned their legitimacy and right to belong in that community; (6) they were being rejected by both men and women as potential dating partners, or conversely being expected to be hypersexual and non-monogamous; and (7) navigating these experiences was profoundly stressful.

In another study, Hong et al. (2015) investigated subtle and blatant forms of discrimination among 530 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) college students. Types of discrimination experienced differed by the students’ specific identity. Bisexual and pansexual students reported experiencing less subtle discrimination and fewer verbal threats. Gay men reported experiencing more verbal threats than other groups. Students with atypical gender expression also reported receiving more threats, both verbal and physical, and more avoidance
behaviors from others. Sarno and Wright (2013) also found differences in microaggression experiences between bisexual and homosexual participants. In their study, bisexual participants experienced more microaggressions in the “Alien in Own Land” category on the Homonegative Microaggressions Scale, and fewer microaggressions in the “Ascription of Intelligence” category. However, the sample ($N = 120$) included only 14 bisexual participants, so results may not be conclusive.

When transgender microaggressions have been explored separately, these studies reveal microaggressions specific to transgender identities. Nadal et al. (2012) studied transgender microaggressions among 9 participants (3 transgender men, 6 transgender women) who were recruited through transgender community organizations. Notably, participants in this study identified within the gender binary. Researchers started with the microaggression taxonomy proposed by Nadal et al. (2010) and statements that did not fit within the categories of this taxonomy were used to generate additional themes or modify existing categories. The seven categories of Nadal et al.’s (2010) taxonomy were supported in slightly modified form, but five additional microaggression themes were reported by these participants. As Nadal et al. (2010) previously identified, participants reported that others misgendered them or used transphobic terms to refer to them. They recounted incidents wherein they were expected or pressured to fit into the binary gender norms of their birth sex. Others reacted to them with discomfort or disapproval, or assumed their transgender identity was evidence of pathology or abnormality. Participants reported being exoticized and objectified, sought for sex or friendship because others wanted the experience of being with them rather than seeing them as a whole person. A similar kind of dehumanization was demonstrated when others assumed all transgender persons
had the same experience. Participants reported that others denied their experience of these forms of discrimination, or indeed the very existence of transphobia.

The experiences described above all supported the taxonomy developed by Nadal et al. (2010). As mentioned, additional microaggression themes were identified from the interviews: (a) physical threat or harassment, (b) denial of personal body privacy, (c) familial microaggressions, and (d) systemic and environmental microaggressions. Participants reported being subject to threats of violence or actual physical aggression. Participants reported others treated their bodies as public property by staring or making explicit remarks about their bodies. Participants also reported microaggressions that were specific to their family context, such as being asked about past history and whether they had always known they were transgender. Finally, participants discussed microaggressions that took place due to characteristics of the social systems and environments in which they moved. They recounted problems with using public restrooms, such as being forced to choose between binary options for restrooms and fearing attack from others in their chosen bathroom. They reported discrimination in the criminal legal system (e.g., being targeted for humiliation by law enforcement officers, being ignored or discounted when they reported crimes), discrimination from health care professionals (e.g., being given delayed care), and problems obtaining correctly gendered identification on government-issued ID or in social welfare systems.

Even within the transgender community, microaggression experiences may vary widely. Chang & Chung (2015) pointed out that in the three microaggression studies that include transgender participants, the transgender community is treated as homogenous, ignoring the diversity of identities among transgender people. These authors (2015) discussed the differences in identification and experience among members of the transgender community, and articulated
how microaggression experiences might differ depending on the specific identity of the person. They discussed physical transition and how microaggression experiences might differ between transgender persons who physically transition in some way and those who do not. Others might not identify within the gender binary system and might experience microaggressions when placed within that system. Microaggression experiences might also be different depending on the gender to which one is transitioning. Male to female (MTF) transgender individuals might experience different microaggressions than female to male (FTM) individuals. The authors discussed these and other factors that make it inappropriate to treat transgender experiences as uniform or to subsume the experience of transgender individuals within a framework of LGBT microaggressions.

In addition to differences in microaggressions experiences between lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, research findings also suggest LGBT microaggressions may be influenced by the victim’s other identities (e.g., race, gender, disability status). Balsam et al. (2011) designed and tested an instrument to measure microaggressions experienced by LGBT people of color. Items were generated from interviews completed with 53 LGBT people of color (POC). The researchers reviewed transcripts of these interviews and identified microaggressions participants reported targeted both their sexuality and their race/ethnicity. Microaggressions that targeted one or the other identity exclusively were not examined. The instrument was then tested with a national sample of 297 LGBT-POC, along with measures of psychological distress and adjustment. Factor analysis identified three broad types of microaggressions experienced among LGBT-POC: (1) racism in LGBT communities, (2) heterosexism in racial/ethnic minority communities, and (3) racism in dating and close relationships.
Nadal et al. (2015) offered another exploration of intersectional microaggressions by examining data from six qualitative studies of microaggressions among specific groups (e.g., LGBT people, Filipino Americans). In conducting their analysis, the researchers looked specifically for intersectional microaggressions in seven pre-determined domains of intersectionality. Of these seven domains, three specifically concerned sexual identity: (1) race and sexual identity, (2) religion and sexual identity, and (3) gender and sexual identity. Analysis resulted in identification of eight microaggression themes, two of which concerned intersectional microaggressions toward LGBT people. The first, gender-based stereotypes for lesbians and gay men, was reported when participants’ sexual identity was assumed to affect their expression of gender (i.e., gay men were stereotyped as feminine, lesbian women were stereotyped as masculine). The second was a theme of disapproval of LGBT identity by specific racial, ethnic, and religious groups. Though these two themes were the only specifically concerned with LGBT identity, the others (exoticization of women of color, assumption of inferior status for women of color, invisibility and desexualization of Asian American men, assumption of inferiority or criminality of men of color, gender-specific expectations for Muslim men and women, and women of color as spokesperson) might still be experienced by LGBT individuals who hold other oppressed identities.

Finally, Miller (2015) studied the classroom experiences of 25 students (both undergraduate and graduate, predominantly White) who identified as LGBTQ and as persons with disabilities. While the study was not focused on microaggressions, students’ microaggressions experiences were explored in the data analysis. Students reported experiencing microaggressions related to their sexual orientation, disability status, gender, and race/ethnicity.
Individual Responses to LGBT Microaggressions

LGBT individuals have reported a variety of cognitive and behavioral coping strategies. As Sue and colleagues (2007) indicated, the effort involved in selecting and employing coping mechanisms may add to the psychological burden of these experiences. Nadal et al. (2011) explored how 26 LGB-identified individuals coped with microaggression experiences. Behavioral strategies included passive coping (e.g., walking away, ignoring comments) and confrontational coping (e.g., challenging discriminatory remarks). Cognitively, some participants coped by emphasizing their own resiliency and empowerment (e.g., affirming their own right to be as they are regardless of others’ actions). Another cognitive strategy was to adopt a position of conformity and acceptance (e.g., to explain microaggressions as an unchangeable part of life for LGB people). Similarly, Nadal et al. (2014) used the data obtained from an earlier study (Nadal et al., 2011) to explore transgender individuals’ reactions to microaggressions. Cognitive reactions included rationalizing others’ reactions (e.g., explaining them as the result of ignorance), conceiving of themselves as in a double-bind where they had to balance conflicts between transgender identification and other concerns, reminding themselves to be vigilant and act in self-preserving ways, and conceptualizing microaggressions as making them stronger or more resilient. Behavioral reactions included direct confrontation of bias, indirect confrontation (e.g., allowing others to handle the bias), and passive coping methods (e.g., avoiding situations wherein microaggression might occur).

Li, Thing, Galvan, Gonzalez, & Bluthenthal (2017) conducted a qualitative examination of family microaggression experiences and resilience strategies among 21 young gay and bisexual Latino men. Participants were asked about experiences of microaggressions from family members, and how they had coped with these experiences. Participants experienced all
three major types of microaggressions from family members (microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations). The authors identified three resilience strategies in this sample. The first, self-discovery, occurred when participants engaged in exploration of their sexual identity and learned to affirm and accept this identity. The second, adaptive socialization, referred to ways that participants found to continue to connect to their families without internalizing negative messages. The third, self-advocacy, described instances in which participants attempted to challenge or educate family members about microaggressions.

LGBT microaggressions are related to a variety of emotional and psychological problems. In previous studies, interpersonal and environmental microaggressions predicted psychological distress (Woodford et al., 2014) and were related to depression (Seelman, Woodford, & Nicolazza, 2017; Swann, Minshew, Newcomb, & Mustanski, 2016; Woodford Paceley, Kulick, & Hong, 2015) among LGBQ college students. Both distal environmental microaggressions (e.g., observing microaggressions on television) and proximal environmental microaggressions (e.g., witnessing anti-gay demonstrations on campus) were related to anxiety and stress among LGBQ college students as well (Woodford et al., 2015). Microaggressions were also linked to lower self-esteem, more negative feelings about being LGB, and more difficulty developing an LGB identity (Seelman et al., 2017; Wright & Wegner, 2012). Moreover, both LGB and transgender individuals have reported painful emotional reactions to microaggressions (Nadal et al., 2011; Nadal et al., 2014). LGB participants in Nadal et al.’s (2011) qualitative study reported several emotional reactions, including discomfort and feeling unsafe, anger and frustration, sadness, and embarrassment or shame. Some participants believed microaggression experiences had either caused or exacerbated depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for them. LGB participants in a study by Robinson and Rubin
(2015) showed higher posttraumatic stress symptoms than heterosexual participants, and higher microaggression experiences were related to higher posttraumatic stress symptoms, especially for those who rated their microaggressive experiences as having a greater negative impact. Similarly, transgender individuals reported feeling anger, betrayal, distress, hopelessness and exhaustion, and feeling invalidated and misunderstood (Nadal et al., 2014). Finally, in Balsam et al.’s (2011) study, LGBT people of color who experienced more microaggressions showed higher scores on measures of depression and stress.

Just as microaggression experiences may differ depending on the combination of identities held by the victim, some research suggests reactions may differ as well. Lesbians and gay men of color reported more distress in the study by Balsam et al. (2011) study than bisexual participants of color. Concerning this result, the authors hypothesized that sexual identity might be more “central” for gay and lesbian participants and thus discrimination might be more distressing (p. 171). Asian Americans showed higher scores on the Relationship Racism subscale in this study. Men also reported more distress on the Relationship Racism subscale. Responses varied depending on the type of microaggression encountered. Scores on the POC Heterosexism scale and on the LGBT Relationship Racism scale showed an especially strong relationship to depression and stress.

Experiences may also differ depending on the identity of the perpetrator, and their relationship to the person. Galupo, Henise, and Davis studied microaggression experience that 207 transgender individuals experienced from their friends. They asked participants to indicate how frequently they experienced microaggressions from cisgender heterosexual friends, transgender friends, and cisgender LGB friends. Participants in their study reported more frequent microaggressions from heterosexual cisgender friends than from transgender friends or from cisgender LGB
friends. However, they felt more distressed about microaggressions from transgender and LGB friends. They indicated that microaggressions affected their sense of closeness to their friends, and that microaggressions from friends were more painful than from others.

**Sexual/Gender Identity Development**

Theories of social identity development explain how individuals come to claim social identities and the attitudes they hold about these identities (i.e., how one develops a sense of belonging to social group, one’s level of self-acceptance and affirmation of that identity, and one’s understanding of and attitude toward social oppression based on one’s identity). While a complete review of sexual and gender identity development models is beyond the scope of this chapter, this section reviews pertinent identity development models and discusses how identity development may be connected to microaggression experiences.

Cass (1979, 1984) proposed and tested a seminal six-stage model of identity development for gay men and lesbians. Cass (1984) proposed that sexual identity development begins when individuals “perceive that their behavior (actions, feelings, thoughts) may be defined as homosexual” (p. 147), a realization which precipitates a period of Identity Questioning. Individuals may resolve this confusion by choosing to explore the possibility, or by refusing to consider it. If the individual chooses to explore this possibility, they proceed to the Identity Comparison stage, in which they begin to differentiate their own identity in society and are “faced with feelings of alienation as the difference between self and non-homosexual others becomes clearer” (Cass, 1984, p. 151). Having arrived at the belief that they are lesbian/gay, the individual enters the Identity Tolerance stage, in which they hold the identity but have not yet formed a positive sense of this identity. They may form relationships with other lesbian or gay people to fulfill personal needs, but may see these relationships “as ‘necessary’ rather than
desirable” (Cass, 1984, p. 151). Forming positive relationships with other lesbian and gay people may increasingly lead to self-acceptance, but individuals in the Identity Acceptance stage still hide this identity from most others, though they may come out to trusted others.

Over time, according to Cass’s (1984) model, individuals develop a sense of Identity Pride in belonging to the lesbian/gay community and begin to actively confront discrimination. They may develop a sense of “loyalty to homosexuals as a group, who are seen as important and creditable while heterosexuals have become discredited and devalued” (Cass, 1984, p. 152). In the final stage of the model, individuals develop a sense of their sexual identity that is integrated into their sense of themselves as a whole person (Identity Synthesis). They routinely come out to other people, integrating their private and public identities. They also develop more complex evaluations of other people so that they do not categorize all gay/lesbian people as good and all heterosexual people as bad. Cass (1984) hypothesized that identity development may be foreclosed at any stage. Resolution of each stage depends on whether a gay/lesbian identity is seen as accurate or desirable for the person. Movement through the stages is driven by individuals’ need to resolve cognitive dissonance and emotional reactions to their own internal sense of their identity.

Since Cass’s theory was introduced, several other models of sexual identity have been advanced and researched (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2011). Kenneady and Oswalt (2011) reviewed research on the Cass model and similar models of sexual identity development. Studies explored in their research found some support for the idea of sexual identity stages or statuses, although factor analytic study results varied, with some providing support for a two-stage or a four-stage model and very limited support for the full six-stage model. Kenneady and Oswalt (2011) criticized Cass’s model for its linearity, as sexual identity development may be a more fluid or
cyclical process; its focus on only gay men and lesbians, as it excludes bisexuals and those whose sexuality is not defined within binary gender categories; and the fact that it does not articulate how other identities such as gender or race might influence the identity development process (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2011).

McCarn and Fassinger (1996) reviewed existing models of identity development and articulated several commonalities of these theories. According to the authors, identity development models:

- “describe a lengthy process of coming to terms with homoerotic desire and changes in self-concept” (p. 513),
- describe identity development as a linear process (from three to six stages),
- begin with a stage in which the individual is confused about their identity,
- describe a moment where LGB individuals acknowledge that they have a non-heterosexual identity, and
- suggest individuals move progressively towards greater self-acceptance and openness with others about their identity.

McCarn and Fassinger (1996) discussed the fact that existing models did not account for the ways other identities (e.g., racial/ethnic identity, gender) might affect the identity development process. In particular, they noted that individuals who experience oppression related to more than one aspect of their identity might have to make complex choices about how to negotiate belonging and identity development in multiple communities with multiple identities. They reviewed identity development models for racial/ethnic groups, and identified factors that might affect lesbian identity development for people of color. For example, people of color may face racism both in society in general and in the LGBT community in particular.
They may, therefore, choose to conceal their LGBT identity in order to maintain support within their racial or ethnic community (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). They also reviewed feminist models of identity development for women and ways in which female or feminist identity development may complicate lesbian identity development. They give as an example that women:

have been taught that sexual desire itself is dangerous and wrong, then they find that the object of their desire is devalued. This may help to explain why women tend to come out later in life and why women are more likely to come out in the context of a relationship as opposed to an independent process of articulating and acting on sexual desire (p. 518) McCarn and Fassinger (1996) developed a model to attempt to explain identity development more accurately and completely, taking these additional factors into account. They proposed a model in which two parallel identity development processes take place for each individual: individual sexual identity development and group membership identity development. They proposed four phases of identity development: (1) Awareness, (2) Exploration, (3) Deepening/Commitment, and (4) Internalization/Synthesis. At the Awareness stage, individual identity development involves becoming aware that one is different, while group membership identity development involves becoming aware that different sexual orientations exist. In the Exploration phase, individual identity development involves exploration of internal feelings of attraction, while group membership identity development involves exploring how one feels toward lesbian and gay people in general. Individual identity development at the Deepening/Commitment phase involves increased self-knowledge and willingness to accept one’s lesbian identity, while Deepening/Commitment at the group level of identity development involves increasing involvement in the LG community. Finally, individuals at the
Internalization/Synthesis stage of individual identity development integrate their sexual identity into their overall identity, while those in the Integration/Synthesis stage of group membership identity development integrate their sexual identity publicly in all areas of life. The authors described phases as recursive; each individual may proceed through these phases multiple times in response to changing situations and relationships. They also emphasized that individual identity development may proceed at a different pace than group identity development, and that public concealment of identity should not imply self-hatred.

Several transgender identity development models have been developed as well. Bockting and Coleman (2007) presented a coming out model for transgender individuals that is somewhat like models of sexual identity development. In this model, transgender individuals initially go through a pre-coming out stage in which they may be somewhat aware that they do not conform to the gender they were assigned. They then proceed to a coming out stage in which they acknowledge their awareness of transgender feelings to themselves and others. The authors proposed that individuals who are outwardly gender-nonconforming proceed to this stage at an earlier age than those who attempt to present as gender-conforming. Transgender individuals then proceed to an exploration stage in which they experiment with gender expression and identity and learn more about transgender identity and community. According to Bockting and Coleman (2007), they move into an intimacy stage, in which they work to develop intimate relationships with others. As these individuals become more and more comfortable and open with their identity, they reach a stage of identity integration in which public and private identification match, and transgender identity becomes integrated as one of many personal identities.
Devor (2004) developed a 14-stage model for transsexual or transgender individuals, building on Cass’s (1984) work in sexual identity formation and incorporating his own clinical and personal observations from extensive involvement and work in transgender community. In this model, individuals move from Abiding Anxiety (vague unsettlement or discomfort about gender or sex) to Identity Confusion (active doubts about gender and sex). As they begin actively questioning their gender or sex, they begin to make Identity Comparisons, attempting to compare their own gender with others. Somewhere in this process they discover that transgender identities exist (Discovery of Transsexualism or Transgenderism). They initially struggle with doubts about whether transgender identity accurately describes their experience (Identity Confusion about Transsexualism or Transgenderism). They compare their own experience with the experiences of other transgender people to try to resolve these doubts (Identity Comparisons About Transsexualism or Transgenderism). They gradually become more confident that they identify as transgender (Tolerance of Transsexual or Transgender Identity), but take some time before fully accepting this identity, often dealing with fears about the potential consequences of transition (Delay Before Acceptance of Transsexual or Transgender Identity, Acceptance of Transsexual or Transgender Identity).

According to Devor (2004), once individuals fully accept their transgender identity, they begin the process of changing their gender presentation or undergoing physical transition (Transition). They must then go through a process of coming to accept their post-transition identity, learning what it means to embrace and live into their gender (Acceptance of Post-Transition Gender and Sex Identification). Over time, they complete the process of integrating their post-transition lives with their pre-transition lives, and integrate into society. Devor (2004) proposed that at this stage, many transsexual individuals keep their identity secret from others.
Finally, transgender individuals move into a stage of pride that involves both internal self-affirmation and external affirmation of identity. Like other authors, Devor (2004) indicated individuals move through stages recursively, and at different rates.

The American Psychological Association (2015) review of research on transgender individuals summarized current transgender identity development literature, and noted unique factors that may influence identity development for these individuals. In general, transgender identity development models, like LGB models, have proposed a move from questioning and identity confusion, through exploration of one’s gender identity, toward greater self-acceptance and public identification as transgender. However, transgender identity development may influence sexual identity development. For example, the societal conflation of gender nonconformity with same-sex attraction may cause some transgender individuals to initially assume that they are lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Transgender individuals may change how they describe their sexual identity as they become more aware and accepting of their gender identity. A study by Dickey, Burnes, and Singh (2012) supports this idea. The authors explored the sexual identity development process for female to male (FTM) transgender individuals. Participants in their study progressed through stages of increasing questioning and awareness toward self-identification and acceptance; however, identity development was heavily influenced by gender identity development, both development of personal identity and development of group membership. Some participants, for example, reported that at points in their development, even though they were somewhat aware of their FTM gender identity, they continued to identify publicly as lesbian since that was an identity for which they had more support. Moreover, the availability of information about a broad range of gender identities may influence gender identity development. A non-binary individual, for example, who has access only to information about
MTF or FTM experiences may find it more difficult to understand or describe their gender identity. Others’ perception of the individual’s gender may also play a role (Bockting & Coleman, 2007).

Development of gender identity among transgender individuals is less researched, but a few studies have explored this process. Levitt and Ippolito (2014) performed a grounded theory study with 17 transgender participants with a variety of gender identifications, including participants who made a variety of choices with regard to decisions about medical transition. Participants in the study reported initially hiding or ignoring their identity, and feeling marginalized and isolated. Over time, they developed language that helped them form a more defined sense of their gender, and were assisted in this process by affirming communities. They described identity development as an ongoing process in which they tried to balance their need for authenticity and self-expression with the need for safety. Public identification of their gender identity and in some cases physical transition were seen as acts of authenticity that allowed them to affirm their true selves. Participants reported that as their gender identity developed, their sexual identity sometimes shifted.

**Microaggressions and influence on identity development.** While no single model of sexual or gender identity development has emerged as prevalent in the field research does support the idea that how an individual identifies their sexuality/gender identity publicly and privately, their degree of acceptance of and comfort with the identity, and their identification with the broader LGBTQ community all influence the individual’s well-being (Halpin & Allen, 2004; Kenneady & Oswalt, 2011). Of particular relevance to this study is the concept that identity development may influence and be influenced by microaggression experiences. Jones and Galliher (2015) examined relationships between ethnic and cultural identification and
microaggression experiences for 114 Native American young adults. They found higher numbers of microaggression experiences were correlated with stronger Native American identification, especially for male participants. Those with stronger Native American identification also tended to find their microaggression experiences more upsetting. In particular, microinsults were more strongly linked to ethnic identity than microinvalidations. They discussed the possibility that stronger Native American identification might make participants more likely to notice microaggressions, or have greater sensitivity to microaggressions. Alternatively, the authors noted that microaggression experiences might prompt deeper exploration of and engagement in Native American culture and heritage. Another possibility they raised was that greater identification with the Native American community might mean participants display obvious cultural behaviors that might make them more likely to be targets of microaggressions.

While there is a lack of research exploring connections between sexual identity and how LGBT people experience and make sense of microaggressions, theoretical formulations of identity development and some existing research suggests LGBT counselor education students’ experiences may influence and be influenced by their identity development. Students may experience microaggressions differently depending on their own level of self-acceptance and group identification (Jones & Galliher, 2015). Students who are early in the identity development process, for example, might have less self-confidence and less social support from other LGBT people, so microaggressions experiences might be more painful. Alternatively, being early in the process might make them less likely to perceive others’ actions as microaggressive. As students develop a stronger sense of identification as an LGBT person, they might be more likely to perceive experiences as microaggressive. As their awareness of
microaggressions increases, they may feel greater stress and such experiences may be more painful. Alternatively, they may have more LGBT-affirming support and so experience less distress over microaggressions. Students’ microaggression experiences also may precipitate meaning-making processes that alter their perceptions of their own identity and their group identification (Dickey et al., 2012; Jones & Galliher, 2015).

Microaggressions in Higher Education

LGBT Student Experiences in Colleges and Universities

Studies indicate that, in general, LGBT students experience more challenges and barriers and lower well-being than their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts. The Minnesota College Student Health Survey was administered to 34,324 college students across Minnesota (Przedworski et al., 2015). LGB students were more likely than heterosexual students to report being diagnosed with a mental disorder, especially depression and anxiety, and were more likely to report frequent mental distress. They also reported more stressful events than heterosexual students. There were some differences between sexual identity groups. In particular, lesbian and bisexual women reported more diagnoses of PTSD and social phobia, and gay and bisexual men reported more diagnoses of bulimia and panic attacks. In addition, bisexual women were more likely to receive diagnoses of panic attacks and bulimia. The University of California, Berkeley Graduate Student Happiness and Well-Being Report (Graduate Assembly, 2014) surveyed 790 students and found that LGB students in general reported lower well-being. In a study of 289,024 university students, transgender students were at the highest risk for eating disorder symptoms, and gay and questioning men and questioning women were also at higher risk for disordered eating (Diemer, Grant, Munn-Chernoff, Patterson, & Duncan, 2015). In another study of 75,192 students, transgender students reported heavy drinking on more days than
cisgender students. They were also more likely than cisgender students to report alcohol-related sexual assaults or suicidal ideation (Coulter et al., 2015).

LGBTQ students may have more negative perceptions of campus climate than heterosexual and cisgender students. Yost and Gilmore (2011) studied the perceptions of 274 faculty/staff members and 562 students on the climate of their college for LGBTQ individuals. LGBTQ students perceived the campus climate as less positive than heterosexual students. More than half of the LGBTQ students reported being verbally harassed for being LGBTQ, and 10% reported physical attacks or threats; however, LGB students may also experience uniquely positive interactions. In a national sample of 23,910 students, Garvey and Inkelas (2012) found that LGB students reported higher satisfaction with their interactions with faculty and staff than their heterosexual peers. Regression analysis revealed this relationship was only significant for bisexual students when responses of LGB students were compared. Dugan and Yurman (2011) surveyed 1,682 LGB students and found that participants perceived their campuses to have positive and inclusive climates for LGB students.

While studies of campus climate reveal both positive and negative experiences for LGBTQ students, several recent studies show LGBT students continue to experience frequent discrimination in their institutions. Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, and Frazer (2010) authored a report for a national study sponsored by Campus Pride. They surveyed 5,149 LGBTQQ students, faculty, staff, and administrators about their experiences on college campuses across the United States. Almost a quarter of LGBQ participants (23%) reported harassment, and most believed it to be due to their sexual identity (p.10). Almost two-thirds (61%) reported being targeted by derogatory remarks (p. 10). A substantial number of LGB participants also reported experiencing other types of discrimination as well, such as being stared at or being purposely
excluded or ignored. There were some differences in experiences between participants who held different identities. Gay men, for example, were more likely to be stared at, while lesbian women were more likely to be excluded. About a third of transgender participants also reported experiencing harassment, and most believed it to be based on their gender identity (p. 10). In addition, participants of color reported being racially profiled and harassed for their racial identity. Overall, LGBTQ participants showed lower levels of comfort with the climate on their campus generally, as well as in their departments or classrooms specifically. They reported greater concerns about their safety on campus. They were also less likely to perceive their institution as responding adequately to anti-LGBTQ bias. Transgender students in particular reported negative perceptions of their campus climate. Using the same dataset, Garvey and Rankin (2015) found that transgender students reported more negative campus and classroom climates, and lower levels of inclusiveness in curriculum than students who identified as LGBQ. Dugan, Kusel, and Simounet (2012) also found that transgender students reported more experiences of discrimination and lower sense of belonging than cisgender LGB and heterosexual students.

A smaller study by Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, and Hope (2013) among 75 LGBTQ students at one university in the Great Plains. Few of the study’s participants reported instances of unfair treatment from faculty or staff, but more than half (53%) reported being treated unfairly by other students; nevertheless, they reported a moderately positive perception of the campus climate. Students who had lost support from friends because of their LGBTQ identity, students who were treated unfairly by a faculty member, and students who hid their identity from other students were more likely to have a negative perception of their campus climate. Students who
were more closeted and had less support from others were more likely to consider leaving their institution than those who were open and had more support.

Pryor (2015) conducted a qualitative study of five transgender students’ experiences at a mid-western college. These students reported both discrimination and support from faculty members and other students. Experiences of discrimination included being misgendered (i.e., being addressed by the wrong gender pronoun), being threatened or attacked, and hearing others ridicule transgender people. Some indicated these experiences affected their academic work (e.g., caused them to drop a class or made them reluctant to speak in class). Similarly, Goodrich (2012) interviewed four transsexual students, who reported verbal harassment and a lack of support from others in their institutions.

Research supports the idea that students’ experiences may vary depending on their other identities (e.g., race). Ford (2015) studied the experiences of 10 Black gay male alumni from historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and found that participants reported incidents of verbal and physical violence from others while in college. Participants indicated they were especially likely to experience harassment if they were perceived as more effeminate. They also reported that their fellow Black students thought of being gay as a White identity, and so perceive them as taking on this identity from White society. Some even reported that others believed they could not identity as gay and still form a positive Black identity. In a study conducted by Garvey et al. (2012), Hispanic and Asian American students reported lower satisfaction with faculty/staff interactions than White students, and women reported lower satisfaction than men. Hayes, Chun-Kennedy, Edens, and Locke (2011) reported that students of color and LGB students experienced more distress than White or heterosexual students on most variables studied. When LGB students were compared by race, students of color did not report
more psychological distress than White students; however, when students of color were compared by sexual orientation (i.e., LGB students vs. heterosexual students), LGB students of color reported more distress than heterosexual students of color.

These negative experiences affect students’ well-being, and some studies suggest they are linked to students’ academic experiences and career choices (Schneider & Dimito, 2010). Woodford, Kulick, and Atteberry (2015), for example, found students who directly experienced harassment because of their sexual orientation showed greater depression and anxiety, more alcohol use, and were at more risk for physical health problems. Even hearing the phrase “that’s so gay” has been related to diminished well-being for students (Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz, & Yu, 2012). In other examples, experiences of discrimination have been related to overall adjustment to college (Schmidt, Miles, & Welsh, 2011) and academic disengagement (Rankin et al., 2010). LGBTQ students have been found to be more likely than their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts to consider leaving their institutions (Rankin et al., 2010), and have reported academic difficulties as a result of experiences with discrimination (Goodrich, 2012; Woodford, Joslin, Pitcher, & Renn, 2017). As it concerns career, Schneider and Dimito (2010) found students who had experienced the most discrimination were most likely to report that their sexual orientation had a large effect on their career choices; specifically, gay men and participants who believed themselves to be visibly identifiable as a “minority” were most likely to report that their sexual orientation had a negative impact on their career choices.

Certain factors like self-esteem or support from others may protect students from experiencing the negative effects of discrimination or harassment (Sheets & Mohr, 2009; Woodford et al., 2015). Support that specifically affirms the student’s sexual or gender identity may particularly helpful. Sheets and Mohr (2009) found sexuality-specific support but not
general social support predicted internalized binegativity for bisexual students. Different protective factors may function differently for students of different identities; however, Whiting, Boone, and Cohen (2012) found bisexual students were less likely to report social support from families than gay, lesbian, or heterosexual students, but reported more social support from peers. They also shared challenges in social relationships with peers, however, such as having to educate others about their bisexual identity.

In some cases, students who experience discrimination may actually show better adjustment. In Schmidt, Miles, and Welsh’s (2011) study, students who experienced both high levels of discrimination and high levels of social support showed less career indecision. The authors hypothesized that experiencing discrimination stimulated the development of better coping and decision-making skills, which they then applied to making career choices. Most studies of LGBT experiences on college campuses do not specifically investigate microaggressions, although many identify types of discrimination that could be classified as microaggressions. There are a handful of studies, however, that have looked specifically at LGBT microaggressions on campus, and the impact these have on LGBT students.

**Microaggressions on College Campuses**

Woodford et al. (2014) studied the effects of heterosexist microaggressions among a national sample of 299 LGBQ college students (60% undergraduate students, 78% White, 57% women, transgender students were excluded) recruited from LGBTQ listservs. Higher microaggression ratings were related to higher psychological distress and lower self-acceptance among these students. Self-acceptance mediated the relationship between microaggressions and psychological distress in this sample.
Hong et al. (2015) investigated subtle and blatant forms of discrimination among college students using a sample of 530 LGBQ-identified college students who were attending a national conference for LGBTQ college students. They used the LGBQ Microaggressions on Campus Scale to measure subtle discrimination, as well questions assessing students’ experiences of “ambient heterosexism,” or hearing indirect negative messages about LGBQ people and avoidance behaviors from others, like others refusing to sit next to them (pp.123-124). Starting with Bronfenbrenner’s ecological developmental theory, they posited that students would be affected by discrimination at the microsystem, mesosystem and macrosystem levels. The authors measured microsystem factors (e.g., ambient heterosexism), mesosystem factors (e.g., institutional support for LGBQ students) and macrosystem factors (e.g., campus nondiscrimination policies) and tested their relationship to the types of discrimination that students experienced. In keeping with their hypothesis, they found factors at all three levels were associated with students’ experiences of discrimination. Ambient heterosexism (microsystem) was related to students’ experiences of subtle interpersonal microaggressions, as well as more overt verbal threats; however, students’ perception of support for LGBQ students moderated this relationship such that students who experienced more ambient heterosexism but believed their institution was supportive reported fewer experiences of subtle discrimination and verbal threats. Campus non-discrimination policies also seemed to have some protective effect, as students on campuses with these policies reported fewer verbal threats; however, this protection did not extend to other forms of subtle discrimination or physical threats.

A limitation of the Hong et al. (2015) study was that it used a convenience sample. Students attending an LGBTQ conference might differ from other students in important ways (e.g., level of “outness” or socioeconomic status). This study explored university environments
broadly, although the findings might be tentatively applied to counselor education program environments. The results suggest, for example, nondiscrimination policies and a supportive departmental climate may protect LGBQ students from experiencing certain types of discrimination in their programs. Discrimination in this study, however, was operationalized at the broadest level, looking at those types of discrimination students might experience across contexts. This study, therefore, did not capture types of discrimination that might be more particular to counselor education contexts, or the complex interplay of factors that affect microaggression experiences in these programs. Importantly, the study provides support for the idea that the types of discrimination experienced by specific students may vary depending on their specific combination of identities. A student who was gay, gender-atypical, and a person of color in this study might have a very different experience than a student who was a White, gender-conforming, lesbian woman. This suggests more exploratory work is needed to understand how students’ identities and situations work in tandem to influence their experiences.

**LGBT Issues in Counselor Education**

While there is a lack of literature about LGBT students in counselor education programs, researchers have explored how counseling and psychology trainees, counselor educators, and counseling and psychology professionals think about and respond to LGBT people (e.g., Rainey & Trusty, 2007; Satcher & Leggett, 2007; Satcher & Schumacker, 2009). They have also studied students’ knowledge about LGBT populations and their perceived competence to work with LGBT clients (e.g., Bidell, 2014; Farmer, Welfare, & Burge, 2013; Graham et al., 2012). In addition, there are a few studies and conceptual articles that have explored affirming or biased program practices (e.g., Bidell, Ragen, Broach, & Carillo, 2007; Bidell, Turner, & Casas, 2000; Shin, Smith, Goodrich, & LaRosa, 2011). The following subsections review this literature and
discuss the responses heterosexual, cisgender faculty and students might have toward LGBT students.

Attitudes Toward LGBT People

Many researchers have examined the attitudes of counselors, counselor trainees, and counselor educators toward LGB people, but most of this research is dated. The earliest studies showed negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians among counselor trainees (e.g., Glenn & Russell, 1986; McDermott & Stadler, 1988; Palma, 1996). More recent studies showed more positive attitudes towards LGB clients among their participants (Barret & McWhirter, 2002; Liddle, 1995; Mohr, Israel, & Sedlacek, 2001).

For the past decade, only a few studies have investigated counselors’ and counselor trainees’ attitudes toward LGB people. Two studies found some indication of positive attitudes toward LGB people (Rainey & Trusty, 2007; Satcher & Leggett, 2007). Rainey and Trusty (2007) studied attitudes toward lesbians and gay men among 132 counselors in training (76.5% White, 85.6% female, sexual orientation not reported) at one southwestern university. Participants in their sample showed moderately positive attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. Satcher and Leggett (2007) also studied homonegativity among 215 school counselors in one southern state (84% White, all female, all heterosexual) and found that on average, participants showed somewhat positive attitudes on both measures of homonegativity (measuring “traditional or moralistic” disapproval of homosexuality) and modern homonegativity anti-LG (lesbian and gay) attitudes based on social or political opinions. This author did not find any studies examining attitudes toward transgender people.

Though participants in more recent studies showed positive responses to LGB clients, there was a good deal of variation in attitudes between participants, and some participants
reported both positive and negative attitudes. For instance, Satcher et al. (2007) reported substantial variation in modern homonegativity scores, indicating that participants varied widely in their acceptance of lesbians and gay men. Satcher and Schumacker (2009) studied modern homonegativity among 571 professional counselors (79% White, 87% female, all heterosexual). They grouped the 99 counselors who scored more than one standard deviation above the mean into a “high homonegativity” group and the 90 counselors whose scores were lower than one standard deviation below the mean into a “low homonegativity” group. This division suggests the majority of their sample fell into a midrange, revealing a mixture of positive and negative attitudes.

Variation in participants’ attitudes in the above studies suggests some counselors’ and counselor trainees’ reveal prejudiced attitudes toward LGB people. In addition, Miller, Miller, and Stull (2007) studied the attitudes and behavior of 154 counselor educators (89% White, 54% male, sexual orientation not given) toward “cultural diversity,” including responses to different races, genders, sexual orientations, and social classes. Participants reported more negative attitudes toward LGB people than toward other groups, although they reported low to moderate levels of sexual orientation bias overall. Their heterosexism scores (measure of behavior) were also higher than their racism, sexism, or classism scores. Anti-LGB attitudes predicted participants’ self-reported behavior. Interestingly, the authors reported that in each domain of cultural diversity “counselor educators’ scores on the attitude scales indicated less bias than their scores on the behavior scales” (p. 332), suggesting that even counselors who self-report LGB-affirming attitudes might still exhibit biased behavior.

These and other studies examined factors that were associated with higher prejudice toward LGB people. Religious attitudes were also associated with increased prejudice,
especially dogmatic or unquestioning adherence to religious beliefs (Balkin, Schlosser, & Levitt, 2009; Rainey et al., 2007). Political conservativism was associated with higher prejudice (Rainey et al., 2007). Moreover, Rainey et al. (2007) found that quality of experience with lesbians (but not gay men) was predictive of attitudes among counselor trainees.

In sum, existing research suggests that while counseling students and counselor educators on average have somewhat positive attitudes toward LGB people, some have more negative attitudes toward LGB people, and many may hold both positive and negative attitudes. Additionally, students’ attitudes may be more negative than they report, as studies that rely on self-report may underestimate bias and prejudice, especially since none of these studies adjust for social desirability in responding. Self-report instruments may also fail to capture unconscious forms of bias. It is possible then, that heterosexual and cisgender counselors and counselor trainees may exhibit more bias than self-report measures indicate.

Students and faculty who hold prejudiced attitudes, whether conscious or unconscious, are likely to behave in a biased way toward LGBT counselor trainees. While no studies examine this possibility, studies of responses to clients support this idea. Trainees’ attitudes toward LGBT people have been linked to their competence with LGBT clients (e.g., Barrett et al., 2002; Mohr et al., 2001). Brooks and Inman (2013) investigated bisexual counseling competence among 101 psychologists. Attitudes among these clinicians, specifically their acceptance of bisexuality as a legitimate and stable sexual orientation, were linked to their competence. Importantly, trainees who had more LGB-specific training reported more acceptance of bisexuality as a stable identity.
Competencies for Working with LGBT Clients

A number of studies have also examined whether students’ training experiences adequately prepared them for working with LGBT clients. Though there is less research in this area, these studies provide important information about the environment into which LGBT students matriculate. Participants in Graham et al.’s (2012) study of 234 counseling and counseling psychology students reported mid-range levels of competence. Specifically, they reported the highest competence in awareness of LGB issues, somewhat lower competence in knowledge about LGB populations, as well as lower competence in skills for working with LGB clients. As with studies of attitudes, this suggests that even when students hold positive attitudes, they may still have insufficient knowledge and skill to interact affirmatively with LGBT people. This is especially likely given the lack of LGBT-specific education reported by counselor trainees. Bidell (2014) examined the training experiences of counseling and psychology students, and found that only 68 out of 286 participants had taken a graduate course focusing on LGB issues. They measured trainees’ sexual orientation competence (SOC) and found that while completion of an LGB-specific graduate course predicted SOC, completion of the general multicultural course did not. Even when heterosexual and cisgender students receive LGBT-specific training, this training may not always ensure they interact with their peers in an affirming way. In one earlier study of the impact of two types of training (information-based and attitude-based) on the LGB competence of 161 graduate counseling students, information-based training improved knowledge competence level, but after attitude-based training participants actually reported more negative attitudes toward LGB people (Israel & Hackett, 2004).

Despite the limited competence suggested in these studies, results also indicate students and faculty do report acquiring some knowledge and skills to work with LGBT clients. Farmer,
Welfare, & Burgeal. (2013) compared the SOC of 468 counselors working in different practice settings. Counselor educators felt most competent to work with LGB clients when compared to other counseling professionals. This suggests counselor educators might be better prepared to offer affirmation and support to LGBT students than other groups of counselors.

**Program Environments**

A few studies have also examined affirming behaviors of counselor training programs. Most studies of program environments investigated psychology programs, so results may not be applicable to counselor education programs. Only one study was identified for this review that explored program-level expectations in counselor education programs. This study of diversity representation in programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) revealed that few programs kept data on LGBT student enrollment, and representatives reported discomfort asking about student sexual orientation or gender identity, or keeping data on whether such students are represented in their programs (Shin, Smith, Goodrich, & LaRosa, 2011).

While other studies were conducted in psychology programs, they elucidate potential strengths and weaknesses of counselor training environments. Bidell et al. (2007) and Bidell et al. (2006) investigated the diversity-related content of psychology program websites and application materials. Programs typically included very little LGB-related content in these materials. The neglect of LGB content might send a message to LGB prospective students about whether these programs are likely to be affirming places for study. The authors suggested that programs develop LGB-specific recruitment strategies, and offer and publicize LGB-related course content and research agendas.
Program environments are likely to be important in determining the experience of LGBT students. While there is a lack of research describing the environment of counselor education programs, other studies on the impact of organizational environment suggest counselors who work in affirming environments are more likely to demonstrate LGB-affirming behaviors. In the Miller et al. (2007) study, participants’ perception of institutional support for LGB people predicted both their attitudes and behavior. Similarly, Matthews, Selvidge, and Fisher (2005) studied the attitudes and behaviors of 179 addiction counselors (80.2% White, 60.4% women, 81.9% heterosexual) toward LGB clients. Counselors who worked in nonheterosexist organizational climates were more likely to report practicing affirming behaviors in working with LGB clients, as were those who were female, LGB-identified, and had more experience and more positive attitudes toward LGB people.

**Microaggressions in Counselor Training**

There are few studies that examine microaggressions in counselor training, and no studies that look solely at counselor education programs. Studies that do exist focus on racial microaggressions. These studies suggest students who experience subtle discrimination in their programs experience increased stress and feel alienated from others in their programs (Clark, Mercer, Zeigler-Hill, & Dufrene, 2012; Constantine & Sue, 2007). Consistent with theoretical literature on microaggressions, students who experienced racial microaggressions described an intense process of making sense of and responding to these events, a process which increased the labor and stress of completing their programs.

Clark et al. (2012) studied racial microaggressions among 400 school psychology graduate students (both students of color and White students). Ethnic minority students in their sample reported experiencing more racial microaggressions in their programs than White
students. Students who experienced more microaggressions had less of a sense of belonging in their program. A limitation of the study was that it was conducted at the beginning of the school year, so some students may have had limited experience in their program. Nonetheless, the study provides some indication of students’ experiences in their programs.

Constantine and Sue (2007) conducted a qualitative examination of the microaggression experiences of 10 Black supervisees in cross-racial supervision dyads. These students reported their supervisors sometimes ignored or invalidated racial or cultural issues rather than addressing them. They sometimes stereotyped Black clients or Black supervisees. Some seemed reluctant at times to give performance feedback to Black supervisees because they believed they might be seen as racist. Others gave only feedback on supervisees’ weaknesses without identifying their strengths. Supervisors sometimes seemed to lack knowledge about the cultures and experiences of Black clients and gave treatment recommendations that were insensitive to these clients. Some blamed clients for problems resulting from systemic oppression. When supervisees experienced these microaggressions, they reported having strong emotion reactions of shock, disbelief, anger, and disappointment. They additionally reported some distrust toward their supervisors, and that this hindered them from fully engaging in the supervision process. The authors of the study cautioned that the study might not accurately represent all cross-racial supervision relationships, but it affirmed that some students experience racial microaggressions in their programs.

Faculty in counselor training programs have also reported experiencing racial microaggressions. Constantine, Smith, Redington, and Owens (2008) studied racial microaggressions experienced by 12 Black faculty members in counseling and counseling psychology programs. Faculty reported sometimes feeling alternately invisible and hypervisible,
their presence barely noted or valued by other faculty members in their programs until they were wanted to provide diversity representation or multicultural expertise. Faculty members also indicated other faculty members and students frequently challenged their credentials. They reported receiving little mentoring or support from other faculty and staff. Instead, they were often expected to take on extra diversity-related tasks, roles that were not highly valued by other faculty members. Female faculty members reported some uncertainty about whether the microaggressions they experienced were due to their gender or their race. In general, Black faculty members in these programs believed others were scrutinizing their appearance (e.g., clothing, hairstyle, manner of speech) and felt somewhat self-conscious as a result. Faculty members used a variety of strategies to cope with these experiences. Some reported withdrawing from relationships with other faculty members in order to protect themselves from microaggression experiences. They had to engage in a decision-making process regarding whether and how to respond to racial microaggressions. Many sought support from friends or family or using spirituality to cope.

These studies support the idea that microaggressions occur within counselor education programs, and that these experiences have a profound impact on both students and faculty. However, since these studies only explore racial microaggressions, they cannot illuminate how students experience LGBT microaggressions in their programs.

**LGBT Students in Counselor Education Programs**

Despite the substantial number of studies exploring counselor trainees’ attitudes toward LGB people and competencies for working with LGB clients, LGBT participants remained relatively invisible in these studies. Many studies did collect data on the sexual orientation of participants, and this data consistently revealed that LGB participants were included in these
samples. However, little mention was made of this fact, and these participants’ attitudes were usually not explored in isolation from other participants. Several studies did not even collect demographic data on the sexual orientation of participants, and even more did not ask participants to indicate transgender identity. Discussion of the experiences of LGBT counselor trainees and counselor educators was rare.

A few authors mentioned the need to create LGB-affirming training environments. Bahr, Brish, and Croteau (2000) offered specific suggestions for faculty in psychology training programs, such as modeling affirmation, confronting anti-LGBT jokes or stereotypes, educating students on LGBT issues, posting visible LGBT-affirming content in program materials, and, significantly, hiring LGBT faculty. They argued that having “out” LGBT faculty in programs could make important mentoring relationships available for LGBT students. Russell and Horne (2009) also pointed to the need for affirming mentors for LGBT students, and recommended that mentors and supervisors discuss possible instances of bias with their mentees.

As discussed in Chapter I, only a few studies look at the experiences of LGBT students in counselor education programs, and most are outdated. These studies will now be explored in greater detail. In one early study, Pilkington and Cantor (1996) surveyed LGB graduate students in psychology programs about instances of bias and discrimination in their programs. They reported encountering bias in textbooks and course materials, including neglect or minimization of non-heterosexual identities, talk of diagnosing or curing homosexuality, stereotyping LGB people, or pathologizing same-sex attraction or relationships. They reported hearing similarly biased comments from faculty members. They reported that when they demonstrated interest in conducting LGB-related research, they were sometimes discouraged, sometimes warned that it could hurt their careers, sometimes received little support, and sometimes were actually
sabotaged or prevented from undertaking such research. As this study was conducted two decades ago, it may not provide an accurate picture of LGBT students’ current experiences, however.

Lark et al. (1998) studied the mentoring experiences of 14 LGB students in counseling psychology graduate programs. The focus of the study and the reporting format precluded description of many microaggressions in this article. However, some participants discussed that students in their programs were pressured not to choose LGB-related topics for research. Some also indicated that in their programs LGB topics were largely neglected. Again, this study is quite outdated, and looked at only counseling psychology programs, and not at microaggression experiences specifically.

Croteau et al. (2005) collected the 26 narratives about heterosexism in the counseling professions. Writers of these narratives were LGB-identified individuals and allies. The narratives included did not focus primarily on participants’ training experiences, but several participants described some of their experiences. A review of the narratives provides multiple examples of microaggressions. A gay man reported that during his training, few faculty members addressed sexual orientation in classes, faculty pressured him to stay silent about or disguise his sexual orientation, he was exposed to jokes about AIDS in the training environment, and a colleague pressured him to date women. Another gay man and his heterosexual female colleague reported that early in their relationship, when they worked on a mutual project, she deleted all references to sexual orientation in the project, and when confronted, told him she could not be gay affirming. A lesbian who identified herself as a Hispanic woman with Spanish, Cuban, and Middle Eastern roots shared that information about sexual and ethnic minorities was largely neglected in her counseling psychology graduate program; at the same time, she reported
she was pressured to be a “multicultural spokesperson” for these identities (p. 75). Another lesbian woman reported experiencing both sexism (e.g., sexualized photos of women included in a faculty presentation) and heterosexism (e.g., being pressured by faculty members to keep her identity a secret, hearing others complain about the inclusion of LGB topics at a conference) in her program. A gay, gender-variant participant of color reported that a faculty member told them they should publish in a “real journal” rather than an LGBT-specific journal (p. 54). A bisexual female participant reported being mis-identified as either lesbian or heterosexual. Many of these participants discussed their experiences in terms of multiple social identities. As Bieschke, Croteau, Lark, and Vandiver (2005) put it in their analysis of the narratives, “Race, culture, and other forms of diversity profoundly influence the shaping of individuals’ experiences of sexual orientation and heterosexism” (p. 202). This collection of narratives provides strong support for the necessity of examining LGBT microaggressions in counselor education, as it provides some evidence that these may occur and affect LGBT students’ sense of safety and well-being. However, it is over a decade old, and does not focus on counselor education program specifically, so data from this collection cannot provide a current picture of these contexts.

Pollock and Meek (2016) recently conducted an exploratory survey of the experiences of lesbian and gay students in counselor education programs. Using counseling listservs, Facebook, and word of mouth, they distributed an online survey which asked participants to indicate (on a 5-point Likert scale) their agreement with 15 statements, indicating that they had experienced microaggressions from members of their programs. Specifically, participants were asked about heterosexist comments (defined as gay/lesbian slurs, gay/lesbian stereotypes, and generalized presumption of heterosexuality), microaggressions (which were not defined), verbal harassment, and physical abuse from other students, faculty members, and administrative staff. They were
also asked to indicate if they felt safe in their programs. 43 lesbian and gay participants responded to their survey. About a fifth indicated that they felt some lack of safety in their programs. Several reported heterosexist comments from other students (50% of their sample), and several reported similar comments from faculty (30%). Many reported microaggressions from other students (46%), and faculty (25%). A few reported verbal harassment from students or faculty. Less than half of their sample fully agreed that their LG identity was affirmed by their program. This study provides the clearest current indication that LGBT students experience microaggressions in their counselor education programs. However, the study did not explore types of microaggressions encountered in the program, how students experienced them, or how they made sense of these experiences.

Need for LGBT Microaggressions Research in Counselor Education

Previous explorations of LGBT microaggressions reveal LGBT microaggressions may differ depending on the identities held by the victim and the context in which the microaggression occurs. Moreover, research suggests that without descriptions of how anti-LGBT bias may manifest, counselor educators may fail to notice it. McCabe, Dragowski, and Rubinson (2013) studied 292 school psychologists’ perceptions of microaggressions against LGBTQ students in the schools where they worked. Most participants (93%) identified as heterosexual. They used two versions of a survey assessing incidents of bias and discrimination. Half of the sample completed a version that provided a general definition of LGBTQ bias and harassment, and asked participants to estimate, in general, how often they observed incidents of bias and harassment. The other half of the sample completed a version of the instrument that asked additional questions about how often participants observed specific types of bias and harassment (e.g., hearing a student say, “that’s so gay”). When participants were asked to
estimate the incidence of specific types of bias, they reported observing bias much more frequently than when they were merely asked to describe incidents of bias in general (though this difference was less pronounced when participants were rating incidents of bias toward gender-nonconforming students). For example, while only 16% of the sample reported witnessing homophobic bias at least once a month, 43% reported observing specific incidents of bias. This suggests participants may have had difficulty recognizing homophobic bias, or may not have perceived specific homophobic acts as discriminatory. The authors argue that “such dismissal of homophobic verbal remarks can be seen as a product of internalization of prevailing organizational norms and values” (p. 20), which prevented participants from recognizing such events as discriminatory and harmful. This suggests that identifying how bias presents itself specifically in different contexts may be necessary for it to be recognized and confronted. If this is the case, merely informing counseling professionals and students that they must not discriminate without providing guidance on what discrimination looks like may be insufficient to prevent such bias from occurring.

Research suggests LGBT microaggressions and experiences of bias in educational contexts may have profound effects on victims’ mental health and their educational progress. It is therefore critical for research to explore the subtle forms of bias that LGBT counselor trainees experience in their programs.

**Conclusion**

This chapter provided a review of the conceptual and research literature on microaggression theory and LGBT microaggressions specifically. While research has investigated LGBT microaggressions broadly across contexts and some research has looked at microaggressions in more specific contexts, for example, therapy, there is a lack of research on
LGBT microaggressions in counselor education programs. This study, therefore, examined the experiences of LGBT graduate students who are enrolled in such program
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The current study explored the microaggression experiences of LGBT students in counselor education programs, across a broad range of contexts, with diverse identities. This chapter provides a description of the research methodology chosen for this study and the rationale for this choice. It proceeds by identifying the researcher’s assumptions to reveal potential biases and presuppositions that may have placed limitations on the research. A field test of the study procedures will be discussed. The chapter will conclude with a description of the final research design, including recruitment of participants, data collection, and data analysis. This researcher obtained HSIRB approval at Western Michigan University to conduct this study (See Appendix I).

Research Questions

As presented in Chapter 1, the current research was guided by four broad research questions:

1. What are LGBT counselor education students’ lived experiences of LGBT microaggressions?
2. What are LGBT counselor education students’ lived experiences of microaggressions around any other identity?
3. How do participants make meaning of microaggression experience?
4. How do participants make meaning of their microaggression experiences in the context of their multiple identities?
Methodology

Qualitative researchers attempt to gain understanding of the world by observing it directly and using analytic methods to make meaning of their observations. Denzin and Lincoln’s (2008) definition of qualitative research emphasizes the “situated” quality of this work:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations…At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 4)

In contrast to quantitative research, which seeks to eliminate the influence of the researcher’s subjective perceptions by controlling factors that might affect the research outcome, qualitative research is, in a sense, uncontrolled. Qualitative researchers study topics of interest in naturalistic settings, as they appear in the world (Creswell, 2013).

A qualitative approach was utilized for this study, as qualitative methods are often used to explore previously under-researched topics. Because qualitative research looks at experiences as they exist in the world, it is particularly well-suited to exploratory research, where lack of information makes it difficult to know what to look at or measure. While several research studies have investigated LGBT microaggressions, there is a lack of research on LGBT students’ microaggression experiences in counselor education. Qualitative methodology allowed me the flexibility to pursue topics that were significant to participants, as they arose during interviews.

Denzin and Lincoln (2008) described how early qualitative research studies were conducted by White researchers who used these observational methods to study other cultural groups, for the purpose of controlling or manipulating these groups to serve White interests. However, because qualitative research evolved to make sense of complex human experiences
and interactions, qualitative research also provides methods that have the potential to give voice to the experiences and perspectives of oppressed and marginalized groups (Croteau, 2008). Qualitative research is therefore particularly appropriate to the study of LGBT microaggressions, as it enables researchers to observe and make sense of LGBT students’ experiences.

Creswell (2013) characterized qualitative research as a process that is guided by theoretical frameworks that inform the selection of methods and processes for study. Different theoretical frameworks offer different perspectives on qualitative knowledge acquisition; the focus and mode of inquiry are guided by the assumptions of the researcher’s theoretical frame. This study utilized a phenomenology, a qualitative research design that explores participants’ experiences of a given phenomenon (in this case, LGBT microaggressions in counselor education programs). A phenomenon is an experience that arises from living in the world (van Manen, 2014; Vagle, 2014). Phenomena are not solely products of human consciousness, nor are they simply the external features of the world presenting themselves to us; they arise from our interaction with the world of other people and things (Vagle, 2014). Phenomenological researchers attempt to describe participants’ experience in a manner that evokes the experience as nearly as possible (van Manen, 2014). They aim to describe experiences as they are lived in the moment. Phenomenological theorists propose that the moment, the now of lived experience, is always inaccessible because it as soon as it is reflected upon, it is altered (van Manen, 2014). Phenomenological methods are therefore guided by an attitude of uncovering, of seeking to clear away the theories, presuppositions, and reflections that distract us from seeing experience as it is lived. Phenomenologists desire to capture the moment of lived experience prior to reflection, the “pre-reflective experience” of the now (van Mannen, 2014).
For this study, a specific type of phenomenological inquiry was utilized, interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith & Eatough, 2007; Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA adds to the exploration of phenomena an emphasis on interpretation of experiences. IPA is influenced by the field of hermeneutics, a body of theories about textual interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). IPA researchers focus on how participants make sense of their own experiences. In addition, IPA researchers engage in a “double hermeneutic”; to understand how participants make sense of their experiences, researchers must engage in a process of trying to make sense of how participants make sense of their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 51). Researchers go through their own meaning-making process to make sense of participants’ accounts. To understand participants’ experiences, researchers analyze each case in detail, examine each participant’s use of language to discover manifest and latent meanings, compare data from the interviews, and situate the lived experiences of participants in the context of existing bodies of knowledge (Smith et al., 2009). Researchers use existing knowledge and theoretical frames to explain participants’ experiences, while also allowing participants’ experiences to inform and modify these pre-existing conceptions (Smith et al., 2009). The interpretive nature of this process distinguishes IPA methods from other phenomenological methods; IPA allows researchers to look for hidden or unconscious meanings of which participants may be unaware, and to make conceptual interpretations of participants’ experiences (Smith et al., 2003; Smith et al., 2009).

IPA was selected for this research because it allowed for an interface with existing microaggression theory and research to make sense of the data. IPA also allowed an exploration of how participants interpret their own experiences; rather than focusing solely on their experiences as they are lived in the moment. This latter exploration was of particular importance
because existing theory and research suggested that because microaggressions are subtle and sometimes ambiguous, participants may engage in arduous meaning-making processes to make sense of them after the fact.

This study was also shaped by intersectionality theory, which posits that each individual’s experience is shaped by multiple social identities (Collins, 1998). Croteau (2008) pointed out that much of the psychological research and literature on LGBT individuals has looked primarily at White, middle and upper class LGBT people, consequently “most of what we know about sexual orientation is, in fact, knowledge about this particular group of people with same-sex attractions” (p. 647). He critiqued the idea that different identities can be studied or accurately conceptualized in isolation from each other; indeed, he argued that “seeing the self as made up of various separate psychological and social aspects” may be a “culturally centric” way of understanding human beings that is based in a White European worldview. Bowleg (2008) argued that social statuses and identities are “interdependent and mutually constitutive rather than independent and unidimensional” (p. 312), and cannot be adequately studied in isolation from each other. So, for example, asking an Asian American lesbian woman about the microaggressions she experiences as a lesbian will fail to capture the ways in which her social identities and others’ reactions to those identities shape her experience in complex, interlocking ways. At the same time, because each specific identity and its accompanying social status play a unique role in determining experience, it is worthwhile at times to attempt to tease out the impact of one identity. The current research therefore asked participants to first explore microaggressions related to one identity (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender identity) and then asked them to place this discussion in the context of their whole experience. In this way, the research was designed to obtain a rich description of how microaggressions are experienced by
LGBT people who hold a broad spectrum of identities, and to see how they make sense of their experiences in the context of multiple identities, rather than examining LGBT identity in isolation from the whole person.

This perspective on intersectionality also shaped the selection of research methodology. According to Smith et al. (2009), IPA research is idiographic:

IPA is committed to the detailed examination of the particular case. It wants to know in detail what the experience for this person is like, what sense this particular person is making of what is happening to them...the aim is to reveal something of the experience of each of those individuals. As part of this, the study may explore in detail the similarities and differences between each case (p. 3).

IPA was particularly appropriate to conducting an intersectional examination of LGBT microaggressions, as it allowed for exploring the complex phenomenon of microaggressions as they were experienced by participants with different social identities. It also allowed me to explore how experiences of microaggressions converge and diverge between LGBT people of different races, genders, and ability statuses.

**Field Test**

Before conducting the current study, a field test was conducted to clarify the proposed methods and procedures (results of the field test are presented in Appendix G). Participants for the field test were 5 LGBT-identified counselor trainees who were all currently enrolled in counselor education programs. They were recruited through the Counselor Education and Supervision Network (CESNET) listserv for counselor educators and students, and the listserv for the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Interests in Counseling (ALGBTIC). The field test served to refine the study methods as follows:

First, the wording of the recruitment script was changed. To recruit a sample that was diverse in terms of race, gender identity, and ability, the script initially indicated that the
A researcher was interested in examining a broad range of experiences. Initial response to this recruitment e-mail was quite low; only two people responded. The recruitment script was reviewed, and it was determined that potential participants might be confused by the wording. Because this phrase was lengthy, it may have confused some participants and discouraged them from reading further. It also might have given the impression that only those with multiple oppressed identities could participate. The recruitment script was modified to exclude this passage, and the modified script was used in the current study.

Second, procedures were changed to allow participants to give verbal consent on Skype interviews. In conducting the first few interviews, it was discovered that asking students to print, sign and scan informed consent forms was impractical and made it difficult to collect the forms in a timely fashion. In consultation with HSIRB, the consent process was modified; participants in the current study were informed that proceeding with the interview implied their consent.

Third, the initial interview protocol was changed (Appendix D). Participants in the field test focused on describing others’ microaggressive behavior, and did not sufficiently describe their own internal experiences. The revised interview protocol (Appendix E) included questions to help participants enter the mindset of describing their internal experiences. In addition, the initial interview questions did not prompt participants to speak about their history and identity. Questions about participants’ history and identity development were added to place their microaggression experiences in context.

**Personal Background**

I am a White, lesbian woman currently completing my doctoral degree in a counselor education program in the Midwestern United States. I also identify as a person with a visible physical disability. I came out in both my master’s and doctoral counselor education programs,
and have experienced both support and discrimination within these programs. These experiences inevitably shape my perspective on the topic at hand. My personal experience may have helped me engage with participants’ experiences more deeply and describe them more fully. At the same time, my history and preconceptions had the potential to bias my analysis, or prevent me from fully understanding participants’ experiences.

To minimize the influence of bias on data analysis, I used the technique of bracketing. Prior to collecting data, I wrote an époché, a detailed account of my own experience with this topic. I used this document to help me set aside my own thoughts, feelings, and reactions, to minimize their influence on my data collection and analysis.

**Assumptions**

I identified the following assumptions, supported by prior research, to guide the research process.

- Microaggressions exist. That is, people who hold certain identities (e.g. person of color, LGBT person, etc.) have experiences that they recognize as small or subtle discrimination, and that these experiences are qualitatively different in some way from macroaggressions (overt acts of discrimination) (Nadal et al., 2012; Nadal et al., 2014).
- Most LGBT students experience microaggressions in their programs at least occasionally (Croteau et al., 2005).
- Microaggression experiences may vary depending on the specific program and the student’s identity (Croteau et al., 2005).
- Microaggressions sometimes target more than one identity (Balsam et al., 2011).
Study Design

Participants

Participants for the study were 12 LGBT-identified counselor trainees who were currently enrolled in a counselor education program or had left such a program within the past two years. Only LGBT-identified students were invited to participate, as they experience microaggressions most directly; interviewing these individuals allowed for an in-depth examination of the small daily types of discrimination they encounter in their programs. I chose to explore both LGB and transgender microaggressions in this study. Theory and research support the idea that there are both similarities and differences in microaggression experiences based on sexual identity and gender identity (e.g. Nadal, 2010; Nadal et al., 2012). Similar types of bias may be demonstrated toward LGB sexuality and transgender identity; for example, both LGB sexual identities and transgender identities may be labeled as sinful, immoral, deviant, or abnormal (Nadal, 2010; Nadal et al., 2012). In addition, Sue et al. (2010) hypothesized that while the content of microaggressions may vary, the subtle and ambiguous nature of microaggressions is common to all types of microaggressions, and so targets of microaggressions may respond to microaggression experiences in similar ways. The methodology I chose to utilize for this study (IPA) involves analysis of both differences and similarities in the sample. In order to adequately explore similarities and differences, maximal variation was sought in sampling, as described below.

Table 2 describes the demographics of the sample. Six participants identified as cisgender women (50%), 2 as cisgender men (16%), and the remaining 4 participants identified as transgender (34%), with 1 identifying as agender (8%), 1 identifying as gender neutral (8%), 1
identifying as nonbinary (8%), and 1 identifying as FTM (8%). Eight participants identified as European American (66%), 3 as African American (25%), and 1 as Asian (8%). Six of the participants identified as either bisexual or pansexual (50%), 3 as lesbian (25%), 2 as gay (16%) and 1 as heterosexual (9%). Four participants identified as people with disabilities (33%). Eleven participants reported their age; they ranged in age from 24 to 43. The mean age for the sample was 31.6. Participants were equally divided between master’s students (50%) and doctoral students (50%). Four participants had graduated from their programs within the last two years (33%); these participants were graduates of master’s programs. Of the remaining students, 2 were in their first year of their program (16%), 2 in their second year (16%), 3 in their third year (25%), and 1 in their fourth year (8%).
Table 2

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Pronouns</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Disability</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Lesbian/Queer</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Bisexual/Queer</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>Bisexual/Pansexual</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Agender</td>
<td>They/Them</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Nonbinary</td>
<td>They/Them</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>FTM</td>
<td>He/him</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Gender Neutral</td>
<td>They/Them</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>Queer/Bisexual</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>He/Him</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>She/Her</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>He/Him</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recruitment and Consent Process

Participants were recruited through professional e-mail listservs and snowball sampling. Specifically, recruitment e-mails (Appendix A) were sent through the CESNET listserv (a listserv for counselor educators and trainees) and the AGLBTIC listserv (the listserv for the Association of Gay Lesbian Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling, a division of the American Counseling Association which is open to both professional counselors and counseling students). The invitation to participate was extended to approximately 4100 individuals through these two listservs. The recruitment e-mail invited potential participants to contact the student investigator via e-mail or phone to hear more about the study. I then contacted potential participants to schedule a time to go over the informed consent document (Appendix B) and (if the potential participant chose to do so) complete an interview. During this meeting, I shared a copy of the consent document via e-mail, and went over each section verbally. I asked the potential participant if they had any questions or concerns, and addressed these before asking the potential participant for their consent. If the participant agreed to participate in the study, they were notified that proceeding with the interview gave their consent to participate.

Participants were asked to identify other individuals whom they believed would be interested in completing the study, and provide phone numbers and e-mail addresses for these individuals (snowball sampling). However, no participants chose to provide contact info for potential participants; most agreed to send the recruitment e-mail to friends. I sent reminder e-mails periodically to each listserv as needed to continue to recruit potential participants, until saturation was reached. Because students’ experiences may differ depending on their sexual identity, gender identity, race/ethnicity, ability/disability and other factors, I sought to obtain maximal variation in the sample. I enrolled the first ten people to express interest in the study.
After completing these interviews, I completed the informed consent process with four more potential participants, and selected two participants who increased the gender and racial diversity of the sample. At this point saturation was reached, and no further participants were enrolled in the study.

**Data Collection**

After consent was obtained, the participants were asked to complete a demographic form (Appendix C), and then the interview was conducted using a semi-structured interview format (Appendix E). According to Seidman (2013), phenomenological interviewing asks participants to recover their experience as they perceived it in the moment, to get as close as possible to the essence of that experience. Participants are also asked to explain the meanings they made of their experiences. Seidman suggests a three-interview research format to address these purposes. In the first interview, the researcher conducts a focused life-history of the participant. In the second interview, the researcher asks the participant to recapture their experience of the phenomenon of interest. In the final interview, the researcher invites participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. I modified this format to include two phases of data collection. In the first phase, I conducted one interview with each participant, using a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix E). The interview began by asking participants how they describe their sexual orientation and gender identity, and how they came to describe themselves in that way. It next explored students’ overall experiences in their program, to provide context for their microaggression experiences. Participants were asked how they experience their program in the context of all their identities. Next, students’ microaggression experiences were explored; participants were asked to describe specific instances in which they experienced subtle discrimination of any type. Finally, participants were asked to describe their experiences of
LGBT microaggressions in their programs. These questions provided a basic framework for exploring participants’ microaggression experiences as they were lived in the moment. Follow-up questions and prompts were used to elicit in-depth descriptions. Participants were then asked how they made sense of their microaggression experiences. Additional areas of interest that arose during the interviews were also pursued to meet the goal of phenomenological research to describe participants’ lived experiences as closely as possible; the interviews followed what participants emphasized as important, in order to open additional areas of inquiry (Smith et al., 2003).

Audio recordings of individual interviews were made using an electronic recording device. MP3 files were immediately transferred to an encrypted, password-protected external hard drive after completion of the interview, and erased from the recording device SD card. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim.

After the interview, I conducted a second phase of data collection. I invited each participant to read the transcript of their interview, add anything they would like to the transcript, and then journal about the meaning of their experiences (Appendix F). This member-checking provided additional data about how participants made sense of their microaggression experiences.

**Data Analysis**

I enrolled ten participants in the study initially, and then chose to enroll an additional two to increase the diversity of the sample (adding one White gay male participant and one Asian international queer female participant), as I had fewer men in my study, and the sample represented only two racial groups (European American and African American). At this point, I
determined that saturation had been reached, as review of the material from previous interviews demonstrated that little new material was added in these interviews.

Data analysis followed a slightly modified version of the steps outlined by Smith et al. (2009) for IPA research. I started with a detailed analysis of one case, first immersing myself in the case by reading the transcript and journal from that participant several times. I then took notes on my initial impressions, and recorded descriptive comments about the content of the transcript, linguistic perceptions (i.e. my perception of how the client used language), and conceptual comments (potential interpretations of the participant’s experience). After these steps were completed, I chose to code each transcript (a step not included in the Smith et al. 2009 description), to allow me to easily compare themes with the data. I then did an initial grouping of codes into theme areas, and used my initial notes to help develop a first set of emergent themes and subthemes. Using Microsoft Excel, I then went back and assigned each code to the appropriate theme/subtheme to compare themes to the data to determine if they accurately reflected the participant’s experience. As appropriate, I modified themes and subthemes during this stage to more accurately reflect the data. I then looked for connections among themes, and attempted to graphically depict the relationships among themes.

I repeated this process for each interview, attempting to bracket perceptions and ideas formed in analyzing the other cases, so as to attend to the fresh information presented in each case. I then took the lists of themes developed from each transcript, and looked for patterns among the cases. Throughout the process, as suggested by Smith et al. (2009) I worked to interpret the data, looking carefully at the meanings of the text and how they might be explained conceptually, and checking my interpretation against the data. After developing the initial list of themes and subthemes for the whole group, I then assigned codes from all interviews to the
appropriate themes/subthemes. As appropriate, I modified the set of themes and subthemes during this process, to more accurately reflect the data.

I kept a detailed log-trail of the data analysis process, and preserved all stages of the evolution of the process. Upon completion of data analysis, I recruited an independent auditor to whom I explained my analysis process, and how I arrived at each theme. The auditor confirmed that my analysis was drawn from the data.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a term used by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to describe the quality of qualitative research. Other terms have been used (e.g. rigor), but the basic concept is the same; to demonstrate that their findings are valid, qualitative researchers must demonstrate that their findings accurately reflect what is being studied. Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that qualitative researchers must provide evidence that their research meets four criteria for trustworthiness:

- **Credibility**: truthfulness
- **Transferability**: that results may be applied across contexts
- **Dependability**: that results are reliable or replicable
- **Confirmability**: that results were not influenced by bias

A multiplicity of standards have been advanced for evaluating the quality of qualitative research. Creswell (2013) summarizes eight of the strategies commonly used by qualitative researchers to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of their work:

- **Prolonged engagement and persistent observation**. Researchers arrange to spend substantial time with their participants, sometimes over multiple encounters.
They also may do background research on the culture or experiences of participants, to minimize the impact of their pre-conceptions.

- **Triangulation.** Researchers seek multiple sources and types of data to provide multiple points of evidence for their results.

- **Peer review or debriefing.** Researchers submit their work to professional peers for critique and alternative perspectives.

- **Negative case analysis.** Researchers search for evidence in the data that would disconfirm their findings.

- **Clarifying researcher bias.** Researchers explore their own past experiences, biases, and presuppositions to prevent these from unduly influencing their findings.

- **Member checking.** Researchers involve participants by allowing them to examine data or the researcher’s interpretation, and provide feedback.

- **Rich, thick description.** Researchers describe their participants, their settings, and their experiences in detail, to allow others to determine to what extent study results may be transferable to other settings.

- **External audits.** Researchers submit the record of their research process and their findings to an external expert who has had no previous involvement with the study. The auditor reviews these records to determine if the analysis and interpretation are consistent with the data.

Merely using these strategies is not enough to ensure that qualitative research is trustworthy. Armour et al. (2009) argue that a criterion-based approach is not sufficient to ensure trustworthiness; researchers must also attend to the “idiosyncratic threats to rigor that
inevitably emerge when a study is examined for its specific vulnerabilities” (pg. 102). They outline several threats to trustworthiness that may arise in hermeneutic phenomenological approaches, and suggest that these approaches are particularly vulnerable to researcher bias precisely because of their interpretive nature. Using their work as a guide, I identified the idiosyncratic threats to rigor in my study. Below I describe how I addressed each of these threats in my study design and procedures.

**Participant Factors**

Participants in this study may have been reluctant to share their experiences openly for fear of being identified, since they knew that research results will be disseminated to the professional community of which they are a part. To address this threat to validity, I described to each participant in detail the procedures that I used to protect their confidentiality, and emphasized that I am taking great care to maintain their anonymity in reporting results by disguising their identity. I also attempted to put participants at ease, beginning each interview by building rapport with the participant.

**Researcher Factors**

Because I have lived experience of sexual orientation microaggressions, there was a possibility that my experiences and reactions might bias my results. I used bracketing to limit the impact of my biases and pre-conceptions on the study. Prior to beginning my field test, I journaled extensively about my own experiences and the meaning I have made of them, to set aside my presuppositions.

Another potential source of researcher bias in my study was my reactions to interviews. My response to previous interviews might have impacted my future interviews, especially as I began data analysis; my thoughts and interpretations of already existing data might have caused
me to miss new data or fail to notice subtle differences between participants. To prevent this type of bias, I made a log entry after each interview describing my initial impressions of the interview. I also recorded my initial interpretations in my log, to bracket these and set them aside for each fresh interview. I conducted data analysis of each interview separately, and wrote the results for each interview before proceeding to analysis of the next interview.

**Lack of Lived Experience of Certain Types of Microaggressions**

While I have experienced sexual orientation microaggressions personally, other types of microaggressions are less familiar to me. My lack of personal experience of cissexist microaggressions and racial microaggressions limit my pre-understanding in these areas. To address this, I did substantial reading about these types of microaggressions experiences, and explored intersectionality research to familiarize myself with microaggressions that are directed toward more than one oppressed identity.

**Interpretive Nature of the Methodology**

Because IPA data analysis makes use of both pre-existing theory and the researcher’s knowledge and pre-experience, it is particularly vulnerable to bias (Armour et al., 2009). To compensate for this vulnerability, I made use of bracketing (as already described). I also used member-checking. After completing each transcript, I sent it to the participant and asked them to modify and comment on it. This provided a validity-check to ensure that my own pre-conceptions did not have an undue influence on the direction of the interview and what was shared. I also made use of the part-whole-part strategy described by Smith et al. (2009), starting with a detailed analysis of each case, checking my analysis against the whole of my data, and then checking my broad generalizations about the data against each specific case, to ensure that my interpretation accurately reflected what participants shared. In addition, I asked an external
auditor to review my log trail and my findings to verify that my analysis is supported by the data. To allow others to determine the extent to which results are applicable in other contexts, I provided thick description of participants and their contexts, while ensuring their anonymity.

**Conclusion**

This chapter summarized the research methods used for this study. It presented the specific methodology (IPA) selected for this research, and its usefulness for exploring microaggression experiences. The procedures used in the study were described, including recruitment, consent, interview, and member-checking procedures. The process of data analysis was then explained. The results of this analysis are presented and discussed in Chapter IV.
CHAPTER IV

STUDY RESULTS

This chapter provides an analysis of the 12 interviews completed for this study. First, the chapter presents data analysis of each individual interview. Second, the chapter presents microaggression themes for the whole sample. Finally, the chapter presents the phenomenological themes for the entire sample (demographic characteristics of the sample are described in Chapter III, Table 3).

Analysis of Individual Interviews

As described in Chapter III, I conducted data analysis of each interview individually before looking at themes for the sample. I looked at interviews one at a time, completing the analysis of the first interview before proceeding to the second, and so on. I did this to limit the influence of data from one interview on analysis of other interviews. I engaged in bracketing to set aside analysis of one interview when looking at the next interview.

I followed a modified version of the data analysis process described by Smith et al. (2009). I first read and re-read one interview, immersing myself in that interview. I also reviewed my log trail notes for that interview. I then made detailed notes on the interview, including conceptual notes, linguistic notes, and descriptive notes. Next I conducted emergent coding of the interview, separating the text into meaning units in Microsoft Excel. This was a step I added to the IPA process to ensure precision in analysis, and to allow me to examine the prevalence of themes within the data. Once coding was complete, I placed similar codes into groups in Excel. I then used my notes to assist me in generating an initial list of themes to describe these groupings, and created an initial organization of themes/subthemes. I then
revisited the codes in each group and used these to refine and reorganize themes and subthemes, until the list of themes accurately described the data. For some participants, the data was fully described by generating themes and subthemes. For other participants, describing the data precisely required a third level of sub-subthemes. Data analysis is presented below for each participant individually.

**Participant 1**

Participant 1 was an African American cisgender lesbian woman. At the time of the interview, she had completed her master’s degree and was enrolled in a PhD program. During her master’s program, the participant began to recognize her lesbian identity. She came out to only one person associated with the program, and this individual’s negative reaction discouraged her from coming out to others. Because others did not know she was lesbian, she did not usually experience sexual orientation microaggressions. However, she felt a sense of alienation in her program that she attributed in part to her sexual identity development, in part to racial microaggressions:

But yeah, it was a lot of inner turmoil, and then understanding that this is why I feel out of place in my program, not necessarily just because of my, um, you know, I was the only African American woman in the program at the time, and there were a lot of microaggressions, which I didn't know that term existed, that I was experiencing, that had to do with that, but also the fact that I was battling my sexual identity too, I just didn't realize that…

She described pervasive racial and gender microaggressions in her master’s program, and stated that she decided not to pursue her PhD at this school in part because of these experiences. She was warmly enthusiastic about her current program, where she was “out” to both faculty and students. She initially chose the program because many classes were offered online, and she believed this would help her avoid microaggressions or discrimination: “…I chose this experience because I didn't want to experience any more marginalization…” It was also
important to her, in choosing the program, to note that faculty members were doing research on LGBT issues. Once she entered the program, she developed close connections with both students and faculty. She described both racial and sexual orientation microaggressions in her current program, but perceived these as isolated incidents that she was able to “address comfortably.”

As illustrated in Table 3, there were 7 overarching themes within this participant’s interview. Themes summarize how this participant explained her in-the-moment experience, and how she reacted to microaggression experiences after the fact.
Table 3

*Participant 1 Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Naming leads to empowerment</td>
<td>Microaggressions awaken a vague sense of oppression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning enables validation of own experience of oppression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Naming confers responsibility to act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations shape in-the-moment experience</td>
<td>Microaggressions were unexpected in counselor education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expecting unpredictable microaggressions causes anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of microaggression, person,</td>
<td>Character inferred from perceived attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and relationship go hand in hand</td>
<td>Attitude inferred from where effort is directed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of microaggressions linked to</td>
<td>Frequency of microaggression experiences is considered (occasional vs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>overall feeling about a program</td>
<td>repeated)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Faculty diversity contributed to positive evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceptible LGBT affirmation makes experience more positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Faculty response to microaggressions considered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships with faculty and peers contribute to overall feeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action is chosen to protect self and others</td>
<td>Action chosen to protect from further discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Action chosen to protect important goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Action chosen to protect others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microaggressions in the program add burdens</td>
<td>Multiple oppressions intensify impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Microaggressions in other social spheres intensify program experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Microaggressions add to other stressors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choosing response is difficult</td>
<td>Participant desires models of response</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Naming Leads to Empowerment**

A theme that arose frequently during the interview was the empowerment the participant experienced when she was able to use theory to help her name microaggressions. Before she was introduced to the concept of microaggressions, she encountered microaggressions but was unable to understand them. She spoke of having a vague sense that something was wrong, an almost wordless emotional reaction. At times, she felt angry or alienated or offended, but she
was unable to explain these feelings: “…not knowing the terminology, not knowing what was happening, I couldn’t like, label it, I just knew he made me feel weird.”

When the participant was exposed to literature, theory, and education about microaggressions, she recognized her own experience in the terminology. She claimed the language of microaggressions, privilege, intersectionality, and other concepts to name her own experience, “to be able to say, ‘this is what is happening to me.’” She experienced this as “validating” or legitimizing. Naming her experiences seemed to make them feel more real: “Right, so this is something that people go through!” Naming these experiences as oppressive also gave her a sense of responsibility to address them: “…when I learned a lot more about intersectionality I started to realize, ok, I can’t just let these things slide, I need to address it.”

**Expectations Shape In-the-Moment Experience**

The participant’s in-the-moment experience of microaggressions seemed to depend on the expectations she brought to the situation. Initially she experienced microaggressions in counselor education with shock and disappointment because it was “happening in a setting that I thought I was safe.” She believed that counseling programs would be places of acceptance and safety: “…now I know, being a third-year doc student, I see how often this happens, unfortunately. But at the time I was very naïve to it, and just expecting more.” She saw microaggressions as incongruous with the profession’s mission and values:

This was not, obviously, my first experience with, like, somebody who was being, you know, oppressive, it’s just like, this setting, this stuff that we’re learning, how to interact with people…why are you talking to me about this here?

Microaggression experiences altered the participant’s expectations and allowed her act to prevent future similar experiences. In some situations, however, the participant was unable to either avoid or successfully confront future microaggressions. In these situations, she felt
anxious and on edge because she knew that microaggressions would probably occur, but did not when they would occur or what they would be: “Every class was anxiety-provoking because you did not know what offensive thing he would say and who he would direct it…” The experience of these microaggressions was different than those that she did not anticipate.

**Understanding of Microaggression, Person, and Relationship Go Hand in Hand**

After a microaggression occurred, the participant seemed to engage in a process of meaning-making, attempting to understand the other person’s attitude and intent. This participant described perpetrators very differently; where one was a “good person,” others were “jerks.” Her sense of closeness to perpetrators also varied; while she described a continuing friendship with one, another she shunned completely. Her impression of the other person and her closeness to them seemed linked to her evaluation of their attitude, the extent to which they cared about members of other groups (e.g. LGBT people or people of color).

The participant seemed to determine whether perpetrators affirmed or cared about LGBT people or people of color by looking at where their effort was directed. She emphasized the frequency of microaggressions or the energy it took to commit them; to her, these seemed to be indicators of intent. She distinguished between “intentional” and “unintentional” microaggressions, and saw intentional microaggressions as more offensive. However, she saw all microaggressions as somewhat intentional. For example, one microaggression she frequently experienced was having others misspell her name. She described this microaggression as “inadvertent,” but saw it as “a form of discrimination” because it was a “lack of awareness of, you know, ‘let me pay attention to what this person’s name is spelled like,’ versus ‘I’m going to spell what I think it says.’” To this participant, lack of awareness betrayed a lack of care and concern.
When making sense of microaggressions, the participant considered perpetrators’ response to feedback. The participant often noted whether perpetrators acknowledged wrongdoing—that they had committed the behavior and that it had been harmful or problematic. She repeatedly expressed the belief that perpetrators needed to “own” responsibility for microaggressions, and expressed appreciation when they did: “Both of them responded really apologetically, which was great, and we continued to have discussions and it, and it was positive...” She seemed to feel particularly positively about interactions where confrontation of microaggressions was welcomed: “So (name) replied to me and was just like, ‘I’m so glad you said something because I shouldn’t have been doing that.’ So that was good. That was good.” When confrontation was not welcomed, interactions seemed to feel more negative. For example, the participant described confronting a friend about a microaggression, and said that: “it took her hearing it from me several times…Like, I shouldn’t have to tell you what you said. You just need to own it and move on, or own it and not do it again.” The participant seemed to look for consistent change after confrontation had occurred. Of the friend who welcomed her feedback, she said it’s “good to know that she’s still feeling the same way about what we talked about…I appreciate that.” By contrast, when describing a person who committed repeated racial and gender microaggressions, she emphasized that when confronted he initially made some changes, but ultimately became defensive and continued to commit microaggressions. For her, receptivity to feedback was another indication of the perpetrator’s attitude.

**Understanding of Microaggressions Linked to Overall Feeling About a Program**

This participant’s microaggression experiences also seemed linked to her feelings about her master’s and doctoral programs. She described her master’s and doctoral programs quite differently; she expressed negative feelings toward her master’s program, but was warmly
enthusiastic about her current program. The relative frequency of microaggressions seemed to contribute to this difference; she described frequent microaggressions in her master’s program, but saw her microaggression experiences in her doctoral program as isolated incidents. She also emphasized that while she had microaggression experiences with peers in her doctoral program, she had none with faculty.

Microaggression experiences were not the only things that influenced the participant’s evaluation of her program, however. She mentioned that she felt more positively about her doctoral program because the faculty was quite diverse. She believed that the diversity of faculty in her doctoral program meant that there were fewer microaggressions: “Otherwise I haven’t had any experiences, and I think it’s because my faculty is so diverse.”

The participant mentioned that perceptible LGBT affirmation made a difference in her evaluation of her programs. The visibility of LGBT issues in her doctoral program (e.g. faculty conducting research on transgender issues) was something that made the program especially positive for her. By contrast, during her master’s program she was unable to determine whether faculty in her master’s program would affirm her sexual orientation. When she experienced discrimination at an internship site, she felt unable to explain the experience to faculty members “because I didn’t know how they would feel about it…”

The participant also evaluated faculty members’ response when students committed microaggressions. The participant expressed frustration with the fact that faculty members in her master’s program did not openly confront microaggressions: “…she didn’t try to bring them in or try to teach them that what they were doing was wrong…she kind of allowed it.” The participant discovered several months later that disciplinary action had been taken with one student, but since it was taken privately, she initially believed that nothing had been done.
Support from faculty members seemed to influence the participant’s feelings about her programs. She described faculty members in her doctoral program as accessible and caring.

…she wants us to be able to reach out to her if we need to. I don't know, things like that, that's important to me, being able to build connections that are genuine, and not seeming busy, like ‘I don't have time for you’ kind of thing…like they care.

Similarly, in her doctoral program she described her relationships with peers as close and supportive. Though she reported several racial microaggressions from peers, she emphasized that support from others made her overall experience a good one.

**Action is Chosen to Protect Self and Others**

After microaggressions occurred, the participant responded by acting to protect herself and others. When possible she avoided situations where she thought she might experience microaggressions. When she could not avoid such situations, she sometimes confronted perpetrators and asked them to change their behavior: “…I addressed it [a frequently encountered microaggression] with my classmates because you know, we were going to continue to be in classes together.” At times, however, she chose to remain silent to protect her career goals; reflecting on her interview during member-checking, she noted:

I realized how (I) suppressed my experiences for fear of being discriminated again while in my Master’s program. I also realized my determination and drive to continue despite this feeling, which was also a major contributing factor for my remaining silent.

The participant also confronted microaggressions to protect others. In one case, she shared her sexual identity to defend another LGBT student whose identity was questioned. She also felt that confronting microaggressions had given her experience that enabled her to teach others how to respond.
Choosing Response is Difficult

A few times during the interview, the participant shared that she struggled with knowing how to respond to microaggressions. This seemed especially true when microaggressions were unfamiliar to her. She mentioned, as well, that she had no models for response:

…two of my other classmates who, we started together and were trying to make a point to go to all of our residencies together, and that just didn't work out, they were telling me to kind of ignore it, and one of them was saying ‘It's not a big deal,’ the other one was just like, ‘I don't like that they're doing this’ but not necessarily saying you should do x or y. I didn't know what to do, I needed somebody to say ‘this is something I think you should do,’ but no-one did that…

Microaggressions in the Program Add Burdens

The participant mentioned several times that microaggression experiences added burdens to her already busy life. Some microaggressions created additional work for her in quite concrete ways. For example, dealing with microaggressions in one situation delayed her graduation plans. As a lesbian woman of color, the participant experienced multiple types of microaggressions. She noted that she was already dealing with microaggressions outside the program, and microaggressions within the program compounded the emotional impact of these experiences. She shared, for example, that her reaction to one microaggression experience in her doctoral program

wasn’t primarily because of what was happening [at that moment], but I think other life experiences that I felt were much more, um, trying on my spirit, um, that I was like, heavily involved in, especially like community activities related to the LGBT community, and I was having a hard, hard time dealing with the inter-group oppression that I was experiencing.

The sense that microaggressions had an emotional impact and added to stress was repeated throughout the interview. This theme was echoed by the second participant. The first and second participants shared several social identities, and both encountered multiple oppressions, as described below.
Participant 2

Participant 2 was an African American cisgender woman in her first year of post-master’s counseling practice. She identified her sexual orientation as “queer.” To her, the term queer implied a sense of questioning heteronormative ideals:

[It is] a lot of times political in the sense that I disagree with a lot of things that are norms in terms of like…just the idea that women have to be in relationships with men, that there’s only two genders, that women have certain roles that they have to adhere to, that friendships can’t be…just as important and vital as romantic relationships, that people can be in polyamorous relationships…So queer feels comfortable because at its heart it’s kind of like, strangeness.

This participant formed a positive view of the counseling profession as an undergraduate student, when a campus job brought her into close contact with several counselors and counselors-in-training: “…I just loved the work that they did, I loved the approach that they took in working with students and connecting with us and building rapport with us and helping us.” Because of her relationships with these counselors, this participant entered her program with a strong belief that counselors are welcoming and affirming of others. She was especially enthusiastic about the relational nature of the work they did: “…I really love this one-on-one type of problem-solving, support, um, encouragement, like instilling hope, building hope…”

Table 4 presents the 6 themes identified in this interview. As illustrated in this table, most themes in the interview reflected the participant’s sense that counselors, counselor educators, and counseling students failed to live up to her ideals of empathy and understanding. Themes are described in detail below.
### Table 4

**Participant 2 Themes**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Sub-subthemes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Counselors should be knowledgeable about and affirming of diverse groups</td>
<td>Microaggressions are conceived as failures to empathize</td>
<td>Microaggressions involve failure to deliberately listen</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Microaggressions involve asserting one’s own perspective over another’s</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived lack of understanding confers responsibility to educate</td>
<td>If I don’t bring it up, no-one will</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lived experience of oppression qualifies me to educate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Others can practice affirming behavior with me</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Educating is a form of advocacy for self and others</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of education leaves a need to self-educate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived lack of understanding leads to loneliness</td>
<td>Exclusion from shared experience is lonely</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being unheard is lonely</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceived lack of understanding leads to disillusionment</td>
<td>Counselor educators may not be able to educate</td>
<td>Lack of understanding has a real impact on clients</td>
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<tr>
<td>Microaggressions result in loss of educational opportunity</td>
<td>Microaggressions take the place of more constructive conversations</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Energy devoted to processing inhibits learning</td>
<td>Challenging takes energy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Withdrawing is emotionally protective</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Withdrawing prevents further alienation</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Neglect of LGBTQ topics inhibits development</td>
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**Counselors Should Be Knowledgeable About and Affirming of Diverse Groups**

The participant expressed a belief that counselors should be knowledgeable about and affirming of diverse groups: “I believe that counselor educators must continuously strive to be
inclusive and appreciate of diverse identities to both attract diverse counseling students and to train all counseling students in a multicultural way.” When she encountered microaggressions in her program, she emphasized her frustration that “this was a knowledge base where I was like, doing this counseling work with a person who was a counseling professional,” who “should know better!” These expectations seemed to form a backdrop for her microaggression experiences, and how she made sense of them.

**Microaggressions Are Conceived as Failures to Empathize**

This participant characterized microaggressions as failures of empathy and understanding. She repeatedly noted that perpetrators failed to “see other people for who they are.” She expressed the belief that when microaggressions occurred, the perpetrator had made quick, automatic assumptions rather than listening the person in front of them, “…they don’t take the time to know more and to learn more, that the first instinct is, ok, well, clearly I have the solutions and what works for me or would work for me is going to work for you…” As this quote expresses, she often seemed to see microaggressions as a kind of arrogance, with the perpetrator valuing their own experience and perspective over that of the other person: “…instead of just saying, at the very least, ‘I don’t know a lot about this, tell me more,’ it was like, ‘here’s what you need to be doing…”

This participant expressed that she “did not often face blatant discrimination in my program because of my gender identity and sexual orientation,” but that her own microaggression experiences centered around a lack of understanding of LGBTQ lives. She stated that most of the time, LGBTQ lives and identities were invisible within her program. Heterosexual identities were often assumed: “…[they used] heteronormative language just in general across the board, like referring to a client’s partner as their husband automatically, or as
their wife…” She was “one of the few,” both as a queer woman and a black woman, and she remarked more than once that if she did not start conversations about oppressed groups, they would seldom occur:

…in my program there weren’t a whole lot of other people who identified as queer in particular, women were the majority, but Black women were definitely the minority in the program, so had less people that identified in ways that I did, so I think it was easy to not have those conversations because most people probably didn’t need to have them.

**Perceived Lack of Understanding Confers Responsibility to Educate**

In the absence of already existing opportunities to learn about oppressed groups, the participant found herself creating such opportunities: “…I would take it upon myself to make sure we were having intentional, like, frequent conversations about just underprivileged group in general.” The lack of education about the experiences of LGBTQ and other oppressed groups made her feel that if she did not bring these conversations up, no-one would:

And then too, just sometimes, not, not feeling like the spokesperson or the tokenized person, I don’t think I was, but feeling some sense of responsibility to make sure that as much as I could, those conversations were had.

She felt especially qualified to facilitate discussion of these topics, stating that it would “not be as meaningful” coming from someone else in the program, because she could share her own lived, real experiences. She saw herself as a test case with whom peers could practice inclusion: “…what do you do when you’re in class with an LGBTQ person, like how are you inclusive then?” When microaggressions occurred, she often chose to vocally challenge them. She saw this as a way for her to stand up for herself and others, believing it was “important for me to make sure my experiences are acknowledged,” and to be “assertive” in verbalizing the concerns of oppressed groups. She also felt a sense of responsibility to learn what her program was not teaching: “…there are things that I’m going to encounter, and I’m going to have to figure
it out on my own, like my program isn’t going to prepare me for it, I’m going to have to do my
own research and continue to seek out my own knowledge…”

**Perceived Lack of Understanding Leads to Loneliness**

The participant frequently expressed that she felt isolated within her program by the fact
that others could not understand or relate to her experience: “Sometimes it was kind of
lonely…lonely in the sense that I was one of the few.” Even socializing within the program
seemed shaped by heteronormative expectations and institutions:

…even just like socially, maybe like half of the people in my cohort were engaged and
got married throughout the program. And then here I am, who legally does not have the
right at the time to even marry the person that I was in a long-term relationship
with…. [They were] sharing and congregating around marrying and starting families and
weddings, and I’m like, “waiting on that!”

When she encountered microaggressions, the participant spoke of feeling
“misunderstood” and alone. Even when the microaggression was not directed at her, observing
microaggressions toward other LGBT people made her feel that others could never understand
her experience. She recalled hearing other students talk about a gay client:

…it just seemed like people were really poking at this particular person and how they
couldn’t have successful relationships, and how they weren’t spending time with their
family, and how they, oh well they should be more engaged with their family, this would
help, this would help, not taking into account that this person doesn’t spend time with
their family because their family doesn’t agree with their life. So again, it wasn’t directed
towards me, but I remember feeling pretty isolated in that moment, like what could I
possibly tell you about my own experience if that’s what you immediately go to…

**Perceived Lack of Understanding Leads to Disillusionment**

Throughout describing her experiences, the participant expressed a growing sense of
disillusionment with the counseling profession. She shared that she was “disappointed” when
macroaggressions occurred, and that these experiences altered her view of the profession:

“…I’m like, oh man, this isn’t like counseling through the rose-colored glasses…It was like it
went from this idealized version of what counseling and therapy could be, to like…real life.”
She emphasized a growing awareness that counselor educators were unprepared to educate students about diverse groups: “…they’re not going to be able to prepare other counselors who are going to go out and work with folks, because they don’t even have that knowledge.” She expressed concern for the impact this has on clients: “These are real people and real problems that are going under the radar or being ignored…” She felt that, realistically, LGBTQ clients and clients from other oppressed groups will continue to feel misunderstood by counselors, and that this “goes back to why so many underprivileged groups don’t go to counseling, because they don’t feel understood.”

**Microaggressions Result in Loss of Educational Opportunity**

This participant felt that in general, her program prepared her well for her work. She described her program as “wonderful,” and believed it provided her with an excellent education. Despite her satisfaction with her educational experience overall, this participant believed that her education was negatively impacted by microaggressions in her program. In some cases, she felt that microaggressions took the place of productive learning, absorbing time that could have been better spent: “It was just one of those times I was just like, this is a loss. I wish that this conversation would have gone differently…”

After a microaggression occurred, the energy expended in responding to it also made it difficult for the participant to learn. She found herself preoccupied with trying to make decisions about how to respond:

> Usually at those moments I would find myself, like, not participating, or taking a while at least to re-enter the conversation because I’d have to go through all that chatter in my head about ok, what do I say, how do I say it, how are people going to look at me?

> Responding required a certain amount of energy and emotional well-being. While several times she reported directly challenging microaggressions, at others she didn’t “feel emotionally able to redirect (the) conversation.” When she lacked this energy, she found ways to
withdraw. In class, she tried to distract herself or take herself out of the situation: “…I usually will start kind of doodling to like, occupy myself.” She also reported texting her partner from class after such events: “Just trying to reach back out to my own support system…” At times, she chose to withdraw to protect her relationships with peers, relationships which were all the more important because of her general sense of isolation:

Especially at that point in my program where I was actually feeling more connected to my peers, I didn’t really want to do something that was going to push away those connections or make them feel strained or feel awkward.

The participant shared that her program’s neglect of LGBTQ topics left her unprepared for what she would face as a queer counselor. During her first year of counseling practice, many of her clients made openly homophobic and hostile remarks about LGBTQ people. She found herself hiding her orientation to try to preserve her relationships with clients. She felt unprepared for this experience:

…we didn’t really talk about what that would really be like, and what some of those real-life struggles, how they would impact us. Like thinking about being a queer person, how is it really going to feel, or how is it really going to impact me to be with a client or a family and to hear them saying homophobic things?

She reported that on the rare occasions that LGBTQ issues were discussed in her program, the focus was on cultivating empathy for LGBTQ clients: “We kind of talked about it but not fully, it was more like, ‘Oh, let’s look at your experiences so you can have empathy for other folks…’” She wished she had received some warning about what her lived experience of counseling might be like: “I can’t say that I would necessarily have been more prepared, but I think…I would have had more insight and awareness into what I could potentially be walking into.”

Neglect of LGBT topics was a microaggression that both participants 2 and 3 encountered. For both participants, lack of discussion on LGBT topics left them with a sense of
anxiety and uncertainty about what to expect in certain professional contexts. Participants managed these feelings somewhat differently, however.

**Participant 3**

Participant 3 was a White cisgender woman who described her sexual orientation as bisexual, though she clarified that pansexual might be a more accurate term. She shared that she uses bisexual because it’s the word that others used to describe a similar experience of attraction when she was first coming out as an adolescent. She dated a girl during her high school years, and said that she experienced a great deal of bullying in high school, experiences that she recalled at times when she encountered microaggressions in graduate school.

This participant was enrolled as a doctoral student in a counselor education program. She went to the same school for both her master’s and doctoral degrees. During her master’s program she usually kept her orientation secret. She shared that there was an almost total lack of discussion of LGBTQ issues by faculty in both programs. During her master’s program, students made repeated microaggressive remarks in her hearing (e.g. saying they would never counsel a gay client). To her knowledge, these remarks were never addressed by faculty. She chose to remain at the same school for her doctoral work because the location was convenient. Interestingly, she experienced her doctoral program as much different than her master’s program. About half of the doctoral students were LGBTQ-identified and she believed that their presence discouraged other students from making anti-gay remarks. She came out in her doctoral program.

This participant also reported pervasive gender-based microaggressions throughout her program. She felt that in her doctoral program, sexist microaggressions were more of an issue than LGBTQ microaggressions. She reported that opportunities to collaborate on research with
faculty were typically offered to male students. She saw her program as dominated by male values such as competitiveness, and felt that she did not fit into this culture as a woman. She also reported that male students made comments evaluating women’s weight and appearance.

As illustrated in Table 5, expectations played a strong role in shaping the participant’s in-the-moment experiences of microaggressions, as well as her reactions after the fact. This and other themes are discussed below.

Table 5

*Participant 3 Themes*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Sub-subthemes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expectations shape microaggression experience</td>
<td>Microaggressions from certain people are disappointing</td>
<td>Distinction is made between hatred and ignorance</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unexpected microaggressions provoke initial shock or surprise</td>
<td>Absence of LGBTQ topics means they don’t matter</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Past experience shapes in-the-moment experience</td>
<td>Absence of LGBTQ topics (inaccurately) assumes LGBTQ affirmation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of clear support creates ambiguity</td>
<td>Absence of support makes it difficult to evaluate safety</td>
<td>Behavior and identity used to hypothesize level of support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of safety from microaggressions shapes engagement</td>
<td>Fear of attack prompts disengagement and identity concealment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation of escape potential shaped decisions about engagement</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Protection from attack shapes engagement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Microaggressions have a cumulative emotional impact</td>
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</table>
Expectations Shape Microaggression Experiences

Like the first two participants, this participant described how her expectations influenced her microaggressions experiences. She shared that she was disappointed by microaggressions from certain people, because she expected better from them. For example, she shared that when a gay man in her program made sexist comments about women’s appearance and weight, she was surprised, because she had expected gay men to be less sexist. In another case, she was disappointed when a professor with a reputation for brilliance failed to discuss diversity in his class in any way. In both cases, she seemed to believe that certain kinds of people (brilliant professors, gay men) were less likely to commit microaggressions, an expectation that was not fulfilled.

When microaggressions were unexpected, the participant described an initial experience of shock or surprise. For example, when a professor made a comment that she found particularly absurd, she was so surprised that she reacted involuntarily: “I was just shocked, like, so I just yelled it out in the middle of class and people were laughing at me. I couldn’t even contain how surprised I was he’d even say that.”

The participant’s in-the-moment experience also seemed related to expectations formed from past experiences. She described how one microaggression experience recalled prior experiences, and triggered worries and fears about further discrimination:

…[it] brought up some past bullying, just like what are they going to say now? What are they going to say about me behind my back, or what are they going to say to me to my face, or what’s going to happen now?
Absence of Clear Support Creates Ambiguity

Though expectations sometimes shaped the participant’s in-the-moment experience, at other times the absence of clear LGBTQ affirmation in her program made it difficult for her to know what to expect from others. Without this clear affirmation, she felt fearful of discussing her orientation because she did not know how others would react. She was not always sure that these fears were realistic: “[I was] just kind of scared because…if there’s an absence then I don’t what faculty even think about it...”

In the absence of clear information about others’ attitudes toward LGBTQ people, the participant looked for clues to suggest that they were affirming or prejudiced. At times she guessed at the other person’s attitude based on some aspect of their identity. For example, she wondered if one professor was anti-LGBTQ because “she was a very religious person, and never seemed to ever talk about anything related to LGBT identities…” At other times, she weighed subtle cues in others’ behavior. A professor made a comment about LGBTQ people that she found ridiculous, and when she questioned it, “…he didn’t argue with me, he just kind of laughed it off…” so she was unsure whether it had been a joke or an actual belief.

As the participant used these clues to evaluate perpetrators’ attitudes, she attempted to distinguish whether microaggression proceeded from hatred and ignorance: “So it just seemed to me like, not everyone was necessarily anti-LGBT, but some people were, and then some people were just so uninformed that they say ridiculous things like that.”

The participant developed two hypotheses to explain faculty members’ silence about LGBTQ topics. For some, she felt that the silence meant LGBTQ topics were unimportant to them, that they “never even bothered to try to understand any of those experiences.” She also hypothesized that some professors neglected LGBTQ topics because they overestimated the level
of LGBTQ-affirmation among students: “There’s like an assumption made that as counselors we’re all already ok with this, and that’s not true.”

Perception of Safety From Microaggressions Shapes Engagement

For this participant, her perception of her safety from microaggressions strongly shaped her interaction with others. She usually tried to stay out of conversations in which microaggressions occurred. On the occasions that she did confront microaggressions, she tried to challenge microaggressions “from an objective standpoint,” rather than sharing her own identity and her feelings about such incidents: “…[speaking objectively] just feels like defending other people instead of defending myself, so there’s less vulnerability, or I feel like it’s less open from the argument to shift from a debate about something to a personal attack.” She feared that attacks would be intensely painful, that she would “get so upset I can’t think clearly.”

The feeling of threat seemed to make her very aware of her surroundings. She found herself evaluating whether she could escape if others tried to harm her. For example, she shared that she was hesitant to disclose her sexual identity to coworkers at her internship site because “there [we] were... sharing a tiny office, with, you know, cement walls and no windows, every day. Like, I can’t really get into this here.” By contrast, when she knew she could escape discrimination she was more comfortable being open. For example, towards the end of her master’s program she chose to disclose her identity to a professor, knowing that “I’m about to graduate so it doesn’t matter…” The presence of other LGBTQ students also helped her feel that it was safe to be open about her sexual identity: “[With many LGBTQ students around] It just feels like at least the majority of people have to at least pretend that they’re ok with it, and I’ll just take that at face value instead of having to wonder what people are going to think about me.”
Microaggressions Have a Cumulative Emotional Impact

One final theme that arose for this participant during member checking was that microaggressions had a cumulative emotional impact on her. She shared that it was “really hard to read” her transcript because it required her to revisit painful experiences. She did not seem to have been fully conscious of this at the time of the interview, but she felt that re-reading these experiences made her more aware: “at the time the interview ended, I felt worried that I wasted your time because I didn’t think I gave you any material. But reading all of it, it does seem like a lot…” As she reviewed her experiences she realized that she was particularly impacted by “intersectionality, and how the experiences of microaggressions related to gender and sexual orientation may interact.” Reviewing her transcript helped her make sense of “how often I feel disconnected from my program even though I do have a few friends there.”

Participant 4

Participant 4 was a White, pansexual person who described their gender identity as “agendered or androgynous,” and preferred they/them/their pronouns. They shared that the way they describe their gender and sexual identity has evolved over time. They strongly rejected binary gender descriptions. When first coming to terms with their gender identity, they initially used the term “genderqueer” to describe their gender, but over time rejected this term as “too binary,” “…like this knee-jerk response, it’s like, towards gay or lesbian or bi….It’s like, I’m not lesbian, I’m not gay, so I’m queer.” For them, using the term agender meant “saying I’m not participating in any sort of socially defined gender identities, and I’m really fully occupying my space.” They described their sexual identity as pansexual, and shared that their sexual identification evolved in keeping with their sense of their gender. “For a long time I identified as bisexual or queer, but then when you’re like, well, how am I going to identify as bisexual if I
don’t agree with binary?” The way they described their sexual identity conveyed a sense of fluidity and change over time: “And just getting older, I’ve never really terribly been attracted to cis men, and became less and less attracted to cis women.”

They shared that they had initially planned to study psychology, but became disillusioned with it because of “the pathologizing and normalizing, you know, the saying you are either this or that, or if you are any way sort of off the beaten path, you’re sick somehow.” This bothered them especially because of their familiarity with Native American spirituality; they knew that some expressions of Native American spirituality would be seen as psychoses. The participant expected the counseling profession to be more affirming of human diversity. When researching the profession, they read that counseling was a non-pathologizing profession, one with ties to social constructivism. Their expectations that counselor education would be different formed part of the backdrop for their microaggression experiences.

Overall, this participant had a very positive experience in their program: “For the most part it was amazing. It was life-changing and um, it really allowed me to, to become more confident in myself, and to grow intellectually.” At the same time, they felt that “parts of it were in that same, by the same vein, were very frustrating.” Faculty members seemed reluctant to challenge students in some areas, particularly on multicultural issues. LGBT topics were generally not addressed in their program, and faculty members did not confront microaggressions when they occurred.

The participant shared multiple microaggression experiences. Most were cissexist microaggressions, but they also felt further marginalized by others’ reactions to their socio-economic background. In addition, they felt somewhat excluded from the social life of the
department because their peers typically went to bars to socialize, a setting they avoided as a person in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction.

Table 6 presents the themes identified in this interview. This participant’s interview revolved around two major theme areas, the first describing the expectations that shaped their in-the-moment experience, and the second how their initial experience was modified by their choice of response. Themes are described in detail below.
### Participant 4 Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Sub-subthemes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expectations influence microaggression experience and response</td>
<td>Values influence experience and response</td>
<td>Concern for others’ well-being influences experience and response</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Risk of harm to future clients is considered</td>
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<td>Needs of those who can’t speak are considered</td>
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<td>Value for authentic learning spaces influences experience and response</td>
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<td>Lack of challenge is disappointing</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Microaggressions are opportunities for learning</td>
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<td>Expression of emotional response is “pushed down” to create learning space</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Beliefs about responsibility to know influence experience and response</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Counselors should know better because they care about people</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunity for knowledge confers responsibility</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Faculty should challenge microaggressions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Past microaggression experience influences expectations, experience, and response</td>
<td>Some responses diminish with repeated microaggressions</td>
<td>Exhaustion intensifies with repeated microaggressions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emotional impact and response are linked</td>
<td>Responding to microaggressions requires emotional work</td>
<td>Responding to repeated microaggressions leads to exhaustion</td>
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<td>Being the token voice results in feeling isolated</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Emotional impact influences coping responses</td>
<td>Support from others reduces impact</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Use of humor deflects impact</td>
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<td>Focusing on other priorities deflects impact</td>
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Expectation Influence Microaggression Experience and Response

The participant’s expectations of counselor education programs seemed to strongly influence their reactions, both in the moment and after the microaggression had occurred. The participant held strong values and beliefs about how counselor education should be. These values and beliefs shaped their in-the-moment experience, their evaluation of these experiences, and their response to microaggressions.

Concern for others’ well-being was a value that often seemed to shape the participant’s responses and the emotional impact of the microaggression. They believed that counselor education should prepare students to treat LGBT individuals without causing harm. They often described being upset or troubled by the impact that a peer’s microaggressions could have on future clients, and often chose to speak up and take a teaching role to try to prevent future harm to clients: “I know it wasn’t my job, no-one told me to do it, but I just felt like these conversations need to be had or else they’re going to go out and do damage.”

This concern for others’ well-being also translated into concern for LGBT peers’ well-being in the program. They expressed that they were motivated to speak up when LGBT peers were not emotionally able to take on this role: “If one person speaks up then the people who were afraid to speak up are being validated.” As this quote illustrates, they believed that by speaking up they could represent other students’ feelings and help create a more supportive environment.

Another strong value that influenced the participant’s experience and response was a value for authentic learning spaces where students were challenged, and all students could be fully present to learn, even when this meant that microaggressions occurred. They mentioned
several times that they made sense of microaggressions after the fact by reminding themselves that it was a learning opportunity for the perpetrator: “We don’t know what we don’t know. You know? And so maybe that’s the first time anyone had encountered that.” At the same time, during member-checking they expressed that at times they chose to “stuff down” their emotional responses to microaggressions to make space for others to work through their biases and prejudices:

Because I value fluidity and holding space for people to be authentic and positively anchored, because I honor genuinely affirming climates, I had to set aside a lot of frustration so that I could honor the space I wanted to see.

At times, this had a negative emotional impact on the participant: “How much psychological and emotional flexibility is being sacrificed so that we can participate?” The participant felt disappointment that faculty members did not challenge students more in areas where they were uncomfortable, in particular on multicultural and LGBT issues. They shared that they came in with the expectation that the program would stimulate “lively, active, ongoing conversation,” that would push the participant “to the edge of my comfort.” They felt that their program did not entirely meet this expectation, and they experienced some disappointment and frustration over the lack of challenging conversation.

The participant’s in-the-moment experience and their response also seemed to be influenced by their beliefs about whether the perpetrator should have had the knowledge to be more affirming. Their frustration, disappointment, and anger seemed to be greater when they believed a perpetrator should have known better. They expressed the belief that, because counselors’ role is to care for people, they should try to learn and to avoid committing microaggressions: “Come on, you can try harder! You’re a counselor, you’re a person who cares about the safety and well-being of people!...We’re all doing this very honorable career, so why not honor the people?” They expected faculty in particular to be able to challenge
microaggressions, and expressed disappointment when faculty failed to challenge, or at
minimum to back them up when they challenged microaggressions themselves. Their response
to microaggressions seemed particularly intense when they believed the perpetrator had adequate
opportunities to learn, either from having been challenged on microaggressions in the past, or
from having had opportunities to learn about multicultural issues broadly: “…with everything
else that you’re so mindful of and so open and expansive towards, why is it so hard to accept
someone’s gender identity?”

As the participant had more and more microaggression experiences, these experiences
seemed to revise their expectations, which in turn shaped their experience and response. They
shared that over time they became accustomed to microaggressions, such that they no longer
reacted to them with the same intensity: “…being queer identified for so many years, um, we just
get used to it…you get used to people asking you the dumbest questions, so I didn’t really feel
any kind of way except you just get tired of it.” As this quote indicates, when microaggressions
were expected, they seemed to acclimate to them somewhat, and learn to anticipate them: “And
that’s something we just internalize, walking around when you have enough microaggressions
thrown at you, it’s like, ok, I just can assume that someone’s going to say or do something
stupid, you know?” As other responses diminished, their sense of weariness seemed to increase
over time—they referred multiple times to feeling “exhausted” by repeated microaggression
experiences, and expressed a sense of continuous assault, that they and other LGBT students had
to choose between “cowering in the back row not talking because we see what happens to our
classmates, or being perpetually put out into the lion’s den…”
Emotional Impact and Response Are Linked

Emotional impact and response were closely linked for the participant. The act of responding to microaggressions added to the emotional impact of the microaggression itself, resulting in further emotional exhaustion. Challenging microaggressions in the program was “exhausting,” especially when it was required repeatedly. Some of the work of responding to microaggressions was also the internal work of anticipating microaggressions and choosing their response with that awareness:

I have to, every time I open my mouth, be aware of the assumptions that you’re going to make of me, and that you’re not going to take me seriously, you’re automatically going to see me as angry or aggressive or defensive in some way, even if I’m not.

They also expressed that speaking up to challenge microaggressions left them feeling “tokenized.” They acknowledged that they chose to take a teaching role in bringing up LGBT issues in class and confronting LGBT microaggressions; they felt that being outspoken was part of their personality, and they “didn’t mind” being the one who spoke up, since something needed to be said. However, they repeatedly shared the sense that they were the “only voice,” a position that made them feel isolated and alone. They were aware in the moment when they did not receive support from others; in one instance, for example, the participant challenged a microaggression in class, and emphasized how it felt to be aware of the professor, observing the conversation but not intervening: “I was just left to defend myself.” As this quote illustrates, expectations of others’ response to their confrontation also contributed to the emotional impact of the microaggression. The participant seemed to expect others to accept the confrontation, learn from it, and make active changes in behavior. When these expectations were not met, they seemed to feel increased frustration and disappointment.
The participant reported using a variety of coping strategies to help them reduce the emotional impact of microaggressions. Venting to others was one strategy they mentioned to release negative emotions:

…talking with friends, talking with people who I could trust to be like, grown-up about it. I don’t gossip, I don’t talk shit on people, but just processing it…and then you can just drop it, you know, but just to get it out and not carry it with you.

Talking to friends reduced their feeling of isolation:

…we live in a world where everything is set up for heteronormative people, and it’s just nice every once in a while to be in a place where you don’t have to defend yourself or you don’t have to feel like an outcast…

A couple of times the participant seemed to use humor to deflect the emotional impact of a situation. In one case, for example, they shared that a fellow student publicly announced that she would not be in the same class with the participant: “Honestly, I just laughed at her, like are you fucking kidding me?” However, they acknowledged that if they sat and thought about their feelings they were “deeply, deeply hurt.” Similarly, the participant occasionally seemed to try to pass over the emotional impact of a situation by focusing on other priorities: “I’m not going to have this interrupt my education…I can’t spend too much time with that.”

Participants 4 and 5 shared some similar ways of coping with the emotional impact of microaggressions. Participant 5, however, described in more depth how their reactions to microaggressions changed over time. This and other themes are summarized next.

**Participant 5**

Participant 5 was a White, pansexual person who described their gender identity as non-binary, and prefers they/them/their pronouns. They also identified as a person with a disability. At the time of the interview, the participant had been practicing counseling for about a year, and had recently made the decision to leave the counseling field. They did not go into detail about
this decision, but expressed that they are “spoiled” now that they have left the field because they are able to avoid the types of microaggressions they encountered in their program.

Their overall experience of their program seemed to be quite negative; they had few positive things to say about their experience there, and reported pervasive microaggression experiences throughout the program that were primarily cissexist and ableist in nature. Microaggressions involving disability seemed equally frequent as those involving their gender identity, and played a significant role in their experience. The program was structured in such a way that, as a person with multiple physical and mental health conditions, this participant had difficulty proceeding through the program at the same rate as other students. It often seemed to them that because their physical and mental health conditions were invisible, others (particularly faculty) denied or minimized the impact of these conditions, and blamed them or pathologized their attempts to cope with symptoms. In general, the participant described both ableist and cissexist microaggressions as denial or ignorance of their reality, a perception that profoundly shaped their microaggression experience and response.

Five major themes emerged from the analysis (presented in Table 7). As illustrated in these themes, the participant’s experience of their program was much different than they had hoped. Themes are described in more depth below.
Table 7

*Participant 5 Themes*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Sub-subthemes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hopes for the program contribute to reactivity</td>
<td>Counseling professionals should be affirming</td>
<td>Counselors should recognize and be supportive of students’ mental health concerns</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Others should be educated on transgender identities and issues</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Counseling programs provide opportunities for supportive relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Being different is isolating</td>
<td>Being “othered” is isolating</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Inability to relate is isolating</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being different means being invisible</td>
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<tr>
<td>Microaggression experiences cause questioning</td>
<td>Having reality questioned leads to self-doubt</td>
<td>Perception of microaggression denied</td>
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<td>of reality</td>
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<td>Reactions to microaggression pathologized</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Contrast between stated commitment and actual behavior contributes to confusion</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Trauma history contributes to self-doubt</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Exhaustion makes it difficult to identify feelings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exhaustion intensifies impact</td>
<td>Multiple oppressions intensify impact</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Exhaustion of physical and mental health conditions intensifies impact</td>
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<tr>
<td>Locus of affirmation moved to self and supportive others</td>
<td>Recognition of futility allows shift</td>
<td>Recognition of discrimination allows confrontation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Perception checked with supportive others</td>
<td>Vulnerability diminished with faculty</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Recognition of discrimination allows self-affirmation and advocacy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Renewed confidence helps diminish reactivity</td>
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Hopes for the Program Contribute to Reactivity

The participant shared that when they matriculated to their master’s program, they were strongly hopeful that they would be entering an environment where others were devoted to social justice concerns, and aware of transgender identities. Because of these expectations, the participant shared that at times they were strongly “reactive.” “[I would] flinch every time someone said “she” to refer to me, and was very, like, sensitized to everything.” They identified this as, in part, a “very typical identity development…being in that place of like, screw everybody that’s cis, and I don’t want to like, deal with being misgendered all the time, and this is just so horrible, and ruining my life…” They shared that it was difficult for them to move past this reactivity during their program, in part because they were “expecting a lot more than I got.” They shared that their brother is also a counselor, and during his program had undergone a profound transformation from being “homophobic and racist” to being more affirming of others. Witnessing this transformation, they believed that they were entering an environment that would be affirming, where they could make close personal and professional relationships with others who cared about social justice. Their reactions seemed particularly strong when such expectations were disappointed.

Among the expectations they held was the belief that counseling professionals should be affirming of diverse identities and experiences. In particular, they expressed the belief that counselors should recognize and be supportive of students’ mental health concerns. As noted earlier, the participant was dealing with mental health concerns during the program. They felt that they received little support from faculty in coping with these concerns, and were even blamed at times for having these concerns. The participant reacted to these situations with disappointment, anger, and frustration: “…it was hard to understand how people who are
working counselors won’t have the empathy for someone with mental health issues affecting their counseling practice, you know?” They also repeatedly expressed the view that others should be educated on transgender identities and issues. They were especially frustrated when faculty were not aware of transgender issues in counseling: “Why am I teaching you how to counsel transgender clients when I’m your student?”

They also expressed that, before matriculating to their program, they hoped to form close relationships with other students. Their hopes for relationships seemed to make it particularly painful for them to feel isolated within their program:

I was just really sad. I was just really upset, because I came to grad school really hoping to fit in and really hoping to find my place and a good friend group, and have like, really develop close friendships that were really meaningful to me, and that were also really positive working relationships…

**Being Different is Isolating**

As suggested by the previous quotation, the reality of relationships within the program was much different for the participant than they hoped. They felt almost completely isolated within the program, isolation that they attributed to actual and perceived differentness between them and others. They shared that they often felt “othered,” treated as strange and incomprehensible. After introducing themselves with their preferred pronoun in class, for example, they felt like something of a spectacle: “…it ended up othering me really hard. Making me that, like, weird person with the they/them pronouns. A lot of people remembering me who I didn’t remember because I was that weird person in class.” They believed that their reactions to microaggressions were also seen as strange and even threatening:

It would end up coming across as if I was trying to pick a fight, you know. That’s like, speaking of microaggressions I think that’s one of the biggest dynamics that was difficult for me, because it fed directly into this feeling of being othered. And people told me later, I find you unapproachable, I find you, like, intimidating…
Their sense of isolation was increased by their sense that they could not relate to the heteronormative and abled narratives into which other students’ lives seemed to fit. They noticed that other students’ lives seemed to fit within heteronormative expectations from which they were excluded:

…it felt like every single person that I tried to connect with was in a totally different place in their life. They had just gotten married, they were looking to buy a house, they were trying to start their career, they were, you know, very straight. (laugh) You know, and it, I was like, I don’t even know if marriage is on the table for me, it wasn’t legal then. I didn’t know if I was going to stay with the person I was with then, and it was just all very complicated. Just feeling like my life was so radically different than everyone that was around me.

They also noticed the ways that others’ ability status made their experiences different:

I think that there’s knowing that I couldn’t do as much as other people were doing…I was always aware of the fact that everybody else around me was much more functional than I was. Um, so I think that added to the othered feeling of like, feeling like I didn’t relate to my peers or my cohort.

They often expressed the sense that their own actual experience was invisible to others, that they were “not heard,” that others were so unfamiliar with transgender and disability identities and experiences that they were completely invisible:

I felt, I remember saying this a lot to my partner, I feel like I’m walking into a room saying, “Hi, my name is Jim,” and everyone goes, “Hello, Jeremy, how are you doing?” I’m just like, talking to a wall, you know? Yeah, like, or you know, “Hello Martha, how are you?” “No, my name is Jim.” It’s just like, so not at all what I said. Like you’re not hearing me.

Microaggression Experiences Cause Questioning of Reality

As strongly implied throughout the previous theme, the participant often felt that there was such a clash between their own and others’ perceptions that it was like they were living in different realities. When their perceptions clashed with others’, they often found it difficult to discern what was true:

…there’s this aspect of me struggling to know what I’m feeling. I’m told that things are one way, when I’m feeling that they’re another way, and that’s really confusing…to sort
out what is real. It’s like you’re in a room that’s really warm, and there’s six people around you going, “It’s freezing in here!” and shivering, and layering coats on. And you’re like, “What the…I have no idea…it can’t be cold in here!”

They believed that this confusion was in part caused by having their reality questioned by others. When they confronted microaggressions, their experience was often forcefully denied:

…a lot of dealing with the power dynamic when my professors got things wrong, things wrong that specifically impacted me, you know? And when I would correct them, it was like, this very awkward process, and sometimes I would get yelled at, you know? Like, no, I know this better than you do…

As expressed in this quote, the participant believed that faculty members used their position of authority to discredit the participant’s experience.

The participant often felt blamed for their reactions to microaggressions. When they reacted to microaggressive situations with distress or anger, others seemed to portray them as “overly anxious” or “making a big deal out of nothing.” This theme often arose with regard to disability microaggressions. As previously indicated, there were aspects of the program structure that made it difficult for a person with physical and mental health issues to complete the program at the same rate as others. Attempting to complete the program in the required way left the participant feeling overwhelmed. They reported that some faculty portrayed them as “emotionally unstable” due to their reactions. In the moment, when their experience was denied, they sometimes found themselves doubting their own perceptions, or agreeing with others’ perception by default. For example, in a situation that exacerbated their physical and mental health issues they were “told to figure out how to get over it,” and accused of being unprofessional:

In the moment, I very much was like, I don’t know how I feel about this at all, but you are saying I’m supposed to be professional, so I’m going to say that yes, that’s true. So I kind of like agreed with her at the time.
Another thing this participant reported that made them question the reality of their perceptions was a contrast between others’ stated commitment to social justice and caring, and their microaggressive behaviors: “...[the microaggression] was amidst this culture of ‘We’re being so supportive and social justice minded and good to you.’ You know? And that was very confusing at the time.” This was especially the case when the participant experienced the perpetrator as generally caring towards them: “So that [microaggression] was very confusing at the time. Because I had a very good relationship with the people who were giving these messages, otherwise, you know?”

The participant believed that they may have been especially susceptible to self-doubt in these situations because of their own trauma history. They shared that one of their trauma symptoms is “not being able to identify how I feel in the moment,” which made it difficult for them to fully understand what was going on in a situation at the time. In addition, they believed that as an abuse survivor, they tend to defer to others: “It is a common thing for survivors of abuse to devalue themselves, and to see themselves as complaining and needy, as their needs being too much, everyone else’s thoughts and feelings more important.”

Exhaustion also made it difficult for the participant to understand what had happened when a microaggression had occurred. Simultaneously dealing with microaggressions, program requirements, physical and mental health issues left them exhausted, sometimes too tired to be able to clearly perceive a microaggression until after the fact: “I think I was really kind of numb, I guess. I was really just like so run down, and so exhausted, and I didn’t know how to react...”

**Exhaustion Intensifies Impact**

Microaggression experiences seemed to become more intense or overwhelming for the participant when they were exhausted. They expressed the difficulty of coping with more than
one type of oppression at once. For example, when dealing with multiple ableist microaggressions, they shared that “within all of this I’m regularly being misgendered,” and that this increased their sense of isolation and exhaustion. It was especially difficult for the participant to deal with microaggressions on top of the physical and mental exhaustion they were already experiencing due to health conditions:

I was just really at my limit…I felt like I couldn't do it, and everybody was telling me I probably couldn't do it, and I wasn't emotionally stable enough, and I was like, I don't care. I'm going to do it. And I was miserable the whole time.

Locus of Affirmation Moved to Self and Supportive Others

The participant shared that over time they learned to cope with microaggressions by becoming more reliant on themselves and affirming friends and family. In part, this shift was one that felt forced on the participant by the futility of trying to convince others to affirm them: “…continually ramming into the wall of people not getting it. It really wears you out over time, you know?” Recognizing that others could not be changed was experienced as both frustrating and liberating:

It ended up being inevitable that I realized that I was trying to attain something that was impossible. Um, and that was both really upsetting but also kind of freeing in a sense, because I was able to have more of an internal locus of control as far as what, how I valued myself, you know?

In the absence of affirmation within their program, the participant worked at creating safe spaces where they could process microaggression experiences and affirm their own perceptions. Several times they shared that they used conversations with affirming others to help them sort out the truth of their experiences:

…talking it over with my partner a lot, and with my friends and things like that, trying to figure out how I feel about it, and figure out like, what makes sense, and how it could have been different, and what my role was and what their role was, things like that, trying to figure out, did I do anything wrong?
Processing experiences allowed them to notice discriminatory patterns and to process anger:

And at this point a lot of the things we just talked about had happened, and I was starting to realize that there was a pattern of disrespect, and not understanding how difficult this was for me, and what was going on in my life, and I was starting to get fed up with it.

Recognizing microaggressions allowed them to advocate for themselves and assert their own perspective. On multiple occasions the participant reported going back to supervisors and confronting microaggressions. They also reported that they became less vulnerable with faculty about their experiences, as a way of protecting themselves from future microaggressions.

The renewed self-confidence that the participant gained from these measures enabled them to become less reactive to microaggressions over time:

…developing a safe space for myself, and then having some confidence in myself, and then coming to a more, like, kind of open and understanding where people are at with understanding of trans stuff, you know? Even though, yes, it still hurts me to be misgendered, but it doesn’t feel so sort of big and so intense anymore.

While this participant’s experience of their program seemed primarily negative, the experience of participant 6 presents a contrast.Participant 6 reported significant support from others in his program. While he encountered microaggressions, he was often able to avoid them. He believed that this affected his experience of microaggressions, as described below.

Participant 6

Participant 6 was a White, heterosexual student who identified his gender as FTM. He expressed that that this term fits better for him than man or transman, because for him, “dysphoria has always been about maleness,” about having his body be “what folks would consider male” rather than necessarily conforming to gender expectations. He shared that he is uncomfortable identifying as a man because of how much societal expectations of manhood are shaped by sexism:
…it being ok to be sexist and to be misogynist…I think part of manhood is that you grow up and those things are ingrained into your whole life, and then it’s like your job to undo that, whereas for me, they weren’t ingrained my whole life in the same way, so my work as like, a feminist is a little bit different than cis men.

He also wanted a term that did not erase his life before transition: “…saying like, man, kind of feels like it invalidates the first 18 years of my life, in a way. That’s also a big part of my gender, what it is.”

At the time of the interview, the participant was in his third year in a master’s level college counseling program. The participant’s experience of his program seemed quite positive, overall. He shared that he was pleasantly surprised that there were many other queer students, and that many faculty members and students had some level of knowledge about transgender identities. He felt the program prepared him well for his career goals. He shared that he experienced a few gender-related microaggressions from peers in the program. He also shared a couple of gender-related incidents involving faculty members. He shared that he had learned that, prior to his matriculation to the program, there were other transgender students in the program who chose to leave. He wondered if he had a more positive experience of his program because he possesses White privilege and male privilege:

…because I have White privilege on my side…and because I have male privilege on my side especially, and especially because people forget I’m trans sometimes, I get to talk for a bit before I say something that would make somebody think I don’t deserve to talk. If I was a trans woman or if I was non-binary or if I was not White, I wouldn’t have that kind of automatic foot in the door or the ability to speak out…

This was a privilege of which he made intentional use, as the interview suggested. Table 8 presents the themes of this interview. Most of the interview revolved around the participant’s choices to educate other students and faculty on LGBT issues, as he believed his privilege gave him the opportunity to speak for the community.
Table 8

Participant 6 Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Sub-subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Need for education motivates teaching</td>
<td>Desire to protect other students motivates teaching</td>
<td>Privilege creates opportunity to stand in for others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Presence of educated others allows rest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived orientation to knowledge</td>
<td>Greater knowledge makes interactions more positive</td>
<td>Motivation for learning matters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>influences experience and response</td>
<td>Perceived openness to learning makes interactions more positive</td>
<td>Opportunity to learn influences evaluation of openness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived orientation to knowledge influences interaction</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Expectations affect experience

**Need for Education Motivates Teaching**

When microaggressions occurred, the participant reported frequently taking an educating role of explaining transgender identities and issues, and why the microaggression was problematic. While many people in his program had at least minimal knowledge about transgender issues, when he perceived gaps in knowledge he chose to step in and fill them. He was often placed in this role by others as well. For one professor, for example, it was “kind of an expected thing that [myself and an ally] would kind of help her out, and that we were willing to teach the class stuff.” He shared that he became a kind of “trans mediator” in his program, someone to whom peers came for advice if they witnessed a microaggression.

One of his motivations for accepting this role was protecting other students. He chose, for example, to “spend some extra time teaching” a faculty member because “that will be good
for the next person that comes in…there will be more people after me, and there will, he’ll still be around for it.” He expressed that he felt he was protected by privilege, and could therefore take an educating role without suffering as much as others might:

…I think one of the things that’s nice about where I’m at in my life is that I have male privilege, I have White privilege, I’m an extrovert and I’m pretty confident in myself and I don’t have a ton of body issues anymore, so I’m kind of like the safest person possible…there’s things I always have to deal with, but I don’t have to deal with a lot of the stuff that other trans people do, and so knowing that I can reach folks and give the education without as much harm to me as there is to other folks.

He tried to use this protection to be a voice for others in his community: “…I try not to, even when I’m kind of asked to speak for all trans people I really try to bring in other voices, or even to like, after the fact ask, ‘Hey, how would you have answered this, do I need to share any more stuff with folks?’”

While this participant expressed that he was glad to take this role, he also shared that on the rare occasions when there was someone else knowledgeable about transgender issues in the room, it was nice to allow others to fill the teaching role at times. In one class outside the department, for instance, there was another transgender person with similar experiences who was similarly outspoken, and he acknowledged that this relieved him of some of the burden of educating others:

It’s nice to know that if I, like I don’t ever have to worry about feeling responsibility to speak on behalf of my people…knowing him, like I know that, if I’m not there, he would say the thing that I would have probably wanted to say.

At times, he reported that he and other LGBT students and allies would deliberately coordinate how to address LGBT issues or topics:

Like if my group doesn’t do something LGBT-oriented then his probably will, or we’ll talk through, we’ll occasionally plan it out that way, but like, if one of us is struggling with a person in the class that like the other one can work through how to go about it, or even with the professors.
Perceived Orientation to Knowledge Influences Experience and Response

The participant reported that his microaggression experiences and response were strongly influenced by his perception of the other person’s orientation to knowledge about transgender identities and issues. Specifically, he assessed both their level of knowledge and their openness to further learning, and this evaluation seemed to influence how he felt about the microaggression and the person, and to play a major role in his decisions about further interaction with the person.

The greater the person’s existing knowledge, the more positively the participant seemed to feel about their interactions. Being with more knowledgeable people felt more restful to the participant; greater knowledge meant that there would be less need to put in the work of educating. For example, he identified the awareness of transgender identity within their program as a positive thing because “people are familiar with trans folks, I don’t have to constantly be teaching people.”

The participant also evaluated others’ openness to learning. This was mentioned more frequently than any other topic in the interview as a factor that influenced how positive or negative an experience felt to him. When others were interested in learning, he generally felt good about their encounters. The motivation for this interest in learning was important in evaluating openness; the participant expressed awareness of whether the other person seemed “well-meaning,” caring, or motivated by something else. For example, the participant felt particularly good about his encounters with a faculty member who frequently asked him what he thought about LGBT issues:

…in some ways it could come off as really tokenizing, but it was her way of being like, “I value what you guys have to say on this more than I value what I have to say on this,” which was good.
By contrast, another professor who asked questions about his experience seemed like he was “coming from a curiosity place and not out of a checking on my well-being place.” The participant also seemed to look at whether the person had previous opportunities to learn when making this evaluation. If microaggressions were repeated, they found themselves more angry, and thinking that others “haven’t been paying attention at all.”

The participant’s evaluation of the other person’s level of knowledge and their openness to learning both seemed to influence his decisions about how to interact with them. He tended to avoid those who were less knowledgeable and less open to learning:

…there’s been a couple folks who, I just kind of was like, ‘I’m guess I’m not going to talk to you,’ we never said anything about it, I was just kind of like, “Ok, you got some microaggressions going on, I’m just going to avoid you.”

The participant seemed to look for at least a minimal level of independent interest in learning from the other person. For example, initially he chose to speak up in class about transgender microaggressions in textbooks every time he discovered one, but over time he noticed that this was not always useful:

…[There are] two types of folks I deal with. There’s the folks who know me really well and they see something and they’re like, “Hey did you see this?”…And then there’s the folks who don’t even think to think that that’s bad. So there’s different kinds of people and I just kind of had to realize that I can’t fix all of the folks who just read it and don’t even question it. I can’t, again, do that. It’s too much time.

**Expectations Affect Experience**

A final minor theme for this participant was that the expectations he held before a microaggression occurred influenced his experience of it. There were no clear patterns to his expectations, but he mentioned a few times that the strength of his reaction was linked to whether he anticipated the microaggression beforehand. In most cases, being able to anticipate microaggressions seemed to make them feel less intense: “It’s gotten a little bit better because I
know what to expect now…” In some cases, however, anticipating microaggressions made him feel anxious:

I think it’s like, when things get said and I’m not necessarily expecting things to be said, I can kind of quickly turn around and be like, “that’s not how this works.” But if it’s a person it’s like, you know that there’s a good chance, you’re just kind of like sitting there constantly in dread, like, oh God, what are they going to say, what are they going to say? And that just takes up too much energy to sit there and be worried about someone.

As this quote illustrates, Participant 6 had a sense of whether specific others were likely to commit microaggressions, and his reactions varied depending on whether he expected microaggressions from a given person. Participant 7 also seemed to react based on expectations she had formed of the other person. However, Participant 7 seemed also to evaluate perpetrators’ reason for microaggressing, and to form expectations for them based not only on past experience with them, but on her judgment of the reasonableness of the microaggression.

**Participant 7**

This participant was a White, lesbian, cisgender woman in her fourth year of doctoral studies. She shared that has been “out” since high school, though she initially identified as bisexual because she believed that it would be more acceptable at her Catholic high school. She also shared that she is a person with physical disabilities, and her physical condition played a role in her career trajectory. Initially, she was employed in a field other than counseling, but became physically unable to continue in that field, and as a result chose to pursue counseling.

The participant chose to attend the same, faith based school for both her master’s and doctoral programs. The spiritual component of the program attracted her:

…looking at how do we conceptualize the importance of spirituality in people’s psychological well-being. And that was fascinating to me because as a spiritual person, I know it’s important in my life, I know it helps me cope and it helps me get through some things. I also know, growing up Catholic, I know it can be a hindrance to some people or a help. And I was like, my clients are going to have this in their lives, so shouldn’t I be trained to deal with it?
Once in her master’s program, the participant was troubled by a “lack of inclusivity” and understanding regarding race, LGBT issues, and non-Christian faiths. She decided to pursue her doctorate to make change in the counseling profession: “You know, so I figured, my goal in being a professor is to be an educator and to have a more inclusive look on things…”

The participant described characteristic ways of evaluating microaggressions after the fact, and ways of coping with the impact (Table 9). She also spoke a great deal about how she made the decision to confront perpetrators about microaggressions.

Table 9

Participant 7 Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Sub-subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived reason for microaggression influences</td>
<td>Perceived attitude considered</td>
<td>Opportunity to know better considered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experience</td>
<td>Opportunity to know confers responsibility</td>
<td>Education confers responsibility to know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professional position confers responsibility to know</td>
<td>Obviousness confers responsibility to know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of costs and benefits influences</td>
<td>Well-being of clients and peers outweighs other considerations</td>
<td>Likelihood that confrontation will create change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>choice to confront microaggressions</td>
<td></td>
<td>Likelihood of impact on education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Potential reaction of the perpetrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeated microaggression exposure changes</td>
<td>Sensitivity to hurt diminished over time</td>
<td>Focusing on the positive prevents awareness of microaggressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experience</td>
<td>Some microaggressions passed over</td>
<td>Ignoring microaggressions provides a way to cope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from others assists with coping</td>
<td>Response to microaggression checked with others</td>
<td>Affirmation from others gives hope</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The participant shared that she experienced both sexual orientation microaggressions and faith-based microaggressions in her program. She identified as a non-Christian, spiritual person. At times, she felt that faculty members were not fully inclusive of non-Christian students.

**Perceived Reason for Microaggression Influences Experience**

When reacting to a microaggression, this participant frequently worked to make sense of the reason the microaggression had occurred, whether it had occurred because of prejudice or ignorance, and whether (if the reason was ignorance) it was justified ignorance. Discerning the other person’s attitude (prejudiced or affirming) was an important part of this process. She brought what she knew of the other person to bear on her understanding of the microaggression; if they seemed affirming in general, she believed the microaggression proceeded from ignorance: “I would say that my department is accepting, and personally the individual professors are accepting, I just think that they just can’t see that their behavior is saying something different than what they’re saying with their words.” Other microaggressions seemed to express more prejudice:

…unfortunately for some, it’s very uncomfortable for them to understand or work with the LGBT community. So you’ll see it where they will specifically not mention it. You know, they will leave it out, in their presentations or in their class write-ups and everything…they’re so uncomfortable dealing with it that they just sort of, they don’t ask, and they don’t ever have to deal with it.

The participant’s experience of a microaggression also seemed different depending on her evaluation of whether the other person should have known better than to commit the microaggression. She repeatedly emphasized that she was more angry, upset, or disappointed when she felt the other person had been given opportunities for knowledge that would have enabled them to act differently. Education was one advantage that she felt should equip others with the knowledge to be affirming: “It was frustrating, because…we are not uneducated people. We are master’s students…” It was particularly problematic for her when she or others had
confronted the perpetrator about microaggressions in the past and attempted to teach them, and they continued to commit microaggressions. For example, with a professor whom she had confronted multiple times about the same microaggression, she said that the microaggression started to feel “very personal,” and more intensely upsetting.

Regardless of the perpetrator’s opportunity for education, the participant also seemed to evaluate whether the microaggression should have been obvious to the person, either because it was common sense, or because it was consistent with their other beliefs. She frequently exclaimed over how ridiculous certain microaggressions seemed to her, as if any rational person should have known better. Responding to students, for example, who refused to ask their clients about sexual orientation, she exclaimed, “You’ll ask them what religious affiliation they have, but you’re not going to ask that?!”

The participant also expressed that professional position conferred a responsibility to know on counselors and especially on counseling faculty. Even if the perpetrator had not had the opportunity to learn better, she felt that their commitment to caring for people should make them sensitive to and affirming of others:

…even if you don’t have the privilege of education, and even if you didn’t have the privilege of time and age, we’re counselors…our job is to meet people where they’re at, not bring them to where we want them to be or think they should be.

**Perception of Costs and Benefits Influences Choice to Confront Microaggressions**

When considering whether to confront a microaggression, the perpetrator seemed to weigh the potential costs and benefits of the confrontation. She shared that her first concern was for the well-being of clients and future LGBT students. If she did not take the opportunity to educate others, she feared that they would go on to harm clients or students:

Whenever there’s a client involved or a possible client involved, I don’t bat an eye. I don’t care if the other counselor doesn’t like me. I don’t care. Because knowing what I
know about LGBT, knowing what I know about suicidality, it’s somebody’s life, and I’m not going to have that going, “Oh, I could’ve said something.”

As this quote indicates, the participant felt a strong sense of responsibility for LGBT clients and students. She expressed that her choice to confront a microaggression could literally make a life or death difference for them, if it enabled a perpetrator to learn more affirming practices.

The likelihood that confrontation would create change was another factor the participant considered. At times, she chose to sit back because confronting a microaggression in the moment might hinder long-term change: “We realized that sometimes the best course of action is to make a note of it, take a step back, and see what comes next.” She also mentioned allowing allies to confront microaggressions rather than confronting them herself, when she believed her own voice would not be heard:

…one of the reasons why I also kept quiet throughout the talk was because everybody in the room that knew me knows how I identify, knows that I'm lesbian. Um, but the people, some of the people that were the loudest voices in the room identify as heterosexual…Their voices reach a little farther because they're not like, “Of course you're going to say that because you're lesbian, and you want me to be nice.”

A less frequently mentioned consideration was whether confrontation would have an impact on the participant’s education. Initially, she reported staying quiet in her program, but once she had established her reputation as a good student, she felt freer to voice concerns:

…I’ve been here long enough, I’ve proven how good of a student I am, if you’re going to get offended because I’m calling you out on something that I find as offensive, what are you going to do to me? Will you hurt my grade? Everybody knows where my grades are. You’re going to have to justify hurting my grade, and you can’t.

She also considered the potential for negative reactions from the perpetrator if she confronted the microaggression: “You know, whenever you speak up there’s always this second, at least for me, always a second or a millisecond of, ‘Should I?’…Is it going to irritate the other
person?” This concern seemed to be a relatively minor one for her, however, and usually seemed to be outweighed by other considerations.

**Repeated Microaggression Exposure Changes Experience**

The participant expressed that her reactions to microaggression experiences have changed over time. She felt that her early experiences of microaggressions had forced her to learn to moderate her reactions: “…I’ve built up a lot of armor over the years…A lot of that was learned in Catholic high school, you know? You can’t let every slight get to you because you’ll never make it through.” She expressed the belief that others who had fewer microaggression experiences might be “more sensitive” or “react more severely.” Now, where others might find microaggressions painful, she is more likely to react with anger: “I figure if I’m getting pissed off, somebody else is getting hurt.”

The participant also learned to pass over some microaggressions without really giving them attention. She noted at the end of her interview that she realized as we spoke that there were a lot of microaggressions she had not really noticed at the time because she was trying to concentrate on the positive aspects of her program: “…it made me realize that to get through, I had to focus on the positive…” She wondered if there were microaggressions she had totally ignored:

You know, did I just let these, did I let microaggressions go by and just bat them off and shake them off and ignore them? Because I know I caught some, but how many more did I just say it wasn’t worth dealing with, and just walked away?

She said that sometimes it becomes so automatic for her to push microaggressions aside that she is not conscious of doing it: “…it’s so subconscious…you don’t realize what bothers you because you kind of push through it.”
Support from Others Assists with Coping

The participant also coped with microaggressions by seeking support from others. She reported a few times that she checked her reaction to microaggressions with affirming friends to determine if she was reacting too strongly, and if her responses were appropriate. After a microaggression experience with a faculty member, for example, she wrote an e-mail to the professor, but sent it to an affirming friend first: “I had her look over the e-mail. She agreed, she looked over the e-mail, she did tweak one or two words…and I went ahead and I sent him the revised e-mail…”

The participant also mentioned several times that being aware of others’ affirmation gave her a sense of hope. She spoke of going to a presentation on LGBT issues and religion, and how important it was to her to witness non-LGBT people speaking up in support of the LGBT community:

I walked away just holding on to the encouragement that, wow, there’s so many more people than I was expecting that were, you know, defending the community, defending the right of clients and the need for us to accept clients as they are and work with it, instead of pretending that it doesn’t exist.

Working and hoping for change were an important part of coping with microaggressions for this participant. This experience served to reinforce the participant’s commitment to building more inclusive environments. Not all participants responded to microaggressions in the same way, however. While the next participant confronted microaggressions in some circumstances, they often felt unable to challenge microaggressions when they occurred.

Participant 8

This participant was White and described themselves as “queer and gender neutral.” Attraction for them did not seem to center on gender identity or expression, but just “whoever I’m attracted to.” They also shared that they are consensually non-monogamous, and liked the
term queer because they felt it could encompass this aspect of their orientation: “[It’s] another reason I like queer rather than bisexual, ‘cause it’s also like, you know, there’s some other stuff happening here too.”

The participant shared that they began to question their gender identity at a young age, but had no term to describe their experience initially. They used internet searches to explore their experiences, and over time began a process of coming out to others. They felt that early on they were more vulnerable to others’ reactions to their gender, but that over time they arrived at a more self-affirming place, “giving myself permission to not care about people’s responses…”

The participant chose to pursue a degree in the counseling field after they attempted to complete a degree in another field, and became frustrated with the “academic drudgery” of that program. They liked that their counseling program focused on self-reflection and application of concepts rather than academic work for its own sake. They initially worried about pursuing the field because of a history of trauma; they were concerned that working as a counselor would trigger their own traumatic memories and that they would be unable to cope. After doing personal work on trauma, however, they felt better prepared to enter the field. They found the self-reflection component of the program somewhat tiring, as it required them to revisit memories they had already laid to rest.

The participant found the program “positive” overall. They described their cohort as a “tight-knit group” and said that the relationships they formed during the program made it a “much better experience than I was expecting.” They felt the program was “pretty good” at affirming diverse sexual orientations. There seemed to be less awareness of transgender identities and issues within the program, but they felt that this was improving. They were frequently misgendered, but stated that this did not usually bother them greatly.
Though the participant did not usually react strongly to misgendering, their reactions were stronger under certain circumstances, as described below. Table 10 summarizes the themes identified in this interview. The first three themes summarize the reasons the participant gave for the variations in their experience of microaggressions, why some microaggressions had a deeper emotional impact. The participant also mentioned the importance of support in helping them cope with microaggressions.
Table 10

*Participant 8 Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Sub-subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expectations influence experience and response</td>
<td>Hope for affirmation makes microaggressions more painful</td>
<td>Lack of change leads to resignation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Existence of change influences expectations, experience, and response</td>
<td>Others’ attempts to change improve experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal well-being interconnected with emotional and behavioral response</td>
<td>Effort of response weighed against personal capacity and likelihood of benefit</td>
<td>Effort of educating avoided</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-doubt leads to questioning response</td>
<td>Unsuccessful attempts made to moderate emotional response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning of the microaggression influences emotional response</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from allies enables coping</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Expectations Influence Experience and Response**

As with other participants, this participant’s expectations seemed to influence their microaggression experience, and how they chose to respond. In particular, microaggressions felt more upsetting to them when they had hoped others would be affirming. For example, they found being misgendered more painful if it occurred after they had explained their gender identity to the perpetrator: “…since trying more actively get people to recognize me as neutral, now it’s that much more frustrating I’m just ‘the girl in the group.’” They also found microaggressions more upsetting if they came from people who identified as allies, but chose to disregard their experience as a transgender person.
The participant described how their expectations were shaped over time by observing whether others made changes to become more affirming. Their altered expectations in turn influenced their in-the-moment experience and how they chose to respond. When changes were not made (i.e. others continually misgendered them, even after correction), they became more and more resigned to these microaggressions. They reacted to such microaggressions with frustration, but without surprise: “She misgendered me for the rest of the semester. I was just like, yeah, that seems about right.” Sensing that change was unlikely, they sometimes chose to withdraw rather than to confront the microaggression: “I feel like usually they want to just say it to me, so I’m like, ‘Uh, ok, bye.’ Rather than have a conversation. Partly because they’ve already decided that they’re right.” By contrast, when others made attempts to change, they seemed to feel more hopeful: “I mean most of them, it’s just a learning curve…some of my classmates and teachers, they did get better.”

**Personal Well-Being Interconnected with Emotional and Behavioral Response**

The participant mentioned several times that their state of well-being played a role in how they experienced and responded to microaggressions. They often weighed the effort of their response against how much emotional and physical energy they had available at the time, and how likely it was that their response would improve their well-being. Early in their program, they shared that they were better able to respond to microaggressions, but that later in the program they became “burned out.” Furthermore, the participant also experienced a traumatic event during the program. Coping with this experience and completing schoolwork left them with little energy for educating others: “I just don’t have the energy to be a social justice advocate right now. I don’t even know if I have the energy to be fully authentic right now.” They evaluated whether confrontation was likely to matter to their own life:
...how many of these people am I going to see after this? Who is actually going to be part of my life? Is it worth the energy of educating everyone, correcting everyone, and if there's not actually any end game then...like I would love to do it so that it would be easier for people in the future, but at the same time, it's not my job to save the world.

The participant attempted to use the same sort of analysis of costs and benefits to moderate their emotional reactions: “I have that little internal dialogue of, is it worth being this upset?” They noted, however, that their attempts to moderate their emotional reactions were unsuccessful: “…I just end up upset and try to decide if it was worth it or not afterwards, and then frustrate myself more.”

The participant seemed to have a personal tendency to doubt themselves; this was another aspect of their personal well-being that seemed to affect their microaggression responses. This strand of self-doubt appeared throughout the interview in self-critical comments. For example, they said during member-checking that they “feel kinda dumb about not articulating things right in a bunch of places,” and acknowledged that they “tend to second-guess the way I say things.” This tendency appeared to influence their response to microaggressions. Specifically, they sometimes questioned the intensity of their responses: “[I] felt frustrated with myself for being so upset….on some level it feels dumb that I invested that much energy in being upset.” They acknowledged that they might not have been so critical of someone else who had the same reactions:

…it’s definitely one of those situations where if any of my friends or anyone I knew or a client came and told me about it, I’d be like, no, you’re totally justified for being upset. But then of course when it was me and I was in the position I was like, you shouldn’t be this upset.

Meaning of the Microaggression Influences Emotional Response

A minor theme of the participant’s interview centered on one microaggression experience which they described as particularly difficult and painful, the “worst” interaction of their program. The participant was misgendered in a class session, and when they attempted to
correct the issue, the professor told them they were overreacting, and gave a lengthy explanation of why the professor believed they were wrong to be upset. In the moment, the participant said they felt “shocked and like, small, and didn’t know what to say, just really wanted to not cry.” During member-checking they wrote about this experience particularly, and found re-reading their experience “unexpectedly emotional.” Their strong response to this microaggression seemed to come from the meaning they made of it, that it symbolized the most painful aspects of their microaggression experience:

I guess it just feels like the perfect embodiment of the misgendering I’ve experienced in my life. Just that confident certainty that I’m the one who isn’t understanding something. That easy, confident, casual, condescending dismissal of what I’m saying. That sense of feeling talked down to...That feeling like the person thinks the conversation is a waste of time, but thinks they’re doing me a favor by explaining to [me] what I’m doing wrong. And all totally unnecessary, unwelcome, and unasked for.

It also seemed to hold meaning for the participant as a symbol for other painful relational experiences: “It might be the perfect embodiment of a lot of my interactions with people...not just the moments of misgendering...”

Support from Others Enables Coping

A final minor theme for this participant was that seeking support from others provided them with the ability to cope with microaggression experiences. They mentioned a few times that they talked about their experiences with friends, and used friends as a sounding board when planning their responses. Support was also important for participant 9, but she received little of this support in her doctoral program, and found coping particularly difficult in this context.

Participant 9

Participant 9 was a White pansexual person who currently identifies as a cisgender woman, but indicated that her way of describing her gender identity fluctuates somewhat:
I don’t know about gender identity, I kind of go back and forth on it, you know? I used to say I was genderqueer and now I would just say I identify as a cis woman. You know, but that’s a little harder to put a word on.

When she was young she struggled to define her gender. She shared that she grew up with boys and “that’s just kind of like how I was socialized.” She felt like she did not really relate to girls as well, but did not quite fit in with guys either, so she remembers “feeling like I don’t really belong anywhere.”

As a young person, the participant struggled to accept her sexual orientation and gender identity; she shared that she experienced a lot of prejudice from others, and a family member even tried to force her to attend conversion therapy when she first came out. She also reported pressure from others to “pick a team,” to choose between being lesbian or being heterosexual. In her member-checking notes, she shared that she attempted suicide multiple times because she felt “God made a mistake when he made me.” Even after she began to accept her identity, she said that for a time she was preoccupied with trying to clearly define her sexual and gender identities to make them fit labels that others would acknowledge: “[I] really wanted it to fit in like a pretty box of like, I am this…” Over time, as she became more self-confident, labels became less important to her: “…I think as I’ve gotten more comfortable with myself as a person in general, that’s just kind of started to matter less…So I just kind of stopped thinking about it in terms like that, I guess.”

The participant became interested in psychology after the death of a family member, and she discovered that she enjoyed working with children. She shared that her experience in her master’s program was profoundly transformative for her as a person, helping her become more comfortable with who she was as a person, and helping her develop deeper empathy for others. She described sexuality as a non-issue in her master’s program:
…in terms of sexual identity it wasn’t really even a thing. I was in a pretty gay part of [the state], so I was like, I don’t know, it wasn’t like anything out of the ordinary. It wasn’t really a conversation either way it was just kind of like, eh, who gives a shit? Why are we bothering to talk about that?

As this quote indicates, she believed that the surrounding culture shaped the environment of the program. The participant did experience occasional microaggressions in her master’s program that were targeted at her identity as a person in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction.

For her doctoral program, the participant chose to go to a different region of the country. She shared that the lack of diversity in the area was a shock to her, and she felt there was more prejudice there. At the time of our interview, she was still in her first semester of the program, and reported several LGBT microaggressions. Not all microaggressions occurred in the program itself; the participant shared that she had microaggression experiences in her workplace that had a profound effect on her overall well-being and her experience in the program.

Table 11 summarizes the themes expressed in this participant’s interview. At times microaggressions had a profound impact on the participant’s sense of human worth and value. Like other participants, however, this participant’s experience varied depending on her expectations and her context. She struggled to determine how to respond to microaggressions after the fact, weighing her well-being and her values when choosing whether to speak out about a microaggression. As mentioned, she felt a strong need for support from others. She also coped by conceptualizing microaggressions as part of a process that leads to social change.
Table 11

Participant 9 Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Sub-subthemes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Microaggressions strike at feeling of human worthiness</td>
<td>Unexpected microaggressions cause shock and outrage</td>
<td>Expectations of certain groups influence reaction</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Expected microaggressions are less intense</td>
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<td>Expectations shape reaction to microaggressions</td>
<td>Fear of consequences leads to silence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Suppressed emotions make silence difficult</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Challenging microaggressions is right</td>
<td>Speaking up protects others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Well-being and values influence choice to speak up</td>
<td>Microaggressions create a deep need to be heard</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Support from faculty is particularly important</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support is critically important to coping</td>
<td>Election of Trump exacerbates distress</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lack of diversity in the area exacerbates isolation</td>
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<tr>
<td>External context affects microaggression experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Microaggressions are part of a learning process</td>
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Microaggressions Strike at Feeling of Human Worthiness

The participant mentioned several times throughout the interview that microaggression experiences were “belittling” and “dehumanizing,” that they touched “who I am at the core of my being and what I think about that and what other people think about me.” Microaggressions seemed to profoundly affect the participant’s core sense of self. When microaggressions occurred, she found herself feeling “bad,” as if she had done something wrong, even when on some level, she knew that she had not. For example, after confronting a microaggression at her
workplace, the participant received a negative job evaluation that she believed to be deliberately discriminatory. Describing this experience, she said:

At first it was this really, really deep blow to like, my human worthiness, or something. You know, I don’t even know how to, how to describe it, but it was just like, it wasn’t like oh I did a bad job at work and I’m upset, it felt like there was fundamentally something wrong with me, and that’s a shit feeling…

Microaggressions caused her to question her goodness, whether they targeted sexual orientation or addiction. She recounted hearing peers make negative comments about addicts: “I just felt like a bad person I guess, in some way, ‘cause it kind of makes you question, like, was this really all my fault?” While both types of microaggression experiences seemed to lead her to question her goodness, she acknowledged that she struggled more when microaggressions targeted sexual orientation:

I think I am somehow able to take emotion out of addiction a lot more because I can explain it like it’s this brain disease and I’m not a bad person, but with being gay it’s like, am I a bad person? Why do people want to take my rights away? Why do people think I will go to hell?

Expectations Shape Reaction to Microaggressions

Like other participants, this participant shared that her reaction to microaggressions was shaped by expectations she held before the microaggression occurred. When a microaggression was unexpected, she expressed shock and/or outrage. For example, when the participant learned that gender neutral bathrooms were controversial on campus, she was surprised, because gender-neutral bathrooms were simply a part of life at the university where she completed her master’s program: “It was pretty shocking to me because I thought it was a common thing…” Expecting certain groups of people to know better was a kind of expectation that she mentioned a few times (e.g. she expected counselors, authors of multicultural textbooks, and supervisors to know better than to commit certain microaggressions). Other expectations included expectations about the specific microaggression (the particular microaggression seemed so ridiculous that she would
never have expected someone to commit it), and expectations of modern society (she would not have expected a certain microaggression to occur in this day and age).

The participant only mentioned once what her experience was like when a microaggression was expected (and even that microaggression she described as unexpected in some ways). When another student made derogatory comments about bisexuality (the participant publicly identifies as bisexual because pansexual is too hard to explain to others), she said:

Unfortunately she’s not the first and she probably won’t be the last to have that kind of reaction, so I was mad, and I shrugged it off and I laughed and I acted like it was fine, and I didn’t want to pursue it, and at this point I unfortunately want to say I’m used to it, that it’s a comment I’ve gotten plenty of times before, from gay people, straight people. But it was kind of like, alright, whatever. Another person who thinks that way.

**Well-Being and Values Influence Choice to Speak Up**

The participant shared that she is often faced with choices about whether to stay silent or to speak up. In making these choices, she seemed to weigh both her well-being and her values.

After a microaggression occurred, she mentioned feeling fearful of what would happen if she were to challenge the microaggression openly. She said that she frequently does not challenge microaggressions targeted at pansexuality or bisexuality:

It’s a battle I guess I kind of gave up on—that whole be gay or straight thing. Partially because I don’t care because I know who I am, but partially because I am scared of losing friends or making people feeling uncomfortable.

At other times, no microaggression had occurred, but she believed microaggression or discrimination was likely, so she found herself making choices about whether to share her sexual identity with others, as her choice to speak up might expose her to harm. She shared, for example, that she publicly identifies as bisexual, because when she describes herself as pansexual, she encounters more microaggressions:
I also usually just tell people I am bi if they ask me about my sexual orientation because people give me weird looks or probing questions when I say pansexual. Some people even make jokes about me being attracted to pans and kitchenware. The only people I really bother to describe my sexual orientation in the holistic way I see it are my close friends or someone I am dating.

Even though the participant chose to keep silent to protect her well-being, silence still felt emotionally difficult. In some situations, the participant shared that keeping silence was quite difficult and painful, and required her to press down her emotional reaction to the microaggression. When working as a GA, for example, the participant felt she had to keep silent when a student committed a microaggression, but found it emotionally difficult not to speak out. Sometimes this effort was not worth the emotional cost. After a microaggression at work, for example, she initially kept silent for fear of losing her job, but ultimately “I couldn’t sit with it anymore...I was just still so upset about it about a week later that I was like, I need to say something.”

Though she chose to keep silent at times, the participant expressed that she felt conflicted about this, because she feels that challenging microaggressions is the right thing to do. In her member-checking comments, for example, she said:

I actually felt really bad talking about this during our interview. I felt like I should stick up for myself more and verbalizing that I don’t felt pretty crappy. I didn’t want to admit that I didn’t do anything about it…I don’t think that’s right, and I think I should say something when people say mean and ignorant stuff...

She expressed that keeping silence felt like agreeing with the perpetrator: “…after a while it just felt like that’s just as bad as saying something [microaggressive], if I’m just going to like, you know, not do anything about it.” She expressed that she chose at times to speak up in the hopes that the perpetrator would learn from their encounter and act differently toward others in future; in this way, challenging microaggression gave her a sense of being able to protect others. When speaking with others about addiction and recovery, for example, she attempted to
“take a more educational approach of like, you know, using my experience as sort of an educational tool,” and she was careful about the way she presented herself as she spoke:

…usually I would do my best to try and not get angry, ‘cause like, I almost felt like I was representing all drug addicts or something like that, and I wanted to be calm and try to explain it nicely…It’s kind of like, what if this is the only real interaction they’re going to have with someone in recovery? Or something like that. You know, I don’t want it to be a bad one, or just confirm what they think.

The participant seemed to feel an added sense of urgency about protecting LGBT individuals, a sense that challenging microaggressions could be a life or death issue. The participant expressed that she chose to complete this study in part because she believed it might save someone’s life:

I really hope that maybe if even one person can just read your study and open their hearts a little more, it really could make the biggest difference in the world for someone. It could make the difference between life and death—I don’t think you can save someone or push them over the edge, but you can certainly push a person in one direction or the other. It’s so important for counselors and counselor educators to understand that we (LGBT) have our own needs, we deserve a space in that multicultural class, and we are still facing discrimination today. They need to be aware of our pain, our struggles, and our triumphs. Some of the highest suicide rates are among the LGBT community and there’s a lot of crimes against us too.

**Support is Critically Important to Coping**

A pervasive theme throughout the interview was how important support was to this participant in coping with microaggressions. The participant shared that microaggressions often left her feeling as though others are not hearing her. She expressed a need to have others to “confide in” about her microaggression experiences. She mentioned this frequently in her member-checking comments as another factor that made her decide to participate in this study:

…I know my voice is just like a drop in the ocean, but I just wanted to be heard. A lot of the times I feel like nobody is really listening to me. They hear me, but they aren’t really listening or understanding…So I just thought if I participated in this study maybe someone would listen to me. I wanted to have that space to say these things and to be taken seriously.
She shared that support from faculty has been particularly critical to helping her cope with microaggressions. Faculty provided emotional support after microaggression incidents occurred, and offered practical assistance in helping her deal with fallout. In the first semester of her doctoral program, the participant experienced a microaggression in her workplace (outside the program) that was so severe that she needed to find another place to work; her faculty advisor assisted her with finding a new work placement and helped her decide how to navigate the situation until a new placement could be found:

Yeah, the people in my department, like, my advisor and my professors that I know, um, and have a relationship with, have been really very supportive…I was like, sobbing. We had this meeting maybe 3 weeks after…and I went to my advisor because I feel like she’s someone that I can trust and that I have that relationship with, and she was incredibly understanding, she was like, you know. “What do you want me to do? How can I help you? Do you want to set up another meeting? Do you want to…like, I’ll help you look for other positions or whatever the case may be.” And she kind of sat, she processed it with me, like “How are you feeling?” It felt kind of like a supervision/counseling kind of session that she helped me through it.

**External Context Affects Microaggression Experience**

As the previous story illustrates, not all microaggressions that affected the participant’s program experience occurred in the program, and sometimes external context affected how she experienced microaggressions within the program. One external circumstance that she mentioned a few times was the impact of the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency. Her microaggression experiences felt even more dehumanizing and isolating to her since the election:

Um, basically like since Trump got elected it's just been awful. I think I've cried for like, days, every day after that happened, and um, you know, unfortunately me and my brother are not even on speaking terms right now because of a lot of things that he said, that he just flat out doesn't care, and he doesn't have to because he's a White male in the middle class, so it's, you know, he's right, it won't affect him. But it's definitely caused a divide between me and a lot of people. I was supervising a bunch of master’s students during election night, and a group of them had actually come up to me and they tried to leave class early because they were so like, stressed out, and they wanted to go view the election results, and I was like, you know, “No, absolutely not are you leaving class to go
get drunk and watch the election.” But we were all in this heightened, what's going to happen kind of thing. And since then, my God is it incredibly infuriating to be told things like, um, just that like, it doesn't matter or that I'm being bratty or that I don't know what I'm talking about, or that I'm not being targeted, and you know, “Trust me, nobody cares if you're a woman or if you're gay. You just need to calm down.” And it's like, you know, you don't, you're not told that like, “gay people need to die,” by Trump supporters. You're not, like, you know, you're not like, told these things where it’s in your face, and it's like this apparent kind of thing that I have to deal with...

She stated that few of these microaggression experiences occurred in her program, but as this quote suggests, her general level of fear and distress was heightened. This seemed to affect her experiences of microaggressions when they occurred. When talking about feeling “bad” or ashamed during microaggression experiences, she noted that, “this has only gotten worse since Trump was elected.”

A second contextual factor that seemed to affect her microaggression experiences was the lack of diversity in the region where she is completing her doctoral degree. She shared that she has had difficulty finding LGBT friends, and this made microaggressions in the program even more isolating. For example, the only other LGBT student in her cohort made a microaggressive comment to her about bisexuality, and this felt especially devastating given the context:

That was a really sad moment for me because I thought she would be the one person I could confide in about the personal problems I was having with my sexuality, like dealing with that [microaggressive] professor or trying to find women to date.

**Microaggressions Are Part of a Learning Process**

A minor theme for the participant was that she made sense of microaggression experiences by reminding herself that they are part of a learning process, a process that may produce positive change:

…I guess I was making sense of it like, it’s a changing world, you know, and before it was gay people, lesbians, trans, like, whatever, there was other groups of people where there was just this cultural shift where it’s like, oh wow, what we were doing is pretty messed up and maybe we shouldn’t be doing that…whenever there’s change there’s going to be people who are super for it, and people that super don’t want it, but there’s not usually to many people who don’t care either way.
It seemed easier for the participant to accept microaggressions when they were conceptualized as ignorance rather than hatred, coming “from a lack of understanding and not necessarily a bad place…” When a professor failed to cover LGBT families in a lecture on a certain family counseling topic, she was initially angry, but when he explained that there was no research on how the topic applied to LGBT families, this changed her experience:

It made me want to go out and do that research, you know? I was kind of like, ok! I'm satisfied with that response because that actually makes a lot of sense to me that this is, it is a smaller population and maybe they don't want to be involved in research studies…And it was something I like, looked into and followed up on, and he was right, there's just really not a whole lot of research done on it.

The participant seemed to find this experience motivating, an impetus to go out and generate new knowledge. Some participants found it difficult to affirm such a hopeful view. Like this participant, Participant 10 desired for others to engage in learning about LGBT people and people of color, but observed that heterosexual peers did not seem to make use of opportunities to learn. These experiences made it difficult for him to believe that change would take place.

**Participant 10**

This participant was an African American man who described his sexuality as “homosexual.” The participant arrived at this identity as a young teen, and initially attempted to change his orientation through prayer:

So I was in middle school when I like, every night I would go to bed crying and I would just pray to God, ‘Make me straight, make me normal,’ and I would wake up, and I would still have attractions to boys my age, and you know, it just dawned on me that I can’t change this…

When he realized that it was not possible for him to change his orientation, he began to share and affirm it, despite opposition from his family. He shared that he now takes pride in his identity, and the courage that it takes to hold it:
...I love who I am. I won’t change myself for anyone, and I’m proud of who I am. It takes a lot of, I think it takes a lot of strength, a lot of courage for me to be, especially since I’m African American too, to be who I am on a day-to-day basis.

He expressed that he has been targeted throughout his life for both his race and his sexuality, and the combined weight of both oppressions has made coping difficult at times: “So I’ve had to put up with not only racism, but homophobia as well, and um, two things I really can’t hide, and two things I don’t hide, so I kind of um, I’ve been, it’s been a struggle.”

The participant initially planned to enter a field unrelated to counseling, but as a young adult he entered a stressful internship that precipitated a “mental breakdown,” causing him to seek counseling as a client. His experience as a client was so positive that he wanted to give the same help to others: “I always thought that since she gave me so much, I want to do the exact same thing to someone else.” At the time of our interview, the participant was in his final year of his master’s program. He described aspects of his program as very “enjoyable,” particularly the participatory style of learning in certain classes. He described multiple microaggression experiences during his program, however, encompassing both racial microaggressions and LGBT microaggressions. He had expected his program to be more affirming than it was. Most of his comments during the interview focused on this discrepancy, and how he made sense of it over time, as described below. Table 12 presents the themes of the interview, which describe how the participant came to terms with this discrepancy.
Table 12

Participant 10 Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Sub-subthemes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peers and faculty should know about LGBT lives and issues</td>
<td>Being a counselor means accepting and caring for everyone</td>
<td>Lack of knowledge and acceptance may negatively affect clients</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Caring for everyone means learning about diverse experiences</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Faculty must educate about everyone to train good counselors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others’ lack of knowledge and acceptance creates cognitive dissonance</td>
<td>Lack of affirmation necessitates speaking up</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lack of program diversity means being the only voice</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Speaking up repeatedly leads to exhaustion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attempts made to educate because no-one else will</td>
<td>Everyone has an opportunity to learn</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of knowledge means lack of effort means lack of caring</td>
<td>LGBT lives do not matter to the perpetrator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expectations and opportunity for knowledge used to make sense of the perpetrator</td>
<td>Perceived lack of caring leads to hopelessness</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Multiple oppressions intensify impact</td>
<td>Support helps with coping</td>
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Peers and Faculty Should Know About LGBT Lives and Issues

A pervasive theme throughout the interview was that the participant strongly believed that faculty members and peers in his program should know about LGBT people and the issues that affect their lives. This belief was grounded in his expectations for the counseling profession. To the participant, being a counselor means welcoming, serving, and affirming everyone, regardless of identity: “…how I see a counselor is someone who is, you know, throws all of their
ideals, all of their beliefs to the wind when it comes to accepting other people…” This expectation seemed both aspirational and practical, a value statement about what counselors ought to be, as well as a statement of what counselors must be to be effective:

…clearly you’re not going to just counsel heterosexual White men the entire time. You’re going to have all these people that come from different backgrounds, different walks of life, so when I know and then when I sense that people aren’t accepting of homosexuality, I’m thinking, well, what if you get a gay client?

Because counselors cannot pick and choose clients, the participant believed that counselors must be well prepared to work with anyone they might encounter; therefore, in the participant’s view, counselors must deliberately seek out knowledge about diverse groups of people. He saw the counseling program as the obvious environment for peers to learn about LGBT people:

There’s no guarantee that the people you’re going to be working with, somebody’s going to identify as part of our community, and you can just say, “I’m going to refer you to this person.” That’s not how it works. You’re going to have to figure something out. And why not get over that uncomfortable feeling now, when you’re in the program, when you’re still learning?

The participant saw this learning as particularly crucial because of the potential impact that counselors’ prejudice and ignorance could have on clients:

You know, if I can sense it [prejudice against LGBT people] now and I’m just sitting in the room with you and we’re discussing Freud, how is your client going to feel if they sense that you don’t accept them, their homosexuality, when you’re counseling them?

He felt that LGBT clients might be even more in need of educated and accepting counselors than other clients: “…I feel that they [same sex couples] would probably have more issues than your average heterosexual couple because of stigma there is around homosexuality, and because of the way our society looks at homosexual marriage…”
The participant particularly emphasized faculty members’ responsibility to educate students about LGBT people: “…these are people that, you want to shape and mold us into good counselors…” He expected professors to model the affirming values of the profession to prepare competent counselors.

Others’ Lack of Knowledge and Acceptance Creates Cognitive Dissonance

When the participant entered his program, he found it much less affirming than he hoped: “I honestly would have thought that it would have been more welcoming…” He described faculty and peers as almost universally ignorant about LGBT people. LGBT topics were almost never addressed in classes, and when he brought them up, others seemed to have little interest in learning about them. Instead, there were multiple expressions of bias and discomfort with LGBT people. This state of affairs contrasted strongly with the expectations he held for the program, and it seemed to create a state of tension and cognitive dissonance for him. He frequently described himself as “confused” by others’ lack of knowledge and acceptance, as if it was almost unthinkable to him that someone in a counseling program would not seek to accept and learn about LGBT people: “…I mean there are people in our program, people in my program who don’t agree with homosexuality. I know that for a fact. Um, so it’s, it kind of throws me for a loop…I’m just like, why are you in this program? Why are you doing this?”

For this participant, learning about diverse groups was such an inherent part of the profession that it seemed completely contradictory for someone to want to be a counselor and still not want to learn about LGBT people:

And then I get confused by it because I’m just like, I don’t understand. (laugh) Like I just, I don’t understand why you would go into this program knowing that you’re going to have to counsel all of these diverse groups of people.
Attempts Made to Educate Because No-One Else Will

When the participant realized that most faculty members would not teach about LGBT people, and peers would not learn on their own, he began to introduce LGBT topics in class discussion, since he believed such topics needed to be covered. He felt the need to present LGBT people in a positive, affirming light, as he believed that on the rare occasions they were discussed at all, no-one really saw the goodness and strength in these stories:

Like, for instance in my [multicultural] class, we read a book [about a lesbian couple], and I feel like when we’re discussing this book, I have to, you know, stand up and say, “Well, I really admire them for being lesbians because of this, because this in our society is, you know, so awful, and you know, them being, trying to raise a family together, it’s just so inspiring for me.”…I don’t know, for some reason I feel like no-one else will say that. Like, no-one else will say how inspiring it is for these two women to have a child together, and overcome all the adversity, and live a happy life.

The participant felt he was the only person who would speak out because in his program there were only a few other LGBT students: “I’m the only person who will do it, because I’m the only person who, you know, identifies as gay…” He also expressed that this was an issue in speaking about race as well; topics related to race were sometimes neglected, and as one of only a few students of color in the program, he was one of the only people who could teach to the issue from his own life experience:

I feel like it’s the same way with, um, just any type of minority issue, because, I mean in our program, it’s predominantly White…I mean these people don’t know what the hell I’m talking about. They don’t know the life I’ve had to go through. So I feel like I always have to try to open their eyes, you know, broaden their horizons…
Over time, attempting to educate others became an exhausting experience. Initially, the participant felt pride in being able to share his experience, but over time it became a burden to him:

…now I’m just tired. I’m just so tired of talking about what my life is like to be a homosexual Black man. Like I’m tired of telling my story. I’m tired of trying to get people to understand how different it is to live this life.

**Expectations and Opportunity for Knowledge Used to Make Sense of the Perpetrator**

The participant seemed to go through a process of evaluating perpetrators after microaggression occurred, to resolve cognitive dissonance between his expectations of counselors and his actual experience with others in his program. He started with the belief that if counselors care for everyone, they will want to learn about everyone. When he repeatedly found that faculty and peers in his program had not learned about LGBT people, he sometimes tried to make sense of it by questioning whether they might have simply lacked opportunity for knowledge in the past: “I just, you know, I would sometimes say, ok, well, maybe it’s not their fault, you know, if they didn’t grow up around these types of people…” He quickly concluded that this was implausible:

But then I’m like, ok, so when they went to college to get an undergrad, you know, their bachelor’s degree, where did they go? (laugh) Like, where did they go for them not to have seen diversity? You know, um…did they just go to like some closed, conservative, Catholic school where, like...I just don’t get it sometimes. You know in the beginning I’m just like, it’s not their fault, but then I’m just like, ok, it’s their fault because they didn’t decide, they didn’t try to expand their horizons. You know, they didn’t try to be
more open and go to a place that’s not, go somewhere where there are people who don’t identify with them.

Ultimately, the participant concluded that everyone had the opportunity to learn about LGBT people if they chose to do so:

So I’m just like, if you waited until now to say, “Oh, I didn’t know that’s what life was like for a gay person,” like, have you been hiding under a rock? Like, who do you hang out with? Like, where have you been this whole time? So I’m, like, I mean I understand it for, like, when they were younger, but now when they’re an adult and they can, you know, they have decisions of where to go school and they have decisions of what they studied, I don’t understand that.

Having concluded that faculty members and peers had ample opportunities to learn about LGBT people and had failed to do so, he began to question whether LGBT people really mattered to them. For him, their lack of knowledge meant that they had put no effort into learning about LGBT people, which meant that they did not care about LGBT people. He recalled an incident in which he asked a professor why same-sex couples had not been covered in a lecture on couples therapy, and the professor responded that there was no research available about same-sex couples (an assertion that the participant knew to be false):

…I looked around at my classmates, I was like, is this really all we’re going to talk about for same-sex couples?…and my peers are just like, we don’t really care. And like, I cared! And so I’m just sitting here just like, “I guess we’re all just going to be ignorant to same-sex couples. I guess they don’t matter.” So I was very upset about that, I was extremely upset about that…
His response to this incident illustrates a reaction that seemed to become more and more typical for him, as he realized that others lacked interest in learning about LGBT people. He even felt at times that he, himself did not matter to others in his program. For example, when he was asked by peers to take LGBT clients who were assigned to them in practicum, it seemed like a statement about his importance as well as the clients’ importance: “…I’m just like, well, ok, I guess I’m just here to take care of all the LGBTQ clients that nobody wants because they don’t feel comfortable counseling people.”

**Perceived Lack of Caring Leads to Hopelessness**

As the participant became more convinced that others did not care about LGBT people, he described a growing sense of hopelessness:

…and how the hopelessness comes in and I’m just like, if you tell me now, like, “Oh my gosh, I just, I did not realize that that’s what life was like for you!,” if you’re just now realizing that…there’s no hope for you. Like there’s literally no hope for you, and you’re trying to help somebody else.

He continued to speak up about LGBT topics, but began to wonder if there was a point to doing so: “If you’ve done it for so long and you don’t see a light at the end of the tunnel, why try to run around in that darkness? Just freaking just stand there.” His narrative sometimes took on a tone of bitterness: “Open your eyes, people. Take off the rose-colored sunglasses ‘cause those, I mean that’s not how, that’s not how the world is.”

Revisiting these experiences for the interview felt somewhat difficult for the participant: “Reading over this I can sense the pain and anger in my narrative. I still am shaken up about it.” The participant expressed that his sense of hopelessness was compounded by the fact that he struggles with major depression, that hopelessness “just comes with the package.”
Multiple Oppressions Intensify Impact

The participant mentioned a few times how experiencing multiple types of oppression in his program as an African American gay man made his time in his program even more difficult. As mentioned earlier, he felt pressure to educate peers and faculty about both LGBT and African American communities, as he could use his own experience in these communities as a teaching tool. This seemed to compound his exhaustion, however.

Support Helps with Coping

A minor theme for the participant was the importance of receiving support from others in coping with his experiences. He shared that one faculty member in his program was affirming of LGBT identities, and assumed an advocacy role for both LGBT students and students of color. The participant went to this faculty member to process his microaggressions experiences. He also at times sought support from friends.

The importance of support was echoed by Participant 11, who intentionally sought to build relationships outside her program, when she could not find support within it. Both participants shared a sense of demoralization and disillusionment in the profession. Participant 11 chose to cope by moving outward to find others who could help her develop professionally.

Participant 11

This participant was an Asian international student who identified as a queer woman. The term “lesbian” was imported to her home country, but was always used pejoratively, so it felt uncomfortable to her to use it. She shared that she likes the term queer because to her it denotes activism, and activism and advocacy for the LGBTQ community are a crucial part of her identity. She also liked it because it is “inclusive” of different gender expressions. She shared that she has always found gender expectations for women too constricting:
I just felt it was a little difficult to, um, keep up with the gender, what we call, you know, stereotypical behavior...because I’m female I should feel this way, I should be caring, and you know, I am caring, but I should be wanting to marry, or I should be wanting to have kids...wanting to date with boys.

The participant chose to pursue a doctoral program in counselor education after working for a few years in the field. She had always wanted to further her education, but her work provided her with even more motivation to pursue her doctorate. She shared that she encountered a great deal of poverty in her work, and wanted to go back to school to work for equal opportunity for others:

…I did believe education will give me the power to speak up for people, I care and I want to help. You know, like, losing gap in, you know, unequal distribution of resources, opportunity, because the majority of the population that I worked with was, you know, from low socioeconomical living, poverty level. And you know, when you look at their faces and you can see, you know, they’re not going to get the same opportunity that I was somehow given...so I just felt like I want to be part of this change.

At the time of our interview, the participant was in her third year of her doctoral program. She shared that her experience there had been much different than she hoped: “…it turns out that my school was pretty conservative. And very anti-LGBTQ.” She was initially unaware of anti-LGBTQ attitudes, however, as they were not explicitly discussed. During her first year of the program she was deeply engaged in “carrying out social justice conversations with my colleagues,” and assumed that others were supportive of the LGBTQ community. She was out to all her colleagues, and believed they were accepting of her. When she began to volunteer for a pro-LGBTQ political campaign, she asked peers to sign a petition related to this work. It was
only then that she discovered that about two-thirds of her peers believed same-sex relationships to be against their religious beliefs. The themes presented in Table 13 describe how she responded to this realization.

Table 13

*Participant 11 Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Counselors are expected to be affirming</td>
<td>LGBTQ rights are human rights</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Faculty are responsible to challenge microaggressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microaggressions lead to isolation</td>
<td>Microaggressions cause re-evaluation of people and relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Withdrawal protects others’ feelings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Microaggressions lead to self-doubt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Microaggressions have a cumulative emotional impact</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative sources of affirmation created</td>
<td>Relationships built with faculty members outside program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research conducted independently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engaged in activism outside the program</td>
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</table>

The participant indicated that she experienced racial microaggressions in her doctoral program, though she did not describe them in detail. She also shared that she encountered racial microaggressions in her master’s program. Microaggressions at the master’s level tended to revolve around her English proficiency (as English is not her first language), and assumptions that others made about her competence. She was not out as a queer person during her master’s program, and so reported no microaggressions concerning her sexual orientation.

*Counselors Are Expected to Be Affirming*

As indicated above, the participant entered her program with a strong commitment to social justice, and in her first year she expected that others would share the same commitment:
“…in the first year I didn’t doubt, I was carrying out social justice conversation with my colleagues and fellow students. I thought that we were advocating for social justice for ALL…”

When she discovered that others did not support LGBTQ identities and relationships, she was shocked. Anti-LGBTQ attitudes seemed completely out of place in the counseling profession:

“…it was really shocking to me, because, you know, we’re in a doctoral program, you know, becoming counselor educators, future counselor educators, and then they have these beliefs about, ‘no we don’t support this...’” To her, it was a “contradiction” for someone to advocate for human rights, but exclude LGBTQ rights: “I was like, ‘Wow, what is going on here? It’s ok to advocate for a group, one group of individuals, but not for the other?’” She was angry with faculty for portraying their attitudes as an issue of “personal choice.” To her, failing to support LGBTQ identities and relationships was simply unacceptable, a lack of humanity rather than a difference of opinion:

…it is their choice, but at the same time, that makes them very anti-humanity…I mean, are you going to go against voting rights to minorities, people of color? I mean, it is your choice, but it really mess up your humanity, you know? So to me it’s the same, under same umbrella, in marriage equality, protection from being discriminated due to sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression. You know, protections against, you know, discrimination, or, like, hate-crime law, everything. I mean, it’s a fundamental human right. So opposing the, as a counselor educator, is not acceptable to me.

She expressed that faculty members have a responsibility to confront anti-LGBTQ attitudes. She seemed to want faculty to take an actively affirming stance toward LGBTQ people, and was angry when they failed to do so. “I was also angry at my faculty who failed to
confront their bigotry. Faculty made it okay to have ‘different opinions’ about us, our rights and protections.”

**Microaggressions Lead to Isolation**

Microaggression experiences at both the master’s and doctoral level left the participant feeling profoundly isolated from others. In her master’s program, for example, she said that isolation was a “constant battle,” and that it felt difficult to find “some students who are relatively ok with me.” Microaggressions called into question everything she thought she knew about others and the trust she had developed in her relationships. After anti-LGBTQ prejudice in her doctoral program was revealed, for example, she described the loss of trust and assurance that she had felt in her relationships with peers:

I felt betrayed. I felt fear. Like, I don't know who they are anymore. Who are they? More like, I don't think anger was there at the time. I was like, (gasp) What? It was shocking, because I didn't doubt that they would do it. I really thought this is a social justice issue, so I was really shocked, and then, you know, felt really uncertain about who they are, what they might be thinking. What they have been thinking about me. They never said anything [about me and my partner]! So all of a sudden, you know, I started being like, wondering what other people are really thinking.

After microaggressions occurred, the participant became more and more withdrawn. She stopped interacting with perpetrators in any meaningful way, limiting her interactions with them to classroom situations. In class, she became much more reserved: “…some faculty were…really encouraging us to become authentic (some faculty members encouraged us to be like family), but I couldn’t go there. I was like, what the fuck? What is he talking about?”
The participant even found herself questioning her relationships to her program and the profession. At the time, she could not find any clear indication that the profession broadly supported same-sex relationships, and this made her wonder about her place in the profession: “I was thinking if I chose the right profession, counseling…”

The participant chose to withdraw rather than to confront microaggressions, in part because it protected the perpetrators’ feelings. She described this as a culturally conditioned response:

I tried to pretend that it was not a big deal. To some extent, me being Asian, I tend to worry about others’ feelings, so I was also thinking that I shouldn’t offend them or upset them by me being upset.

She even sometimes played along with perpetrators. In her master’s program, for example, sometimes others would assume that she was less proficient in English than she really was, and would offer unnecessary help or advice. Rather than correct them, she simply accepted the help:

Well I just, you know, met their expectation I guess, you know, like, like when they are treating me less capable of understanding, or not like, maybe, not intellectual[ly] equal, I didn't want to offend them by saying, "Oh, I know that," or correcting them if they, if I found they might be, you know, they might be wrong…So just keep my mouth closed and then listen and then like, "Oh cool, yeah thanks, I didn't know that." Playing dumb a little bit….I was worried about disappointing them or upsetting them if I were not as helpless as they thought.
Microaggressions Lead to Self-Doubt

A theme expressed a few times in the interview was that microaggressions made the participant doubt herself and her abilities. Even during her advocacy for LGBTQ rights as human rights, she wondered occasionally if there was a problem with her; “…it made me question, yeah, maybe I am sick, yeah, maybe something [is] wrong with me…”

Microaggressions also seemed to affect her self-confidence in general. Before her doctoral program, she described herself as confident in her interactions with others:

So before that I was, I still talk to many people, but I was talking to people all the time, friendlier and like, smile at the strange, random people, and was able to carry out random conversations with strangers, random people…

After experiencing pervasive microaggressions in her doctoral program, however, she described herself as less confident and friendly in interactions: “…but this self-doubt, yeah, came like, it did change how I approach people.” She “became more suspicious about what their agenda might be, [and] less friendly at times.” In part this seemed to express a loss of trust in others (as expressed above), but she also seemed less confident in her ability to navigate new relationships.

Microaggressions Have a Cumulative Emotional Impact

The participant described a range of emotional experiences when microaggressions occurred—anger, fear, betrayal, pain, shock, resignation—and encountering multiple microaggressions seemed to increase the emotional fallout for the participant. After one class period in which microaggressions occurred, a fellow student pulled the participant aside and accused her of taking the topic too personally, suggesting that her experience of the class was
invalid. The participant described how it felt to her to encounter this microaggression when she was already upset from other microaggressions:

I was shaken, you know, I did feel shaken to my core kind of, so I was very kind of like shaky when she said that because I felt like that was really stabbing in my heart, because it was a difficult class, there was another conversation about LGBTQ issues....At the end of the class, she stopped it, you know, she kind of finalized it.

Part of the emotional impact of repeated microaggressions had to do with the emotional labor of preparing for them. The participant had to “mentally prepare before each class,” to encounter microaggressions. This felt “exhausting” and “anxiety-provoking.”

**Alternative Sources of Affirmation Created**

In the absence of affirmation from peers or faculty in the program, the participant worked to create affirming spaces for herself elsewhere, to lessen the impact of microaggressions. When a faculty member made derogatory comments about her desire to conduct LGBTQ research, she looked outside the program for LGBTQ and ally faculty members to support her professional and personal development. She also continued her own reading and research on LGBTQ issues, independent of classwork:

…I still kept doing research on LGBTQ [issues]…but I stopped talking [about] what I am doing [in the program]...I definitely made sure that the male professor [who discouraged LGBTQ research] would not notice what I continued to be doing. I reached out to faculty outside of my division, made more connections with them as they were supportive and mentored me.

She also continued to engage in activism and advocacy outside the program. Her activism helped her “numb” herself, as she became too busy to dwell on microaggression
experiences. It also helped restore her sense of self-confidence: “…volunteer experience made me, like, think that I’m capable of helping somebody, [capable to] be useful to society or somebody, some people. So, you know, it was still kind of helping me, my self-esteem…”

Participant 12 also found sources of support and validation that helped him cope with microaggressions. Unlike Participant 11, he was able to find support from faculty within his programs. Though he experienced many microaggressions at the Master’s level, his introduction to the profession was liberating and transforming.

**Participant 12**

This participant was a White, gay man. The participant shared that he came to this identity after a great deal of struggle. Religion was quite important in his family, and the geographic area where he grew up presented few options for support. Though he spent much time and effort trying to appear straight as a child and adolescent, he frequently “got caught.” He shared that his “gender expression is not terribly male,” so others often perceived him as gay, even when he tried to conceal it. He shared that as a young man he rebelled against his religious upbringing, which gave him the space to begin to actively question his sexual orientation. He attempted suicide during this process, and shortly after decided to seek counseling.

The participant did not plan to become a counselor. He initially pursued another career, but after the loss of a family member, he began to question whether his career choice was meaningful or fulfilling way to him. He chose to pursue counseling because it gave him opportunities to help others and to develop relationships. The participant described his experience in his master’s program as “life-changing:”

Quite literally, it changed my life, and it changed my person. It changed who I am and who I think of myself, and how I think of myself. I think it helped me get in touch with
myself a little more fully than having not done it…I think it broadened my mind, it opened my heart, and it sort of created a space for me to really appreciate who I am as a human being, which allows me I think to appreciate others.

The participant attended a faith-based university for his master’s program. The participant described faculty in the program as “very supportive and affirming” of his identity. However, the participant reported frequent microaggressions from peers. At the time of the interview, the participant was enrolled in a doctoral program. He shared that he had experienced a few microaggressions in this program, mostly small and “subtle” microaggressions.

Table 14 summarizes the themes that emerged for this participant. Microaggressions seemed to hold a particular meaning for this participant; he described them as an attack on his humanity. Like other participants, this participant described variations in his in-the-moment experience of microaggressions. His response to microaggressions also varied, as he weighed the costs and benefits of confronting microaggressions. He also spoke of his need for support from others.
Table 14

*Participant 12 Themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Microaggressions are dehumanizing</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactions to microaggressions differ</td>
<td>Unresolved feelings and questions make certain microaggressions more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>depending on the context</td>
<td>painful</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subtle microaggressions can be brushed away</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Repetition changes the experience</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Privilege shapes expectations, which shape experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costs and benefits weighed in determining</td>
<td>Energy need to confront is considered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>response</td>
<td>Potential reactions of others are considered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of responsibility to educate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>motivates confrontation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from others helps with processing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reactions</td>
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</table>

**Microaggressions Are Dehumanizing**

When the participant spoke about microaggressions, he conveyed a sense that they attacked not just his orientation, but his very humanity. He expressed the desire, for example, for a perpetrator to “understand my humanity” by understanding his experience. He spoke of microaggressions as “invalidating” more than once, and saw them as invalidating not just his thoughts and beliefs, but his being:

There’s a way that their discourse *invalidates me* so profoundly that I find it difficult to describe and to, not just describe, but in the moment it becomes such a large feeling, such a consuming reaction, that it takes me back to being a 14-year-old Southern Baptist boy, and I have to fight to validate myself in my own head, all over again. [emphasis added]
He expressed that others seemed unwilling to allow him full participation in human experience. For example, when another student told him that she wasn’t prejudiced against gay people, but didn’t believe they should marry, he argued that “[if] I can’t marry someone or even have a relationship with someone, then you’re asking me to sit in the back of the bus.” When the same student (an African American student) became angry that he compared his own experience as a gay man to the African American community’s experience of racial oppression, he saw this as a refusal to allow that he has an experience of oppression as legitimate as her own:

…we had had many conversations about racial diversity and racial inequality and, you know, the existence of White privilege, and how all of those things impacted both of our lives, and I felt like they were healthy, constructive conversations, and she was able to educate me in a number of ways, but my approach to racial diversity, I learned a lot from her. But she was unwilling to hear that conversation where sexual orientation was concerned. And gender identity.

Perpetrators often seemed to him to dismiss his experience as invalid, inferior, not good enough, not fully human. He felt that others were “operating from a stereotype, not from an actual relationship with me,” that they saw him as a sort of caricature, rather than someone who might share their experience:

…a gay person isn’t necessarily, you know, wearing go-go shorts and riding in a parade completely plastered, you know, floating down on a float. Um, and could be, you know, just somebody who sits next to you in a pew at church on Sunday.

**Reactions to Microaggressions Differ Depending on the Context**

The participant spent much of his interview explaining why he had dramatically different reactions to different microaggressions. After some microaggressions, he found himself
struggling to validate himself. Others left him with enormous rage. Some provoked mild amusement, others a slight sense of weariness, and others brought little or no response. He shared that the most painful microaggressions were those that touched on his own unresolved feelings and questions. He experienced some microaggressions as particularly “invalidating,” and these awakened feelings of shame and doubts about his own worthiness:

It’s a process of them activating my own internal homonegativity, and internalized heteronormative reactions, that I have to sort of take a moment or two, and try to separate that from myself again. It’s such, that heteronormative response is so deeply ingrained that it’s difficult to, you know, for my day-to-day I feel like I do a pretty good job of countering that tape or that message that plays in my head, but in those moments when, you know, I feel invalidated in that way, there’s a part of me that rises up and says, “Yeah, she’s right. You don’t deserve it.”

Over time, he felt that he responded less strongly, as he learned to separate others’ opinions of him from his feelings about himself: “In my early program, their beliefs meant something about me, and I learned that they don’t.”

The participant’s responses were also intense when microaggressions touched on his own unresolved questions about faith. He shared that he continues to “struggle with what it means to be a gay Christian.” He felt that his response to these microaggressions was particularly strong because this issue was “still in some way unresolved…”

While these microaggressions provoked strong responses, the participant expressed that many were so small and subtle that he took little notice of them, even passed over them entirely without really recognizing that a microaggression had taken place: “The funny thing about microaggressions is that they’re often hard to remember because they’re so slight in the moment,
and we get so accustomed to them that we just sort of brush them off…” Immediate repetition made microaggressions more noticeable to him: “…it’s when we get three or four or five in a row…” Repetition changed the experience of the microaggression, provoking greater annoyance or weariness.

The participant also believed that privilege shaped his expectations of microaggressions, which in turn shaped his in-the-moment experience. Specifically, the participant believed that being White and male gave him a certain amount of privilege in the world, privilege which at times prevented him from recognizing microaggressions when they occurred: “I think in some ways it might make it difficult for me to identify a microaggression, because I assume privilege.” He felt that he tends to notice only those microaggressions that are most “obvious and blatant…” He also expressed that when he encounters discrimination or violence, he reacts much more strongly than others with less privileged identities:

…I have larger areas of privilege than other people. So when the Orlando massacre occurred specifically, my queer friends of color seemed to be able to bounce back from that horror more quickly than I did, and, you know, I, sadly I think it’s because they have more experience dealing with the horror that comes with that kind of discrimination. Um, you know, in a lot of ways my privilege has insulated me against that stuff, um, and it’s interesting to me, and I think I saw that happen with this most recent election as well, you know. My friends of color, who sort of watched the election and kind of nodded and said, “here we go.” Whereas, you know, I’m terrified and screaming about my terror…

**Costs and Benefits Weighed in Determining Response**

After a microaggression occurred, this participant engaged in a decision-making process about how to respond. He considered whether he had the energy available to confront the
microaggression, as confrontation demanded mental and emotional labor, “…[it was about] how much psychic energy I had to devote to that, and at that particular moment I didn’t have it…”

The participant also considered others’ potential reactions. At times, he was unsure whether others would react negatively, and chose to remain silent. He chose not to confront microaggressions early in his current program because he was concerned that others might perceive him as “the angry gay guy who comes in screaming about privilege in his first week.” In these situations, it seemed to be the ambiguity of others’ attitudes that made it difficult to determine his response. He described, for example, deciding whether to confront a microaggression from a supervisor, and remaining silent because he was unsure if his faculty supervisor would support him:

If I’d had the relationship with [my supervisor] that I have now, I feel like I could have pushed back to that other faculty member and would have had her support. Um, I didn’t know about her support at that moment, so I wasn’t sure if I would be standing out on a limb by myself or not.

**Sense of Responsibility to Educate Motivates Confrontation**

The participant mentioned a few times that he sometimes chose to confront microaggressions from a sense of responsibility to educate others. In most instances this was simply expressed as a duty, an “obligation.” In one instance, the participant clarified that he felt responsible “to my LGBT brothers and sisters,” as if he saw confrontation as a way to protect or speak for the LGBT community.

**Support from Others Helps with Processing Reactions**

A final minor theme was the importance of support in processing microaggression experiences. The participant shared that supportive faculty members helped “talk me down”
after particularly difficult microaggression experiences. He also shared that he sought continued personal counseling to deal with his experiences.

Analysis of individual interview revealed themes that were common among participants. While expression of themes differed slightly between participants, there was a great deal of similarity and overlap. I will briefly describe how unifying themes were identified, and summarize these themes below.

**Identification of Group-Level Themes**

To arrive at the overarching themes and subthemes for the entire sample, I examined the themes from each participant, and generated a list of tentative overarching themes. Using Microsoft Excel, I assigned each of the codes derived from the interviews to these to tentative themes, and refined, reorganized, combined, and changed themes as appropriate to describe the data more fully. I then grouped codes within each theme into similar meaning units and generated sub-themes and sub-subthemes to describe these groupings. To clarify conceptual relationships, I worked to visually map relationships between themes, subthemes, and sub-subthemes. I also looked at the actual microaggressions (what was said or done by the perpetrator), and grouped similar microaggressions together, then named each type of microaggression. I will first summarize these microaggression types, and then summarize themes.

**Results for the Sample**

**Microaggressions**

Participants reported several types of microaggressions. Some were subtle and difficult to describe (e.g. tone of voice or absence of warmth). Others were more blatant (e.g., portraying LGBT people as sinful). Each type of microaggression is described below, with examples.
**Assumption of heteronormativity.** Many participants reported that fellow students and faculty assumed all people were heterosexual and had the same type of family composition. For example, students and faculty often asked a pansexual participant if she had a boyfriend, assuming she would date only men. The most common way this assumption was demonstrated was by silence on LGBT topics. Several participants reported that LGBT people were never or rarely mentioned in their programs. They believed heterosexual/cisgender faculty and students simply did not think about LGBT people at all. Participants often mentioned that the “normal” client discussed in class had a prescribed set of social identities. Role plays and case examples were almost exclusively of White, heterosexual, cisgender clients. Several participants specifically mentioned this as an issue in couple and family classes. Faculty in these classes often depicted the family as comprised of a heterosexual couple with their biological children, the “magical 1950’s couple,” as one participant put it, who was almost always assumed to be White and Christian. Women were assumed to have children and want children, and at times gender stereotypes were made about family roles.

**Invalidation of experience.** Several participants reported microaggressions that invalidated or denied their experience. Peers or faculty questioned their perceptions and feelings. A supervisor questioned a lesbian student’s identity. “How does she know she’s gay?” A gay male student who shared in class about his unsuccessful attempts to pray to become straight was told he should continue to pray. When participants became upset about microaggressions or challenged them, they were told they were overly emotional, taking things too personally. A few participants recounted that at times their own perspectives on LGBT issues were seen as less valid than the perspectives of heterosexual/cisgender people. For
example, a cisgender faculty member repeatedly contradicted a transgender student’s account of his transition experience, implying he knew better than the student.

**Misgendering.** Most transgender participants reported being misgendered; that is being assumed to belong to a gender category with which they did not identify. Most of these participants shared that others addressed them using the wrong pronoun, or refused to use their preferred pronoun. For example, one non-binary participant shared that rather than using they/them pronouns to address them, a professor avoided using pronouns to refer to them at all, using their first name instead. This category also included comments that assumed all people are either male or female (e.g. referring to people as either “male bodied” or “female-bodied” as though all people with certain physical features identify within socially assigned gender categories).

**Assumption that LGBT people are sick/sinful.** Several participants reported that peers and faculty assumed that LGBT people are either mentally ill, or that LGBT identity is inherently sinful. One participant, for example, shared that other students made assumptions about the quality of LGBT romantic relationships (e.g. that they would be unhealthy in general). A few noted that in class discussions, LGBT people were always assumed to be clients (rather than counselors). Some perpetrators expressed the belief that LGBT people could not be Christians.

**Reluctance to counsel LGBT clients.** Some participants shared that other students expressed reluctance to counsel LGBT clients. One participant, for example, shared that she overheard conversations between students who declared they would never work with gay people. Sometimes this reluctance was expressed indirectly. One student, for example, reported he was asked by other students to take the LGBT clients that were assigned to them in practicum.
Another witnessed a fellow student avoiding conversations about romantic relationships with a lesbian client.

**Anti-LGBT slurs and hate speech.** A few participants encountered anti-LGBT slurs and hate speech from other students. These included the use of derogatory terms for LGBT people (e.g. a student called a gay student an “abomination,” a student referred to a transgender person as a “he-she”). What distinguished these microaggressions from those in other categories was that perpetrators made explicit, intentional attacks or insults against LGBT people (similar to Sue’s (2010) category of microassaults).

**Expected to educate others.** Some participants believed both faculty members and other students expected them to educate others about LGBT issues. Others sometimes asked intrusive questions about participants’ sexual or gender identity, questions that would not have been asked of other students. Faculty members sometimes asked participants to explain LGBT issues in class. Not all participants experienced such questions as microaggressive, but all expressed discomfort when they felt pressured to speak. A couple also shared that they were asked to suppress their emotional responses to microaggressions so that heterosexual/cisgender students could process their own feelings and reactions to LGBT issues. The message participants received in these cases was that heterosexual/cisgender students’ learning was more important than participants’ feelings.

**Social shunning.** A few participants shared that other students or faculty seemed to avoid them, or to limit social discussion of certain topics. One student shared that a fellow student refused to sit by them in class. Another reported that other students would not ask about their partner, though they discussed romantic partners with other heterosexual students.
**Objectification.** A few participants reported that students and faculty objectified or fetishized transgender people. One participant, for example, shared that a faculty member showed videos of transgender children in class, portraying them as “fascinating” and strange. Class discussion of these videos focused on the reactions of the parents, rather than on how it must have felt to the children to be recorded and scrutinized. Another transgender participant reported feeling hypervisible in their program because others saw them as “weird” and different. In these instances, participants believed transgender people were seen as objects of curiosity, rather than human beings.

**Faculty failed to challenge microaggressions.** Some participants shared that faculty members failed to confront microaggressions or to educate perpetrators. A few shared that faculty members even supported perpetrators’ microaggressive comments. Participants saw these acts as further microaggressions that legitimized anti-LGBT attitudes in the program and made it acceptable for others to discriminate. Because faculty members were in positions of power, students were likely to follow their example.

**LGBT people are all the same.** At times, heterosexual/cisgender faculty and students assumed that LGBT experience was homogenous, that LGBT people are similar and like similar things. A student asked one participant where to park for the gay pride parade, assuming all LGBT people go to such events. Another was asked to give the gay perspective in a classroom discussion, a request that seemed unreasonable given the diversity of the community.

**Outing.** Two participants reported that faculty members “outed” LGBT students to other students (i.e. revealed their sexual orientation or gender identity without permission). One participant had come out privately to a professor, and the professor subsequently asked her to comment on her identity during a class discussion of LGBT issues. Another shared that a
professor “outed” a fellow transgender student, seemingly to help the participant feel more at home. Both saw this as a violation of trust, and believed it exposed them to potential discrimination from other students.

**Environmental microaggressions.** Some microaggressions did not come directly from an individual, but involved policies, procedures, and practices that were exclusionary. Microaggressions in textbooks were mentioned by a few students. A few more mentioned that some LGBT identities were excluded from intake forms for clients. One participant mentioned that there was not an easily accessible gender neutral bathroom for them to use, and the only one that existed was often left unclean.

**Bisexual people can’t make up their minds.** One participant shared that others sometimes implied bisexuality is not a real identity, and stereotyped bisexual people as indecisive or uncertain, unable to choose between being heterosexual and being gay. Some students who committed this microaggression identified as lesbian or gay. This microaggression made the participant feel isolated from both LGBT and heterosexual communities.

**Other microaggressions.** In addition to LGBT microaggressions, participants reported several additional types of microaggressions. Participants of color shared experiences of racial microaggressions. White students sometimes dismissed their experiences, and sometimes made inaccurate assumptions about them based on stereotypes. Cisgender female participants reported sexist microaggressions (e.g. male faculty or students talked down to female participants or excluded them). A few participants reported encounters with other types of microaggressions (e.g., ableist, socioeconomic, religious). Two microaggressions seemed to be intersectional in nature, targeting more than one identity. An Asian international student shared that, as an Asian American woman, she was expected to be pretty and docile. In this instance, the
microaggression seemed to encompass both gender and race. In another case, an African American student reported that other Black students saw her as less Black due to her sexual orientation.

Participants’ reactions to microaggressions are described by four overarching themes, described below. Analysis of the entire sample revealed themes that were common among participants. These themes described both in-the-moment and long-term experiences and responses.

**There are Multiple Microaggression Experiences**

A major theme that arose from all interviews was that there was not just one experience of microaggressions, but many, comprising a kaleidoscope of nuanced experiences. Participants’ in-the-moment emotional experiences ranged from mild amusement to shock and rage. Some experiences aroused annoyance, others a sense of shame, and still others a profound sense of isolation. Participants explained these variations in experience in thematic ways, summarized in Table 15.
Table 15

**Theme 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Sub-subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There are multiple microaggression experiences</td>
<td>Some microaggressions awaken vague discomfort</td>
<td>Some microaggressions lead to self-doubt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations shape experiences</td>
<td>Violation of hopes and values brings surprise, disappointment, outrage, sadness</td>
<td>Counselors are expected to affirm and know about diverse groups&lt;br&gt;Faculty are expected to be knowledgeable, teach and protect&lt;br&gt;Social justice experts are expected to affirm and know about LGBT people&lt;br&gt;People with oppressed identities are expected to be affirming of all oppressed groups&lt;br&gt; Educated people are expected to be knowledgeable&lt;br&gt;Perpetrators who have been confronted are expected to learn&lt;br&gt;People in this day and age are expected to be affirming&lt;br&gt;Specific microaggressions are unexpected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-being influences experience</td>
<td>Stressors affect well-being and microaggression experience</td>
<td>Repetition of microaggressions alters the experience&lt;br&gt;Some expected microaggressions are easily brushed away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning of the microaggression affects experience and response</td>
<td>Some microaggressions are particularly dehumanizing</td>
<td>Being unheard is painful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of safety influences the experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Some microaggressions awaken vague discomfort. A few participants shared that some microaggression experiences awakened a vague sense of discomfort. When these experiences occurred, participants could identify that something that was said or done had bothered them. Sometimes they could even identify that the words or actions were wrong or offensive; however, they had difficulty naming the experience or describing exactly why it was problematic. “They have an emotional response to something and they don’t know why...” An African American participant, for example, said that before she knew about microaggression theory, she found herself angry and upset when a fellow student frequently used racial stereotypes to talk about others. She even confronted him about it:

I don't know what it is you're doing, but the fact that you've made these comments about other people, like, you're describing their behavior but you're using their race, I don't appreciate that. You need to find a better way to talk about people.

In this example, she could describe the behavior and identify that it was offensive, but struggled to put into words what made it a problem. In other cases, participants were uncertain if their discomfort was a reaction to an actual offense. Another participant recounted a stereotype another student made about “lipstick lesbians.” She felt uncomfortable with the comment, but did not understand what was meant by the term “lipstick lesbians,” and was therefore unsure how to take it. “I don’t know if that was discriminatory for that person to say that because I don’t really know what they meant by it.”

In both types of situation, participants recounted a sort of pre-knowledge, an emotional sense of wordless unease, that signaled something was off. Participants then struggled to explain these feelings, to identify the cause. In some cases, participants found themselves wrestling with self-doubt after these experiences, questioning the reality, reasonableness, or goodness of their
experiences. Some initially experienced a sense of shame: “…it made me question, yeah, maybe I am sick, yeah, maybe something [is] wrong with me, you know?” Especially when their own perceptions were so different than others’, participants felt almost as if they were living in another reality: “…there’s this aspect of me struggling to know what I’m feeling. I’m being told that things are one way, when I’m feeling that they’re another way, and that’s really confusing…[it’s hard] to sort out what is real.” In such situations, participants sometimes initially chose to accept others’ explanations of reality, rather than to assert their own.

**Expectations shape experience.** Another explanation participants offered for the dramatic differences in their in-the-moment experiences was that their expectations of the person or the situation influenced their reactions. This was a pervasive theme in the interviews. Every participant in the sample mentioned that their high expectations for counselors shaped their in-the-moment reactions. Most entered their programs with a strong sense of idealism about the profession. They saw counselors as people who help, people who care deeply about the entire human community, and people serve everyone equally. They believed this caring would translate into affirmation of and knowledge about diverse groups. Some entered the profession because of positive and affirming encounters with counselors, and believed their program experiences would be similar. When they encountered microaggressions in their programs, they were surprised, angry, disappointed, and sad, and felt these reactions more intensely than they might have if they encountered the same type of microaggression outside of the program: “It’s not something I haven’t experienced before, it’s just that in that particular setting I wasn’t expecting it.”

Participants spoke especially of their disappointment in faculty members who committed microaggressions, or who allowed students’ microaggressions to pass unaddressed. They
expected faculty members to be more knowledgeable about diverse groups than students.

Instead, most expressed a sense that they knew more than their professors about LGBT issues: “Why am I teaching you how to counsel transgender clients when I’m your student?” Faculty members were expected not only to know about diverse groups, but also to actively teach and challenge students who committed microaggressions. Some expressed a sense of betrayal when faculty members failed to do so. One participant challenged another student’s microaggressive comment in class, and expressed dismay:

I was kind of left there to defend myself. It was just really frustrating, like my professor was allowing us to have the conversation, but it was mostly that he didn’t feel capable to speak toward this…I wasn’t being backed up by my professor.

Several participants expressed that they expected the faculty member to take a clear stand on microaggressions rather than to remain neutral: “I was also angry at my faculty who failed to confront their bigotry. Faculty made it okay to have different opinions about us, our rights and protections.”

Microaggressions felt particularly shocking from people who the participants expected to be committed to social justice. They saw it as contradictory for social justice experts and activists to demonstrate anti-LGBT prejudice. One participant shared, for example, that after multiple conversations about social justice with peers, she was stunned when her fellow students told her that they could not sign a gay marriage petition due to religious beliefs: “It’s ok to advocate for a group, one group of individuals, but not for the other? So it was shocking to encounter the contradiction…”

Similarly, a few participants expected members of oppressed groups to be affirming of and knowledgeable about all oppressed groups. One participant, for example, found it surprising
when she overheard a gay male student make sexist comments about a female student’s weight and appearance, as she expected gay men to be less sexist. A White participant was especially angry that an African American peer, with whom he had fruitful discussions about racism, “was unwilling to hear that conversation where sexual orientation was concerned.” This expectation applied to discrimination within the LGBT community, as well. A pansexual participant (who publicly identifies as bisexual) shared that a lesbian student ridiculed the idea of bisexuality: “That was really a sad moment for me because I thought she would be the one person I could confide in about the personal problems I was having with my sexuality…”

Participants were even more frustrated with perpetrators whom they had already confronted about similar microaggressions, as they expected perpetrators to learn from these discussions. One participant stated, “…it’s like, come on! It’s really frustrating because it’s a conversation we’ve already had…” There were also specific microaggressions that took participants by surprise, as they seemed particularly improbable or ridiculous. For example, participants often expressed shock that certain kinds of microaggressions were still being expressed in this day and age. One expressed amazement that a professor used a fictional case example that stereotyped Latino American male clients: “It’s like utter disbelief. It’s like, what century are we living in? Did I fall into a time warp?”

Certain types of microaggressions became familiar to participants over time because they were repeated over and over. The experience of these microaggressions was somewhat different, ranging from intensified frustration to resignation to little reaction at all. Some microaggressions almost did not register with participants, but were quickly passed over. As one participant stated, “I mean, at that point you just kind of laugh it off…” Several participants said they were “used
to” specific microaggressions and had little reaction to them but weariness. Some generated larger reactions, depending on the context, as will be seen.

**Well-being influences experience.** Participants frequently shared that their in-the-moment microaggressions experiences were profoundly shaped by their overall well-being. Several participants talked about the stressors they were already facing as graduate students. When participants were stressed, microaggressions felt particularly overwhelming. One participant explained, “You know, this is when I was doing my clinical internship and I was working, and I was just tired, you know?” A couple participants also mentioned the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency. Both felt increased fear of discrimination after the election, and responses to microaggressions felt more intense for them.

A few participants shared that they were dealing with physical and mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, and chronic physical health problems, all of which exacerbated the distress they felt when confronted with microaggressions. One participant shared, “Looking back on it, the reason I was upset was I was dealing with it, I was really dealing with a disability, and not getting any treatment for it, and being expected to perform way beyond my means…” Mental health issues seemed to intensify distress, and make it difficult for participants to process their feelings. One participant, for example, mentioned that their trauma experiences made it hard for them to identify their feelings in general, which made it more difficult for them to name the source of their distress when microaggressions occurred.

Identity development was another factor that seemed to influence participants’ in-the-moment reactions. A few participants mentioned unresolved feelings of shame about being gay. Reactions that activated that shame were particularly intense. A gay male participant was called an “abomination” by another student, and shared that in the aftermath it made him go “back to
being a 14-year-old Southern Baptist boy, and I have to validate myself in my own head, all over again.” Others expressed a sense of strong reactivity in the earlier stages of their identity development. As shared by one participant, “[I] kind of would flinch every time someone said ‘she’ to refer to me, and was very, like, sensitized to everything.” As participants developed greater confidence in their identities, they became “less reactive,” and microaggression experiences felt less distressing.

Some microaggressions felt particularly painful because they recalled early experiences of discrimination. A participant who was bullied in high school was outing by her supervisor in front of students who often made anti-gay comments, and said that it,

…brought up some past bullying, just like what are they going to say now? What are they going to say about me behind my back, or what are they going to say to me to my face, or what’s going to happen now?

These memories seemed to make participants particularly vulnerable to microaggressions in certain situations.

**Meaning of the microaggression affects experience and response.** Some specific microaggressions were felt more intensely because of the meaning they held for participants. A common meaning participants made of microaggressions in these cases was that the microaggressions dehumanized them by implying there was something fundamentally wrong or inferior about them, thereby making them “second class citizen[s],” a lesser class of human being. One participant shared that even re-reading her account of one such microaggression during member-checking was difficult,
I kind of cried after the interview and again when I read this because this isn’t comfortable to discuss. We are talking about who I am at the core of my being and what I think about that and what other people think about me.

Another exclaimed, after overhearing jokes about transgender people (using derogatory names like “he-she”), “…this is totally inappropriate! These are people and you’re viewing it through the lens of entertainment, and it’s not. I remember again just feeling pretty upset and alone.”

A second meaning participants expressed was that others were unwilling to hear them or their experiences, unwilling to connect with them or to really listen. Observing peers make quick assumptions about a gay client, one participant said, “I remember feeling pretty isolated in that moment, like what could I possibly tell you about my own experience if that’s what you immediately go to…” At times others seemed to actively deny their experiences. A participant who asked peers to use gender-neutral pronouns to refer to them was berated by a professor:

It was just, “What you need to understand is,” and then this long talk at me, about how I needed to be patient with people and be understanding and how people’s brains are hard-wired against being able to use gender-neutral pronouns or some nonsense, and [I] just felt shocked and like, small, and didn’t know what to say, just really wanted to not cry.

**Presence or absence of support changes the experience.** Some participants’ experience of microaggressions seemed to be very different depending on whether there were LGBT-affirming people present. In the moments after a microaggression occurred, some participants had a keen awareness of the reactions of others around them. If they perceived support from others, this seemed to make the experience somewhat less negative. If they did not, they felt intensely isolated and alone. When a gay male participant questioned why a professor had failed to cover same-sex couples in a couples and family class:
I looked around at my classmates, I was like, is this really all we’re going to talk about for same-sex couples? …and my peers are just like, we don’t really care. And like, I cared! …I felt so isolated because nobody else decided to speak up…

**Perception of safety influences the experience.** Some participants also felt their experience was less intense because they knew they were relatively safe, and could easily escape microaggressions if they chose to do so. The White heterosexual FTM transgender participant shared that most people perceive him as cisgender, and though many people perceive him as a gay man, once they know he dates women they perceive him as heterosexual:

I really have as much privilege as possible, and that’s made it a lot easier, because I know at the end of the day I could just shut up about it and go through the program and be fine, whereas other folks may not have had that opportunity to elect to talk about it like I have.

**Microaggressions Prompt Evaluation of Perpetrators and Relationships**

After microaggression experiences occurred, participants seemed to engage in an active process of evaluating the perpetrator and their relationship to that person. They sought to form a sense of what the other person meant to do, their intention. Table 16 summarizes the common thought processes involved in these evaluations.

**Table 16**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Sub-subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Microaggressions prompt evaluation of perpetrators and relationships</td>
<td>Opportunity and responsibility for learning used to infer effort</td>
<td>Perpetrator’s response to confrontation considered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attitude inferred from perceived effort to learn and care</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Character inferred from perceived attitude</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Opportunity and responsibility for learning used to infer effort. In order to judge perpetrators’ intentions, participants frequently evaluated whether the other person had opportunities to learn about LGBT people, and to what extent they were responsible to avail themselves of such opportunities. These evaluations helped them understand what effort the other person was willing to put into learning about LGBT issues. Some perpetrators were believed to have had little opportunity to learn about LGBT people, and participants seemed willing to give these individuals the benefit of the doubt. As one participant stated, “We don’t know what we don’t know. You know? And so maybe that’s the first time anyone had encountered that.” However, they often believed peers and faculty should actively seek out knowledge and understanding about LGBT people. Therefore, if perpetrators lacked knowledge about LGBT people, or failed to affirm LGBT people, they often ascribed their ignorance to a lack of effort. This was especially the case when the perpetrator was known to have had opportunities to learn: “You’re not seeing this person’s actual struggle…you’re not taking the time to understand them…”

Attitude inferred from perceived effort to learn and care. If perpetrators had ample opportunity to learn about LGBT people, and failed to learn, participants believed they had made no effort to understand. By contrast, if others showed awareness of LGBT issues, participants believed they had made an effort to learn. Participants made inferences about others’ attitudes toward LGBT people based on their perception of others’ efforts to learn. When perpetrators put little effort into learning about LGBT people, participants believed they did not care about LGBT people. Lack of effort was equated with lack of caring. For example, when a professor repeatedly misgendered a participant, the participant believed it was,
…too much of a hassle to do the thing that I ask you to do…it felt very hypocritical. It was constantly getting these messages of, like, being so progressive and being so, like, kind and gentle with people and open-minded and all these things, and then it was constant microaggressions on top of that.

The perpetrator’s response to confrontation was frequently included in participants’ evaluation of effort and attitude. If, when confronted, perpetrators acknowledged wrongdoing and made active, consistent change, participants were more likely to believe they truly affirmed and supported LGBT people. For example, one student shared that although a faculty member was initially resistant when he confronted her about a microaggression, ultimately she welcomed the feedback and changed her behavior. He saw this as evidence of her support:

She argued a little bit and then she eventually was like, “You know what, let me look into this,” and then she came back and she was like, “Yeah, you guys are right.” And it worked out pretty well. She ended up coming to me and the guy who was kind of on my side with it. From then on whenever we’d talk about LGBT stuff in the classroom, she’d kind of be like, “Well, what do you guys think?” And it was, in some ways it could come off as really tokenizing, but it was her way of being like, “I value what you guys have to say on this more than I value what I have to say on this,” which was good.

Character inferred from perceived attitude. As the above quote illustrates, if participants saw what they believed to be a good faith effort to learn and to care for them, they seemed to have more faith in the person, even when some of their actions might otherwise be seen as microaggressive. As participants made sense of perpetrators’ intentions, they seemed to simultaneously evaluate perpetrators’ character. Perpetrators who repeatedly committed microaggressions and actively resisted change were described most negatively, while those who
were most open to change were perceived most positively. Participants’ feelings about their relationship to the other person seemed to coincide with this evaluation of character. Those who committed the most microaggressions and resisted change were avoided, while some participants maintained friendships with perpetrators who made a consistent effort to change.

**Microaggression Experiences Figure Into Overall Evaluation of the Program/Profession**

As participants made sense of perpetrators, some seemed to simultaneously evaluate their program and the profession. As Table 17 illustrates, participants seemed to consider microaggressions alongside other factors. Although participants reported that microaggressions made their program experience more negative, some evaluated their program positively, even when microaggressions were present.

Table 17

*Theme 3*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Sub-subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Microaggression experiences figure into overall evaluation of the program and the profession</td>
<td>Actions of individuals used to make generalizations about the program and the profession</td>
<td>Presence of microaggressions reflect on the entire program and profession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relative absence of microaggressions makes experience more positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Openness to confrontation makes overall experience more positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other factors are considered alongside microaggressions</td>
<td>Program diversity is important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships with faculty are important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships with peers are important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunities for learning and growth are important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Actions of individuals used to make generalizations about the program/profession.**

A few participants seemed to make generalizations about their program and the profession, based on the actions of perpetrators within their program. For these participants, perpetrators were
seen as representatives of the program and the profession. If perpetrators were not affirming, these participants reasoned that perhaps the program or the profession was not affirming either. One participant, for example, described how after experiencing multiple microaggressions in her program, she went looking for evidence of LGBT affirmation in the profession:

I was thinking if ACA is aware of that sort of things are happening at local level (it was 2013 before LGBTQ gains more official recognition from ACA. At that time, I didn’t find any evidence that ACA officially endorsed same sex marriage while NASW, APA, APA, medical association, other health care professional organizations officially endorsed it...I was thinking if I chose the right profession...

Repeated microaggressions reinforced these questions. The overall frequency of microaggressions within the program seemed to influence participants’ perceptions. When participants encountered multiple microaggressions, they sometimes felt that these events overshadowed the positive aspects of the program. Even when multiple microaggressions occurred, however, participants felt more positively about programs if faculty and peers seemed open to change.

**Other factors are considered alongside microaggressions.** Microaggressions were not the only factors considered by participants in determining their overall feeling about a program. Participants felt especially positively about their programs if they were diverse in terms of LGBT and other identities. A participant shared that his program was “really good” because of how many other LGBT students were enrolled in the program. Another believed that the presence of LGBT faculty and faculty of color had a positive influence on the program environment.

Relationships with faculty were mentioned as a particularly important influence on participants’ overall feeling about their programs. Participants felt more positively about
programs when faculty members made time for them, seemed genuinely interested in them, and supported them through stressful life events. Similarly, close relationships with peers were often mentioned in determining participants’ overall sense of their programs.

Opportunities for personal and professional growth were very important to participants in determining their overall evaluation of their program. Several described their programs as “life-changing.” They also expressed appreciation when faculty created opportunities for students to engage in self-exploration and personal growth.

**Costs and Benefits are Weighed in Determining Choice of Behavioral Response**

As participants worked to make sense of their experiences, they also engaged in a decision-making process about what actions (if any) they should take in response to microaggressions. There were several potential costs and benefits participants typically weighed when deciding on a course of action. Sometimes these decisions were made in the immediate moment after the microaggressions occurred. At other times, they were made after more sustained reflection.

Table 18 summarizes the specific costs and benefits participants frequently considered. Participants evaluated whether others were likely to respond negatively to confrontation. They determined whether confrontation was likely to benefit others. They also evaluated the impact different courses of action would have on their own well-being.
Table 18

**Theme 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Sub-subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Costs and benefits are weighed in determining choice of behavioral response</td>
<td>Likelihood of negative response from others discourages confrontation</td>
<td>Participants fear being perceived negatively</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Participants fear discrimination or further microaggressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Participants anticipate negative changes to relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Participants anticipate that positive change will not occur</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Desire to protect others’ feelings discourages confrontation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Potential benefit to others influences choice of response</td>
<td>Educating chosen to protect clients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Educating chosen to protect peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Educating chosen to help others learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effect on well-being influences choice of response</td>
<td>Availability of time and energy is considered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Needs for self-expression and advocacy are considered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Need for support from others is considered</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Need for integrity is considered</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Personal responses suppressed to allow others to learn</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Likelihood of negative response from others discourages confrontation.** Participants often mentioned they were reluctant to challenge microaggressions openly because they feared others’ reactions. A few mentioned they feared how others would see them, that they would be seen as “crazy” or too emotional: “…is everyone going to think that I’m taking it way too personally because I’m affected by it?” They feared being seen as “obsessed” with LGBT issues or too sensitive to potential bias: “…you don’t want to be the angry gay who comes in screaming about privilege his first week.” Some tried to contain or suppress their emotional responses to avoid such reactions: “[I was] trying to not be too upset or yell…not wanting to be the crazy yelling person….”

Participants feared that if they challenged microaggressions, they would be exposed to further microaggressions or major discrimination such as (loss of a job, being deliberately isolated by faculty in the program. Participants often chose to withdraw when they believed they might be targeted. One participant shared that she stayed closeted in her program and tried to challenge microaggressions “from an objective standpoint” so that “it’s less open for the argument to shift from a debate about something to a personal attack on me.” Another who experienced disability microaggressions from faculty stopped sharing how they were feeling with faculty because they felt that this might protect them from further microaggressions.

A few participants expressed concern that if they challenged microaggressions, they might lose important relationships. This was especially problematic, as some participants already felt isolated in their programs, and wanted to avoid further isolation. As one participant stated:

…[I didn’t want] to be the outsider. More so. Especially at that point in my program where I was actually feeling more connected to my peers, I didn’t really want to do...
something that was going to push away those connections or make them feel strained or awkward.

Sometimes participants were discouraged from confronting microaggressions when they believed that positive changes were unlikely to occur. This was especially the case where previous attempts to confront microaggressions had been unsuccessful. One participant initially pointed out cissexist microaggressions in textbooks to professors, hoping they would either change the assigned text in future, or at least address the issues in class. When faculty dismissed their concerns, they stopped bringing up these issues. “I kind of just stopped doing it, correcting it ahead of time, and then, it just wasn’t helping. We weren’t addressing it.”

An Asian international student participant also mentioned that she did not want to confront microaggressions because she wanted to protect others’ feelings. She feared that if she challenged microaggressions directly, this might make perpetrators feel uncomfortable, or might “offend them or upset them.” This theme was not reflected in other interviews, however.

**Potential benefit to others influences choice of response.** Despite their concerns about others’ reactions, participants frequently chose to challenge microaggressions directly. They tended to describe these confrontations as educational opportunities for the perpetrators. Many were motivated by their desire to protect future clients. They believed that if microaggressions were not addressed, perpetrators might go on to express bias toward clients. They expressed deep concern for how microaggressions might affect clients. One participant observed a fellow student conducting a simulated family counseling session with a lesbian couple and their son. The student counselor called one member of the couple “Mom” and referred to the other by her first name, explaining that she saw only the biological mother as the true mother of the child. The participant worried that “this would be very damaging to the family,” and chose to confront
the perpetrator out of concern that she would “go out and do damage.” A few participants shared that they were motivated to participate in this study because they hoped future counselors and counselor educators might gain a better understanding of LGBT people, experience they could apply to future work.

Participants also chose to challenge microaggressions to protect current and future LGBT students. They believed challenging microaggressions in the classroom would make the environment safer for other LGBT students. As one participant explained: “If one person speaks up then the people who were afraid to speak up are being validated.” Some felt that they were in a better position to speak up than others because they had more privilege, and were somewhat protected from negative reactions. Some hoped that if they addressed issues with faculty, future LGBT students might have an easier time in the program.

If I have to spend extra time teaching [a faculty member] stuff, that will be good for the next person that comes in. Because the trans community at (college) is huge. Absolutely huge. And there will be more people after me, and there will, he’ll still be around for it.

A few participants were motivated to challenge microaggressions by a desire to help perpetrators learn. Educating felt like a duty or a responsibility owed to the perpetrator. “In the moment I felt a really profound sense of responsibility to educate her…” Two participants mentioned that they sometimes tried to suppress their emotional responses to microaggressions to allow perpetrators space to learn. One mentioned that this was part of her role as a teaching assistant:

A few of the other students asked why LGBT people would have special needs during counseling anyway, and why you can’t refer them if your religious views are conflicting. While this may not have been directly personal to me, it was really difficult to sit there
through that conversation knowing that I am gay and that students don’t think LGBT people have enough problems to constitute a chunk of the multicultural literature.

**Effect on well-being influences choice of response.** Participants also weighed the effect of various courses of action on their well-being. Many mentioned that they chose not to confront microaggressions at times because of the emotional energy and time it would take to confront them. Educating others often felt like a burden, and over time it became exhausting. For example, one participant recalled: “I remember just quietly sitting in my chair, and not contributing, because I didn’t want to be the voice of reason in the situation…I don’t really feel emotionally able to redirect this conversation.” Participants expressed a sense of trying to prioritize, deciding which confrontations were worth it, which would matter to them personally, and which would not:

I mean, I didn’t instruct them too much, partly because I was just tired. Um, I mean I was burned out from the program and life…it was like, yeah, I just don’t have the energy to be a social justice advocate right now. I don’t even know if I have the energy to be fully authentic right now. Like, I just have the energy to finish this degree. Which kind of sucked. It was also kind of like…how many of these people am I going to see after this? Who is actually going to be part of my life? Is it worth the energy of educating everyone, correcting everyone, and if there’s not actually any end game then…like I would love to do it so that it would be easier for people in the future, but at the same time, it’s not my job to save the world.

Participants were motivated at times to speak up by their need to express what they were feeling. Sometimes the emotional response to microaggressions felt too difficult to suppress, and speaking out felt necessary. “…I just kind of let it sit, and about a week later I couldn’t sit with
it anymore…I was just still so upset about it a week later that I was like, I need to say something.” Participants also spoke up to advocate for themselves when needed, to protect themselves from further harm.

Participants often chose to seek support from supportive friends and faculty members. Other people offered emotional support, allowing them to vent and process intense emotions. A few reported texting partners or friends from class when microaggressions occurred: “Just trying to reach back out to my own support system, my own support in that moment…” Participants also checked their reactions with others, to validate their perceptions and determine if their emotional responses were reasonable.

A few participants seemed to make choices about how to respond out of a need for integrity—a need to live consistently with their values. A few mentioned that staying silent seemed wrong, like giving implicit agreement to the microaggression. As one participant recalled: “No-one said anything, and I think, I guess after a while it just felt like that’s just as bad as saying something, if I’m just going to like, you know, not do anything about it.”

**Microaggressions Have a Long-Term Impact**

Microaggressions seemed to begin an ongoing cycle of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions. Over time, participants expressed a sense of long-term changes in experience and coping. Microaggressions seemed to have a long-term impact on participants in several thematic ways. Table 19 summarizes common long-term reactions participants described. As described above, participants’ in-the-moment emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions depended on their ability to clearly name and describe the microaggression, the expectations they held at the time, their overall well-being, the meaning of the particular microaggressions, the presence or absence of support, and how safe they felt in the situation.
Table 19

**Theme 5**

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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Sub-subthemes</th>
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<td>Microaggressions have a long-term</td>
<td>Microaggressions lead to disillusionment</td>
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<td>impact</td>
<td>Microaggressions lead to vigilance</td>
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<td>Microaggressions impact education</td>
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<td>Microaggressions lead to exhaustion</td>
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<td>Educating and advocacy become a way of life</td>
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<td>Participants develop coping strategies to minimize impact</td>
<td>Personal healing and self-affirmation desensitize microaggressions</td>
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<td>Numbing, distraction, or acclimation desensitize microaggressions</td>
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<td>Hope for change is affirmed</td>
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<td>Coping “shortcuts” developed for typical microaggressions</td>
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<td>Microaggressions prompt creation of alternative support networks</td>
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**Microaggressions lead to disillusionment.** Microaggression experiences left some participants with a long-term sense of disillusionment. Participants were especially disillusioned with the counseling profession. They expressed a loss of idealism, a sense that attitudes within the profession might never be completely changed, and that counselors might continue to do harm to LGBT clients. As one participant explained:

…so I’m like, oh man, this isn’t like counseling through the rose-colored glasses that I’ve seen for the last two years. This is real life. These are real people and real problems that
are going under the radar…It was like it went from this idealized version of what
counseling and therapy could be, to like a real life…

After repeated unsuccessful attempts to challenge microaggressions, a couple participants
stopped trying to confront them. Others continued to challenge them but felt less hopeful about
these efforts:

I mean, I graduate in May, I’m just like, if it doesn’t, if it hasn’t clicked with these people
now and we’re all graduating in the next semester or two, it’s not going to flip them at all.
So…why even bother?

**Microaggressions lead to vigilance.** Microaggressions experiences left some
participants feeling anxious, anticipating future microaggressions and trying to avoid them.
When they entered new spaces, they questioned whether they would be welcomed or safe:

Is this going to be a safe place? Am I welcome to speak? Am I going to be heard as a
person who has a right to have their voice, or am I going to be heard as a person who has
a chip on their shoulder because of this identity?

When affirmation was not clearly stated, they seemed to try to guess at whether others
would be affirming, looking for clues in their identities or behaviors. A few mentioned being
“on pins and needles” with perpetrators who had made repeated microaggressive comments,
anticipating further problems. Recalling this feeling, one participant stated: “Every class was
anxiety-provoking because you did not know what offensive thing he would say and who he
would direct it…”

**Microaggressions lead to long-term emotional pain.** Some of the more painful
microaggressions seemed to have a lasting emotional impact on participants. A few became
strongly emotional when describing the microaggressions during the interview, and during
member-checking a few reflected on how difficult it was to revisit these experiences, even when the experiences were months or years in the past: “Reading over this I can sense the pain and anger in my narrative. I still am shaken up about it.”

**Microaggressions lead to isolation.** One of the most often mentioned long-term effects of microaggressions, was a sense of isolation. Participants often expressed a feeling of isolation when it seemed that their peers could not understand their experiences. Participants also sometimes deliberately isolated themselves after microaggressions occurred, as the microaggression experience led them to question their relationship with the perpetrators. About this, one participant stated:

> I was always making or found excuses not to participate in any social events with them, you know, I was busy too (with my activism, my partner, trying to keep up with the coursework, but I was like, mmm, and I didn’t make an effort to make any relationship with my doc colleagues outside of the class.

**Microaggressions impact education.** A few participants shared that microaggressions affected their educational experience in their programs. When microaggressions occurred during class, they sometimes “shut down” and were unable to participate in learning: “I lost all the class with him that day, I lost all the class that I had after him, and then I had to go home and fume about this.” Some also believed that the lack of education on LGBT topics stunted their growth and development as LGBT people and limited their competence to work with LGBT clients. For a couple of participants, microaggressions had very tangible effects on their education. One participant was given a negative evaluation by a supervisor after she came out, and this made it necessary for her to delay her graduation for a semester. For another, disability
microaggressions left her feeling pressured to prove herself, which meant that she took on more responsibilities than she could handle and was less able to benefit from her education.

**Microaggressions lead to exhaustion.** The emotional impact of microaggressions and the labor of processing and coping with them afterward left many participants feeling exhausted. Those who encountered frequent microaggressions seemed to have the most difficulty coping, and some conveyed the sense that at times they were just getting by: “How I’m going to survive this, another year and a half?” In particular, participants with more than one oppressed identity expressed that having to endure more than one type of microaggressions was a “double whammy” that added to their exhaustion. Participants frequently mentioned that they were weary of the effort of explaining their experiences to others:

I’m just so tired of talking about what my life is like to be a homosexual Black man.

Like I’m tired of telling my story. I’m tired of trying to get people to understand how different it is to live this life.

Even before microaggressions occurred, some participants felt that they had to “mentally prepare” for being in classes with non-affirming peers or faculty, which further added to their weariness.

**Educating and advocacy become a way of life.** Participants expressed that educating others and advocating for the LGBT community became a way of life for them. This was considered both a positive and a negative thing, as educating at times felt exhausting but also empowering. A few participants made LGBT-affirming education and advocacy a personal mission. One spoke of including LGBT-specific information and information about communities of color in every presentation she gave. Another chose to become involved in off-
campus activism, to develop ties with the LGBT community off campus, and to help herself cope.

Participants develop coping strategies to minimize impact. In order to address the emotional impact of microaggressions, participants developed a range of coping strategies. Some mentioned working to build a sense of self-confidence, and developing the ability to validate themselves in the absence of external validation. As they became more self-confident, emotional reactivity seemed to diminish.

Several participants mentioned finding ways to distract themselves from microaggressions, or to numb their feelings. One learned to “focus on the positive.” Another worked hard in school to keep herself from feeling her reactions. Others seemed to acclimate to microaggressions over time. A few participants said they had become “used to” certain microaggressions, and had very little reaction to those offenses.

A couple of participants coped by affirming their hope for change. They conceptualized change as a long-term process, and reminded themselves not to be discouraged. One, for example, reminded herself that “as a counselor…it’s not in the possibility of people’s minds changing or hearts changing, then we have no point being there.”

A couple participants also developed cognitive “shortcuts” for processing microaggressions and making decisions about how to respond. These processes seemed to have become almost habitual or automatic, used so often they could be done without conscious thought: “So, um, you know, you weigh all of that stuff, not even on a fully conscious level.”

Microaggressions prompt creation of alternative support networks. Some participants deliberately cultivated LGBT-affirming networks of friends and faculty members to support them through their programs. Faculty members were especially important in providing
advocacy for students: “I do have a professor who, um, who I love, like he is my absolute favorite professor because he understands and he’s very accepting, and he fights for us, like the minorities of the program, he fights for us.” Faculty sometimes provided emotional support to students in processing their microaggression experiences. They also provided practical assistance in addressing microaggressions.

Prevalence of Themes in the Sample

Although there was substantial variation in participants’ in-the-moment microaggression experiences, and their reactions varied from situation to situation, they evinced a common range of responses. There was a great deal of similarity in how participants thought about their experiences, and they seemed to engage in a similar decision-making process when choosing how to respond.

Table 20 presents the major themes and subthemes of the study, and indicates how many participants endorsed each (this table does not include sub-subthemes; for complete prevalence tables, refer to Appendix H). Four out of the five major themes appeared in all participant interviews. Most subthemes appeared in at least half of the interviews.
Table 20

*Prevalence of Themes in the Sample*

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<th>Theme</th>
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<td>Some microaggressions awaken vague discomfort</td>
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<td>Expectations shape experience</td>
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<td>Meaning of the microaggression affects experience and response</td>
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<td>Presence or absence of support changes the experience</td>
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<td>Perception of safety influences the experience</td>
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<td>Microaggressions prompt evaluation of perpetrators and relationships</td>
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<td>Intention inferred from perceived effort to learn and care</td>
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<td>Character inferred from perceived attitude</td>
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<td>Microaggression experiences figure into overall evaluation of the program and the profession</td>
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<td>Faculty actions are especially significant</td>
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<td>Other factors are considered alongside microaggressions</td>
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<td>Costs and benefits are weighed in determining choice of behavioral response</td>
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<td>Likelihood of negative response from others discourages confrontation</td>
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<td>Participants develop coping strategies to minimize impact</td>
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All participants described variation in their in-the-moment experiences (Theme 1). All indicated that their expectations of the situation influenced their experience of the microaggression. Most (11 participants, 92%) agreed their well-being at the time the microaggression occurred, and the meaning of the microaggression were important in determining their experience as well. Most (10 participants, 83%) also believed the meaning of the microaggression influenced their experience and response. The presence of support seemed to modify in-the-moment reactions for several participants (7 participants, 58%). Half of participants (6 participants, 50%) mentioned feeling a sense of vague discomfort, and initially finding it difficult to name a microaggression. Five (42%) experienced self-doubt after microaggression experiences. Only two (17%) mentioned their sense of safety from attack as an influence.

All participants talked about evaluating perpetrators and their relationships with perpetrators after microaggressions occurred (Theme 2). All evaluated perpetrators’ intentions in terms of their efforts to learn about LGBT people. Five participants (42%) spoke of making evaluations of character based on their perception of others’ attitudes.

Theme 3 (microaggression experiences figure into overall evaluation of the program and the profession) was endorsed by 10 participants (83%). Participants spent less time discussing overall program evaluation than they spent on evaluating individual encounters. Half of the participants (6 participants, 50%) made generalizations about the program or the profession based on their microaggression experiences with individual faculty members or peers. Two (17%) mentioned that faculty microaggressions were particularly important in forming their overall evaluation of the program. Most participants named other aspects of their programs that shaped their overall evaluation (9 participants, 75%).
The strongest agreement among participants was evinced in Theme 4. All 12 participants considered costs and benefits when deciding how to respond to microaggressions. All 12 named the same three broad considerations: the likelihood of negative response from others, the potential benefit of confrontation to other people, and the potential of various responses to impact their own well-being.

All participants described some long-term effects of their microaggression experiences (Theme 5). There was some variation in what those specific long-term effects were for individual participants. A third of participants (4 participants, 33%) described feeling disillusioned or hopeless because of their microaggression experiences. Slightly more than half (7 participants, 58%) became more vigilant or anxious about future microaggressions. Slightly less than half (5 participants, 42%) described some sort of long-term emotional pain. Six participants (50%) shared that they became isolated in their programs over time. Five (42%) described a sense of exhaustion. Six (50%) believed their education had been impacted by microaggressions. More than half (7 participants, 58%) mentioned that because of microaggression experiences, they regularly engage in education and advocacy. Almost all (11 participants, 92%) developed specific coping strategies to deal with microaggression experiences. Three-quarters (9 participants, 75%) responded to microaggressions by building long-term sources of support through friendships or professional contacts.

**Conclusion**

This chapter summarized the individual and combined themes for study participants, the microaggressions participants commonly encounter, and the experiences and responses that they reported. Participants’ in-the-moment experiences varied widely and they attributed this to several factors. In response to microaggression experiences, participants evinced thematic short-
term and long-term responses. Analysis yielded a detailed description of participants’
experiences and responses, which provides insight into how counselor educators may effectively
support LGBT students. The next chapter will discuss the results presented in this chapter, and
how they may be used to create more welcoming and affirming counselor education
environments.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are discussed in Chapter V, providing a review of how the results answered the research questions posed by the researcher. Findings are also discussed in terms of contributions to the literature, comparing these findings with studies previously conducted. Limitations of the research will be summarized. Implications and recommendations for counselor education will then be discussed, as well as areas for future research.

Results and Research Questions

Research Question 1

The first research question for this study asked, “What are LGBT counselor education students’ lived experiences of LGBT microaggressions?” To answer this question, participants were asked to describe their in-the-moment experiences of LGBT microaggressions. All members of the sample encountered LGBT microaggressions in their programs. Participants had a wide range of in-the-moment experiences. Reactions included shock, anger, hurt, anxiety, fear, exasperation, exhaustion, and amusement. Reactions ranged in intensity from mild to very intense. Sometimes participants had very little reaction to microaggressions, but simply acknowledged that they had taken place. Some participants had strong emotional and even physical reactions (e.g. feeling shaky or frozen).

Research Question 2

The second question asked, “What are LGBT counselor education students’ lived experiences of microaggressions around any other identity?” Participants were asked to describe in-the-moment experiences of microaggressions that involved any aspect of their identity. All
participants of color encountered racial microaggressions in their programs. Most women in the sample experienced sexist microaggressions. A few participants experienced some other type of microaggression (disability microaggressions, microaggressions based on socioeconomic status, microaggressions involving people in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction). In-the-moment experiences of these microaggressions were similar to participants’ experiences of LGBT microaggressions. Participants who experienced two or more types of microaggressions (e.g. LGBT microaggressions and racial microaggressions) shared that having to deal with multiple oppressions made their experiences especially intense and exhausting.

**Research Question 3**

The third research question asked, “How do participants make meaning of microaggression experience?” To answer this question, the researcher asked participants how they made sense of their experiences after the fact. Participants processed their experiences by explaining why they felt as they did in the moment, evaluating perpetrators and relationships, evaluating programs and the profession, choosing a response, and evaluating the long-term impact of microaggressions.

Participants offered explanations of their in-the-moment experiences. They named several factors that seemed to influence what they felt and how intensely they felt it. If a microaggression was difficult to understand or name as a microaggression, they felt a sense of vague discomfort or self-doubt. They believed that they experienced microaggression differently at different times based on the expectations they held about the person or the situation. The content of the microaggression seemed to matter; some microaggressions felt more painful than others, depending on the meaning of the particular microaggression. They also experienced
microaggressions differently depending on whether support was available in the immediate environment, and how safe they felt in the environment overall.

Participants described how they evaluated perpetrators and their relationships to these individuals after the fact. They often evaluated perpetrators’ intentions by examining where their effort was directed (e.g. whether the person put effort into learning about LGBT issues, whether the person repeated the offense, whether the person put effort into caring about them in general). Their sense of the perpetrator’s attitude sometimes informed their evaluation of the perpetrator’s character (e.g. whether they were good or bad people, trustworthy or untrustworthy).

Microaggressions also figured into participants’ evaluation of their programs and the profession. Participants felt more negatively about programs when microaggressions occurred, especially if they occurred frequently and were not adequately addressed. However, they also took other factors into consideration (e.g. quality of education, relationships with faculty and students).

Participants recounted how they chose to respond behaviorally after microaggressions occurred. Participants responded in the moment by confronting the microaggression, withdrawing from the situation, or remaining silent. They considered potential costs and benefits when choosing their response. Specifically, when deciding whether to confront or withdraw/remain silent, participants considered the likelihood that the other person would respond negatively, the potential benefit to others if they chose to confront the microaggression, and the potential effect on their own well-being if they chose to confront.

Participants believed that microaggressions had a long-term impact on them. They noticed changes in their overall emotional well-being. They developed a sense of disillusionment with their programs, with other people, and sometimes with the profession. They
became more vigilant about potential microaggressions, and felt anxious and on edge in situations where they expected microaggressions to occur. They described long-term emotional pain resulting from microaggressions. They felt exhausted by their microaggression experiences.

In response to these changes, they developed different ways of being in the world. Some made it their ongoing mission to educate others about LGBT issues, and to advocate for LGBT inclusion. Most learned some form of coping to diminish the emotional toll of microaggressions (e.g. engaging in personal healing, learning to numb emotions). Most intentionally created networks of supportive friends, family members, and professional contacts, so this social support could buffer the impact of their microaggression experiences.

**Research Question 4**

The fourth research question asked, “How do participants make meaning of their microaggression experiences in the context of their multiple identities?” To answer this question, the researcher asked participants to describe how they made sense of all microaggression experiences (not only those involving LGBT identity). Several participants commented on how their own combination of identities affected their experience. As discussed above, participants with multiple oppressed identities believed that their experiences were more intense and exhausting because they experienced multiple types of microaggressions. One participant felt that having privilege (White privilege, male privilege) made his microaggression experiences less intense or burdensome than they would have been if he had multiple oppressed identities. One participant felt that his experience was *more* intense because he was a White man, and was unused to experiences of oppression.
Discussion

This findings of this study contributes to microaggression research in several important ways. It has contributed specific knowledge of how LGBT students experience microaggressions in their programs. Results may also inform microaggression theory and research. The contributions of this research in several pertinent areas are discussed below, and findings are compared with previous research and conceptual literature.

Types of LGBT Microaggressions in Counselor Education

First, the study revealed the range of microaggressions encountered by LGBT students in counselor education programs. Results confirm that these students do experience microaggressions in their programs (both LGBT-related and other types of microaggressions) (Pollock et al., 2016). Microaggression types were consistent with those identified by Nadal et al. (2010) and Sue (2010), and could be described by their typologies, but were sometimes expressed in ways that were unique to the counselor education context. For example, the assumption that LGBT people were sick or sinful was demonstrated in these programs by the assumption that LGBT people would be clients, rather than counselors. Being expected to educate others was a microaggression that may have occurred with particular frequency because of the context. Reluctance to counsel LGBT clients was a microaggression specific to the counselor education context. Participants also experienced it as microaggressive when faculty members failed to confront microaggressions from students.

Factors that Influence In-the-Moment Experience

The research findings from this study identified factors that participants believed were an influence on their in-the-moment microaggression experiences. Consistent with previous research, participants reported a range of in-the-moment emotional reactions to microaggression
experiences such as anger, sadness, shock, resignation, anxiety, and amusement (Nadal et al., 2011; Nadal et al., 2014). While previous research has linked microaggressions to a variety of emotional experiences and outcomes, there is limited research that explores why reactions differ from experience to experience. Because participants in this study were asked to describe their in-the-moment feelings and thoughts as well as how they made sense of these experiences after the fact, they often gave explanations of why their reactions differed between experiences. According to these participants, several factors determined how they felt about a particular microaggression.

**Ability to name the microaggression.** Participants experienced microaggressions differently in the moment depending on whether they could clearly and confidently name the experience as a microaggression. Because some microaggressions were subtle and unfamiliar to participants, they sometimes experienced a sense of vague unease after a microaggression. Additionally, some microaggressions were accompanied by messages that downplayed or diminished participants’ feelings or subjective realities; at times these messages left participants questioning and doubting their own experience. This is consistent with Sue’s (2010) observation that after a microaggression incident, individuals often spend time reviewing the experience to determine if it actually was a microaggression. A little more than half of the sample (seven participants) reported that they experienced either vague unease or self-doubt following a microaggression. This experience did not seem universal, however; five participants did not report difficulty naming microaggressions, and of those who did, most had some experiences that they could easily identify. It seems likely that some microaggressions were easily identifiable because they were more blatant (e.g. microassaults). It also seems likely that, because some microaggressions were encountered repeatedly, participants learned to expect them, and to
recognize them almost instantaneously, without conscious thought. In addition, it was evident during interviews that most participants had some working knowledge of microaggression theory. It is possible that participants’ knowledge of microaggression theory equipped them to recognize microaggressions more easily.

**Expectations.** Expectations of the counseling profession and of counselor education program seemed to play a large role in shaping participants in-the-moment experiences. Participants expected counseling programs to be places where all people were welcomed and affirmed, where others were knowledgeable about diverse groups and open to learning more. They saw counselors as helpers, people who were invested in human well-being and dignity, and as such they expected them to care about the well-being of all groups. They had particularly high expectations of faculty, as leaders and experts. They held social justice experts to a high standard as well. A few indicated that they expected those with higher education to be more knowledgeable about the LGBT community. When perpetrators were confronted about microaggressions, they expected them to learn from the confrontation and show consistent change. These results suggest that LGBT students arrive in their programs with strong ideals and values about the profession. They reported that they value education and believe that counselor educators and counseling students should use educational opportunities to learn about the LGBT community and other oppressed groups. Because of these hopes and values, microaggressions in counselor education programs may be especially disappointing (Constantine, 2007).

Participants also expected members of oppressed groups to be more knowledgeable about all oppressed groups and forms of oppression (e.g. expecting male gay men to be more aware of sexism, expecting heterosexual people of color to be more aware of LGBT issues than White heterosexual people). One possible explanation of this finding might be that participants
conceived of themselves as similar to people from other oppressed groups. Galupo et al. (2014) found that transgender participants in their study experienced microaggressions differently depending on the identity of the perpetrator; if the perpetrator held a similar identity to their own (i.e. was also transgender or LGB) they found the microaggression more distressing than if the perpetrator was cisgender and heterosexual. They perceived microaggressions differently depending on the identity of the perpetrator as well. In this current study, it is possible that participants conceived of themselves as part of a larger group of oppressed people, and so microaggressions felt more hurtful from other oppressed people because they were, in a sense, microaggressions coming from within their own group, where they expected to be safe. It is also possible that they expected the experience of one type of microaggressions (e.g. racial microaggressions) to help members of oppressed groups develop empathy for all microaggression experiences. For example, a gay man who has experienced microaggressions related to sexual orientation might be able to empathize with women who experience sexist microaggressions because of his own experience.

**Well-being.** Well-being was another factor that shaped participants’ in-the-moment experience. Many microaggression studies have looked at the effects of microaggressions on well-being, but there is a lack of current research to describe how well-being at the time of a microaggression may change the experience. Results of this study suggest that stressors or personal issues may make students more vulnerable to microaggressions. Participants reported many of the same stressors that any counseling student might encounter—demanding workloads, limited time, difficulty balancing work and life obligations—and their in-the-moment experience of microaggressions varied depending on their well-being at the time. If they were already overwhelmed with school and other stressors, microaggressions were sometimes experienced
more intensely, and felt as more burdensome. Students felt that existing physical and mental health issues made them more prone to intense reactions. Unresolved trauma shaped in-the-moment reactions for a few students, who reported that microaggressions triggered painful memories.

Participants' reactions also differed depending on how comfortable and confident the participant was in their identity. Students shared that if they felt a sense of shame about their identity, microaggressions were particularly intense, and reinforced their sense of shame. This is consistent with studies which have found that acceptance of one’s identity may buffer the impact of microaggressions on well-being (Torres et al., 2015; Wong-Padoongpatt, Zane, Okazaki, & Saw, 2017; Woodford et al. 2014).

Meaning of the microaggression. Participants shared that some microaggressions felt more painful than others because of their meaning. Some microaggressions communicated messages that felt especially dehumanizing or degrading. Others made the participants feel unheard. A number of recent studies (Jones et al., 2015; Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010; Torres-Harding & Turner, 2015) have reported that individuals may experience differing levels of distress after encountering different types of racial/ethnic microaggressions. Results of this study suggest that LGBT students may also experience different levels of distress depending on the type of microaggression encountered.

Support and safety. Participants also shared that their in-the-moment experience differed depending on whether there were LGBT-affirming people in the room or nearby, and whether they felt safe in the environment overall. When LGBT-affirming people were present and showed active support, microaggressions were experienced as less painful than when students felt isolated and unsupported. This is consistent with research that shows that support
from others is associated with well-being among LGBT individuals (McConnell, Birkett, & Mustanski, 2015; McConnell, Birkett, & Mustanski, 2016).

**Changes in In-the-Moment Experiences Over Time**

The current research provides some indications of how in-the-moment microaggression experiences may change over time. Participants shared that as their microaggression experiences accumulated, their in-the-moment experiences changed. Many participants experienced more exhaustion. Some felt increased frustration, anger, or sadness. This is consistent with Sue’s (2010) theoretical conceptualization of microaggressions as small, repetitive daily insults that have a cumulative effect on well-being over time. It is also consistent with research that shows that the more microaggressions an individual encounters, the greater the impact on their well-being (Ong et al., 2013).

Accumulation of microaggression experiences did not always mean that experiences became more intense, however. Some participants felt that the intensity of their microaggression experiences diminished over time. Participants found ways to cope that seem to have lessened their in-the-moment reactions (e.g. becoming more self-affirming, numbing emotions).

**Evaluation of Perpetrators**

Results of the study described the way in which participants evaluated perpetrators and their relationship to perpetrators after microaggressions occurred. Previous research has identified that after microaggressions occur, those who are affected engage in a (sometimes arduous) process of trying to understand the perpetrator’s intentions (Sue, 2010). Nadal et al. (2014) found that transgender individuals engaged in rationalization to excuse or minimize perpetrators’ behavior. However, little research has explored how individuals arrive at such
evaluation of perpetrators’ intentions. The current study contributes an account of how individuals may evaluate perpetrators after microaggressions occur.

In this current study, participants evaluated whether the perpetrator had opportunity to know about the LGBT community, and whether they were responsible to have this knowledge (e.g. faculty members were judged to have more responsibility to know). They used this assessment to make a judgment about whether the person had put effort into learning about and caring for LGBT people. In the process, they also considered how perpetrators had responded to feedback about microaggression; if they welcomed feedback and showed consistent change, participants believed they were making active attempts to learn, while if they resisted feedback and/or did not show consistent change, participants believed they were either uninterested in or actively resistant to learning. They also looked at efforts the perpetrator had made to care for them as a person. They inferred the perpetrator’s attitude toward LGBT people from these efforts. Some seemed to make inferences about the perpetrator’s character simultaneously. Perpetrators who had made independent efforts to learn about LGBT people, and who showed evidence of caring for the student were believed to be most affirming, and were evaluated most positively. Perpetrators who resisted learning about LGBT people, and seemed deliberately uncaring were evaluated least positively. This association was not always explicit, but was present in how perpetrators were described, and the kinds of relationships participants chose to have with them. As this description indicates, participants described different perpetrators very differently, and described different types of relationships with perpetrators.

Of note is the influence of perpetrators’ previous efforts to care for the student. There is little research to examine how microaggressions are experienced in different types of relationships, but the study by Galupo et al. (2014) suggests that microaggressions are
experienced differently when they come from friends than from others. It is possible that students experienced or interpreted microaggressions differently when they had an existing close relationship with the perpetrator.

Influence of Microaggressions on Program Evaluation

This current study contributed understanding of how LGBT counselor education students evaluate their programs and the counseling profession when they experience microaggressions in these contexts. Other studies have suggested that microaggressions may affect individuals’ comfort in the settings where they occur, and may even influence career plans (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016; Gomez, Khurshid, Freitag, & Lachuk, 2011). The current study supports the idea that students feel less positively about programs in which microaggressions are a frequent occurrence, especially when they are not adequately addressed. One participant shared that they chose to leave the profession, and felt relieved to escape the types of microaggressions they encountered in their program.

At the same time, students in this study took other things into account when evaluating their overall experience in their programs. Certain conditions seemed to buffer the negative impact of microaggressions on their program evaluations. Specifically, students shared that they felt more positively about their programs when the faculty and student body was diverse, when they had strong relationships with peers and faculty, and when they had opportunities to learn and grow.

Costs and Benefits of Confrontation

Results of the current study provide some validation of Nadal’s (2013) microaggression process model. In this model, individuals decide how to respond to microaggressions by weighing the costs and benefits of various courses of action. Many costs and benefits considered
by these participants were similar to those mentioned by Nadal (2013); potential negative reactions from others, potential impact on the student’s well-being. Some potential benefits were unique to this sample, however. Participants in this study sometimes chose to confront microaggressions in order to protect future clients. They felt that as counselors-in-training, they were responsible to prevent harm to LGBT clients by educating their peers and faculty about LGBT issues. They showed a similar sense of responsibility to other students. Many of these participants shared that they entered the profession out of a desire to help and benefit others. Due to their own strong values for caring and helping, it seems likely that they are especially motivated by concern for others.

The desire to protect perpetrators’ feelings was only mentioned by one participants (an Asian international student), who identified this as an expression of her own cultural values and patterns. This is different from results obtained by Nadal (2013); the desire to protect others’ feelings was much more prevalent in this sample. It is possible that participants in this sample had different cultural values than those held by participants in these studies. The counselor education context may also have played a role in this; participants’ strong sense of responsibility to protect clients and other students may have outweighed any desire to protect perpetrators’ feelings. It is also possible that, given participants’ prior knowledge of microaggression theory and expressed commitment to social justice advocacy, they saw microaggressions more as the responsibility of the perpetrator, and were less likely to internalize these experiences or to take responsibility for mending the breach with the perpetrator.

**Long-Term Outcomes for LGBT Counselor Education Students**

Results of the current study provide information about the long-term impact of microaggressions in counselor education programs. Microaggressions took a psychological toll
on participants; several described a sense of exhaustion, emotional pain, and increased vigilance or anxiety about future microaggressions. These results are consistent with previous research that has linked microaggressions psychological outcomes such as distress, anxiety, depression, lower self-esteem, difficulty developing a positive LGB identity, trauma symptoms, and stress (Balsam et al., 2011; Nadal et al., 2011; Nadal et al., 2014; Robinson et al., 2015; Woodford et al., 2014; Woodford et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2012).

Some of the long-term effects named by participants were specific to the counselor education context. Some participants described a sense of disillusionment with the profession, as their hopes and values for the profession were challenged by repeated microaggression experiences. Some shared that their education was impacted. For some, microaggression experiences made it difficult for them to concentrate on learning. Others shared that neglect of LGBT topics, one frequently mentioned microaggression, meant that they were inadequately prepared to treat LGBT clients, or to manage the experiences of discrimination or bias they encountered in their counseling work. Despite this, they often found themselves taking educating or advocacy roles with others. They perceived this as both positive and negative, both a drain on their energy and a means of empowerment. Taking a self-advocacy role is a resilience strategy supported by previous research (Li et al., 2017).

Results also give an account of the long-term changes these participants made to cope with their microaggression experiences. Most developed some type of coping strategy to help minimize both the short- and long-term impact of microaggressions (engaging in personal growth and healing, self-affirmation, emotional numbing, distracting themselves, choosing to hope for change, developing quick ways to respond to microaggressions). The use of self-affirmation is similar to the cognitive coping strategy of emphasizing resilience and
empowerment that was identified by in previous samples (Nadal et al., 2011; Nadal et al., 2014). The use of self-affirmation and personal growth to cope are also similar to the resilience strategies of self-discovery and adaptive socialization identified by Li et al. (2017).

Limitations

As the sample included only 12 participants, results may not adequately represent the experiences of all LGBT students in counselor education programs. The current sample did not include any Latinx participants, and only one Asian participant (there were no participants who identified as Asian American). The sample included 3 African American students, accounting for a quarter of the sample, so more information was gained about these students’ experiences, but a study that focused more specifically on their experiences might have gained more nuanced, in-depth information. The same is true of transgender students; specific microaggressive experiences emerged for the transgender students in the study, but a study that focused only on these participants might have yielded more data. This may limit the transferability of the study to understanding students with these identities.

Another limitation has to do with the demographic form used in the study (Appendix C). In writing the demographic form, I committed a type of microaggression identified by non-binary participants; I assumed that participants would identify within the gender binary. I provided “male,” “female,” and “transgender” as gender identity options, and “gay,” “lesbian,” and “bisexual” options for sexuality (which implied that all transgender participants would also identify as LGB). Two transgender participants in the study raised this issue, and late in the process I began to address this and worked to revise the form. However, this microaggression may have discouraged participants from responding openly, may have affected their emotional state during the interview, or may have otherwise influenced their responses. The foregoing
example illustrates the potential for researcher bias. It is possible that there were other instances of bias that appeared in the conduct or the analysis of the research. I took the steps described in Chapter 3 (bracketing, use of an audit) to attempt to minimize the influence of bias, but it is possible that unconscious biases influenced the research process.

It is also possible that because of the sensitive nature of the topic, participants did not share all their experiences. One participant expressed concern that her identity might be recognizable through her description of her experiences. While I made efforts to alleviate these potential concerns (as described in Chapter 3), it is possible that participants did not share everything relevant to the study.

An additional limitation is that half of one interview could not be transcribed verbatim. Due to a mechanical error, the first half of one interview was not recorded. The student investigator took detailed notes from memory immediately after the interview was concluded; there is a possibility, however, that this affected the accuracy or completeness of the data.

**Implications and Recommendations**

Results of this study may be used to inform counselor education practice. Counselor educators may benefit from knowing about the unique microaggression experiences of LGBT students in their programs. Implications of the research and recommendations for counselor educators are discussed below.

Results of this current study suggest that students may enter counselor education programs with the expectation that others will be knowledgeable about LGBT issues. Participants expressed that it was particularly upsetting to encounter microaggressions in the counselor education context, which they expected to be a safe space for them. Several felt an abiding sense of disillusionment with the profession when repeated microaggressions forced
them to revise these expectations. They felt even more demoralized when microaggressions were not addressed by faculty.

It may be helpful for counselor educators to prepare LGBT students for the possibility that they may encounter microaggressions in their programs. Faculty may help students conceive of microaggressions as part of a learning process for all students, and describe how these events will be handled. If students enter their programs with realistic expectations and a clear sense that microaggressions will be addressed and learning will take place, they may feel empowered instead of discouraged.

It may be helpful for counselor educators to assure students that all microaggressions will be directly addressed by faculty. This may relieve LGBT students of the burden of educating others, allowing them to focus on their own education. It may also help them feel safe and valued in the program. It may be especially helpful for faculty to name and address microaggressions in the moment they occur, rather than addressing them privately. When microaggressions are not addressed immediately, students may feel unprotected, and believe that their well-being is unimportant to others. If microaggressions are addressed in private, students may believe that they were never addressed.

Misgendering was a microaggression often named by transgender participants. Programs may address this problem by creating a culture of intentionality around the use of gender pronouns. On the first day of class, faculty might ask students to introduce themselves and share their preferred gender pronoun, setting the expectation that preferred pronouns will be used. Any demographic forms used by the program could be examined, and rewritten to include options for non-binary transgender identities, as well as non-binary sexual identities (e.g. pansexual, asexual). Intake forms for clients and demographic forms for faculty and student research could
be similarly inclusive. Forms may either use open-ended prompts for gender and sexuality, or provide comprehensive lists of options. All forms may allow individuals to indicate their preferred gender pronoun. Faculty could also work to ensure that gender-neutral bathrooms are available near classrooms and offices.

Participants in this current study shared that social support was particularly important in helping them cope with microaggressions. They perceived their programs more positively when they had strong relationships with faculty and peers. A few expressed appreciation that faculty members took an interest in how they were doing personally as well as professionally. Counselor educators might ensure that LGBT students have adequate support in several ways. They could sponsor a support group for LGBT counselor education students. They may make all students aware of LGBT social groups and supports at the university and in the surrounding area. They might facilitate a sense of connectedness between all students by helping students develop relationships in the program (e.g. matching students with higher-level mentors or study partners). Faculty could also make it clear to all students that they are available to help students process microaggression experiences.

Since well-being seemed to have an influence on how participants experienced microaggressions, counselor educators could contribute to wellness for LGBT students. They may teach about LGBT identity development, and offer opportunities for self-reflection and growth that give LGBT students the opportunity to work through any internalized anti-LGBT bias. When appropriate, they may show interest in students’ personal well-being. They may encourage self-care for all students. They may also provide referrals to LGBT-affirming counseling services when appropriate.
The importance of program diversity in supporting LGBT students has been named in previous literature (Croteau et al., 2005), and the current study validates that importance. The presence or absence of LGBT faculty and students (as well as faculty and students of color, faculty and students with disabilities, faculty and students from multiple socioeconomic groups) sends a powerful message about whether LGBT students of varying identities are welcome and safe in their programs. Counselor educators should therefore make intentional efforts to recruit and retain LGBT faculty and students from different racial, socioeconomic, and ability groups. Counselor educators could visit campus LGBT undergraduate support groups to talk about counseling programs and invite members to apply. Program materials may be sent to LGBT and multicultural community centers in the state where the program is located, or visits might be scheduled at these locations as well. Promotional literature and program websites could prominently feature any nondiscrimination statements that cover LGBT students or faculty (as well as people of color, people with disabilities, etc.). Any research or publication on LGBT issues that has been conducted by program faculty may be highlighted in literature and on the website, especially research with an intersectional focus (i.e. focus on more than one aspect of diversity).

Programs should maintain contact with LGBT students and faculty about their experiences in the program. Anonymous surveys that ask students and faculty to share their level of comfort in the program, and to identify any microaggressions they have experienced, could provide programs with valuable information about which microaggressions are present in the program. Alternatively, programs could hold periodic caucus groups for LGBT students, facilitated by an LGBT or ally faculty member, to allow students to share about their experiences in the program, as the presence of other students might empower students to share more freely.
(concerns about anonymity should be addressed up front). The same might be done for students of color, students with disabilities, etc.

**Areas for Future Research**

Results of this study suggested potential areas for future research. These areas are summarized below. Recommendations for research are also provided.

Future studies should explore the impact of identity development on microaggression experience and response. The current study and previous theoretical formulations support the idea that individuals at different levels of identity development may experience microaggressions differently. However, further research will be needed to define how identity development influences experience and reactions. Research could explore how identity development impacts microaggression experience for individuals with multiple oppressed identities.

Quantitative research could be done to assess the academic consequences of microaggressions for LGBT students. The current study suggests that learning is affected for these students, but does not provide a clear picture of academic outcomes. Research could investigate whether there is a relationship between attrition and microaggressions for LGBT students, as well as any relationship between microaggressions and thoughts of leaving their programs. Research could also investigate relationships between microaggressions and markers of academic success (in-class engagement, grades, engagement in research opportunities, publication, etc.).

Since the current research indicates that faculty members often fail to address LGBT topics in class, future research might explore how counselor educators make decisions about what LGBT material (if any) to present in class. Such research might explore any factors that motivate or discourage them from covering this material. Future research might also look at
counselor educators’ perspectives on challenging LGBT microaggressions that occur in the classroom, and any factors that encourage or discourage them to do so.

Further research might be conducted to look at the microaggression experiences of specific groups of LGBT counselor education students. This current research did not include any Latinx American or Native American participants, and only one Asian participant, so research might specifically look at the experiences of members of these groups. Research might also focus on the specific experiences of African American LGBT students, female LGBT students, or LGBT students with disabilities. Since the focus of the interview was on LGBT microaggressions and most questions encouraged participants to focus on this, participants may have underreported other types of microaggressions (e.g. racial, sexist, ableist). Future research might ask participants more specifically about various types of microaggressions (e.g. racial, sexist, ableist).

Four participants indicated on the demographic form that they had disabilities, but only one reported experiences of disability microaggressions, and this participant was the only one to mention disability as an identity during the interview. It is possible that other students experienced no disability microaggressions; the lack of data in this area suggests that perhaps disability microaggressions are uncommon in counselor education programs. Another explanation might be that disability identity was not important to the other students, so they did not notice or fully process these microaggressions. However, the microaggression experiences of the remaining student suggests that further research in this area might be warranted, especially since participants were not specifically asked about disability microaggressions in the interview, but were merely asked to describe any experiences of microaggressions.
Future research might also look at how LGBT people make sense of microaggressions in the context of different relationships. While most participants seemed to have somewhat distant relationships from perpetrators, a few participants did describe friendly relationships with perpetrators which continued after the microaggression occurred. The current research suggests that perpetrators’ openness to learning and commitment to change after they committed microaggressions may have made it easier for participants to maintain these relationships. It is also possible that, because participants had a pre-existing relationship with the perpetrator in which trust and care had developed, they were more likely to excuse microaggressive behaviors, or to perceive these behaviors as well-intentioned. Future research on how microaggression experience affect and are affected by relationships might provide insight into these possibilities.

As there is a lack of research on how LGBT individuals evaluate perpetrators after a microaggression incident, it is unclear whether other LGBT people would evaluate perpetrators in the same way as these participants. It is possible that participants emphasized responsibility to learn in their evaluation because of the educational context, and because they expected counseling professionals to learn about LGBT people. In their study of microaggression experiences of transgender individuals, Nadal et al. (2014) found that participants coped with microaggression experiences by providing rationalizations for their microaggressive actions (e.g. lack of education), but their research did not indicate how participants arrived at these rationalizations. Further research would be needed to indicate whether all perpetrators are evaluated the same way.

Conclusion

Results of the current study suggest that LGBT students experience a range of microaggressions in their counselor education programs. The current study suggests that
eliminating microaggressions from counselor education programs could substantially improve well-being and engagement for LGBT students. For the benefit of all students, counselor educators may choose to focus on ways to eliminate LGBT microaggressions from their programs, providing students with a model of professional advocacy and affirmation that may shape their professional lives.
REFERENCES


McNair, R., Pennay, A., Hughes, T., Brown, R., Leonard, W., & Lubman, D. I. (2016). A model for lesbian, bisexual, and queer-related influences on alcohol consumption and


Appendix A

Recruitment Script
Recruitment Script

If you identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, and are currently enrolled in a counselor education program or have left a program within the past two years, and you have experienced some level of prejudice or discrimination in your program (from faculty, other students, etc.), you are invited to participate in a study of LGBT microaggressions in counselor education programs.

If you decide to participate in the study, you will be asked to complete an interview about your experience of subtle discrimination in your program. Interviews will last up to 2 hours. You will also be asked to read and comment on the transcript of your interview, which may take an additional 1-2 hours. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

If you are interested in learning more about participating, or have questions or concerns about the study, please contact me at sarah.e.coulter@wmich.edu or 419-573-2323. You may also contact Dr. Patricia Reeves, the faculty advisor for this project at (269) 387-3527 or patricia.reeves@wmich.edu. If you know others who might be interested in the study, please share this invitation with them.

This study has been approved by the HSIRB at Western Michigan University. I am conducting this study for my doctoral dissertation.
Appendix B

Informed Consent Document
Informed Consent Form
Western Michigan University
Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology

Principal Investigator: Mary L. Anderson, PhD
Student Investigator: Sarah Bryan, MA, LPC
Title of Study: LGBT Microaggressions in Counselor Education Programs

You have been invited to participate in a research project titled “LGBT Microaggressions in Counselor Education Programs.” This project will serve as Sarah Bryan’s dissertation for the requirements of the PhD in Counselor Education. This document will explain the purpose of this research project and will go over all of the commitments, the procedures used in the study, and the risks and benefits of participating in the research project. Please read this consent form carefully and completely and please ask questions if you need more clarification.

What are we trying to find out in this study?
This research project will study the small daily indignities or slights that LGBT counselor trainees experience in their programs. The research will also look at how trainees think their other identities like their racial identity, disability, or gender, affect those experiences.

Who can participate in this study?
In order to participate, you must identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT), and you must either be a current student in a counselor education program, or have been enrolled as a student in a counselor education program within the last two years. You may not participate if you identify as heterosexual, or if you have not been enrolled in a counselor education program within the last two years.

Where will this study take place?
If you are within driving distance of Western Michigan University, your interview will take place on campus in the Center for Counseling and Psychological Services, located on the third floor of Sangren Hall (Room 3341). If you do not live within driving distance of Western Michigan University, your interview will take place via Skype. To protect your privacy, you will be asked to Skype from a location of your choosing that is quiet and private, where you will not be overheard.

What is the time commitment for participating in this study?
If you consent to participate in the study, you may or may not be asked to complete one 2-hour interview, depending on our need for further participants. If you are asked to complete the interview, we will transcribe the interview and send it to you via e-mail no more than 3 months after you complete it. We will then ask you to read the transcript, add any additional thoughts you had about the interview, and send it back to us via e-mail. Reading and commenting on your transcript should take 1 to 2 hours. After we receive the transcript back from you, your participation in the study will be ended.

What will you be asked to do if you choose to participate in this study?
During the interview, you will be asked to share your experiences as an LGBT student in a counselor education program.

**What information is being measured during the study?**
Our questions will focus specifically on microaggressions, the small daily insults or indignities that you may experience because you are LGBT. We will also ask how your race, ability, and gender influence those experiences.

**What are the risks of participating in this study and how will these risks be minimized?**
If you participate in the study, there is a risk that you may experience strong emotions like anger or sadness when you recall negative experiences. If you start to feel distressed, please let the interviewer know, and she will give you a chance to talk about your feelings. You may choose to discontinue the interview at any time if talking about these experiences becomes too difficult. If you need to speak with someone about these feelings after the interview we will assist you with finding an LGBT-affirming counselor in your area. You may also contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255 if you are in need of crisis assistance.

You will be asked to send this consent form and the demographic form electronically to the student investigator via a secure e-mail account (sarah.e.coulter@wmich.edu). There is a risk that information transmitted via e-mail might be accessed by a third party; the confidentiality of e-mail communications cannot be guaranteed.

**What are the benefits of participating in this study?**
You may find it helpful to talk about your experiences. The interview process may give you the opportunity to process painful experiences. It may also give you the chance to influence how counselor education programs treat other LGBT students.

**Are there any costs associated with participating in this study?**
There are no costs to participating in this study. You will need to pay for your own transportation to and from the interview.

**Is there any compensation for participating in this study?**
There is no compensation for participating in this study.

**Who will have access to the information collected during this study?**
We will record your interview using a digital recorder. After the interview, we will transfer the audio file and your informed consent document to a password-protected, encrypted file on an exterior hard drive, which will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the student investigator’s home. Only Dr. Mary L. Anderson (the dissertation advisor) and Sarah Bryan will have access to these files. We will use the audio file to transcribe your interview verbatim, but we will remove any details from the transcript that might identify you like your name, where you live, and what program you attend.

**What if you want to stop participating in this study?**
You may stop participating in this study at any time for any reason, even after your interview is complete. There will be NO consequences to you either academically or personally if you choose
to withdraw from the study. The principal investigator can also decide to end your participation in the study without your consent.

If you have any questions prior to or during the study, you can contact the primary investigator, Dr. Mary L. Anderson at 269-387-5110 or mary.l.anderson@wmich.edu. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the Vice President for Research at 269-387-8298 if questions or problems arise during the course of the study.

This study was approved by the Western Michigan University Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) on March 4, 2016. Please do not participate in this study March 3, 2017.

Proceeding with the interview indicates your consent for use of the answers you supply.
Appendix C

Demographic Form
Demographic Form

What type of program are/were you enrolled in?

___Addiction Counseling
___Career Counseling
___Clinical Mental Health Counseling
___Clinical Rehabilitation Counseling
___College Counseling and Student Affairs
___Marriage, Couple, and Family Therapy
___School Counseling
___Counselor Education and Supervision
___Other (please indicate your program title)_________________________________________

What educational level is your program?

___Master’s
___Doctoral

What is your status in your program?

___Currently enrolled (Year in the program)______________
___Graduated the program
___ Left the program

Are you a person with a disability?

___Yes
___No

What is your sexual orientation?

___Gay
___Lesbian
___Bisexual

How would you describe your ethnic background?

___African American
___Asian American
___European American
___Latina/o American
___Native American
___Multiracial
___Other (please specify)

How would you describe your gender?

___Male
___Female
___Transgender
Appendix D

Field Test Interview Questions
Field Test Interview Questions
(Adapted from Nadal, Wong, Issa, Meterko, Leon, & Wideman, 2011)

Questions for all participants:

Describe your overall experience in your program. As you think about your experiences in your program so far, do any situations come to mind where you felt some level of discrimination related to any aspect of your identity?

Think about situations in your program where you may have been subtly discriminated against because of you are lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender.

Describe one of these situations. (Follow up questions: How did you react in this situation? What do you perceive was the message that was being conveyed to you? How did you feel after the event?)

Can you describe another situation where you experienced subtle discrimination in your program because you are lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender? (Repeat until participant can recall no further incidents)

How might other things like race or gender or disability affect the subtle forms of discrimination you experience in your program as a ________________ (lesbian, gay man, bisexual person, transgender person)?

Think of a time in your program where you may have experienced subtle discrimination as a (name the person’s race, sexual orientation, gender identity, and ability status).

Describe one of those situations. (Follow up questions: How did you react in this situation? What do you perceive was the message that was being conveyed to you? How did you feel after the event?)

Can you describe another situation in which you experienced subtle discrimination as a (name the person’s race, sexual orientation, gender identity, and ability status)? (Repeat until no further incidents are recalled)

How do you make sense of your experiences of subtle discrimination?

How do you cope with experiencing subtle forms of discrimination?
Appendix E

Final Interview Questions
Final Interview Questions

- How do you describe your sexual identity/gender identity? What does it mean to you to say that you’re ____ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, etc.)? How did you come to describe yourself in that way?

- What was your path to this program?

- As you prepared for this experience, how did you imagine it?

- How would you describe your experience now?

- How do you experience your program as a person with all of your identities (race, gender, ability/disability, etc.)?

- As you think about your experiences in your program so far, do any situations come to mind where you felt some level of discrimination related to any aspect of your identity?
  
  o Potential follow-up questions:
    ▪ What was it like for you in the moment?
    ▪ What did you find yourself thinking/feeling?
    ▪ As this was happening, what were you doing? Describe yourself.
    ▪ How did you find yourself responding afterward?
    ▪ How did you make sense of this experience?

- Think about situations in your program where you may have been subtly discriminated against because of you are lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender. Describe one of these situations (repeat until no further situations are recalled).
  
  o Potential follow-up questions:
    ▪ What was it like for you in the moment?
    ▪ What did you find yourself thinking/feeling?
    ▪ As this was happening, what were you doing? Describe yourself.
    ▪ How did you find yourself responding afterward?
    ▪ How did you make sense of this experience?

- As you think about your experiences of subtle discrimination now, how do you make sense of those experiences?
Appendix F

Member-Checking Instructions
Member-Checking Instructions

Have participants journal about their transcript after reading it over, what it means to them. Instructions: Thank you for participating in this study titled “LGBT Microaggressions in Counselor Education Programs.” This is the transcript of your interview. Please read through your interview, and type any additional thoughts you have about our discussion into the transcript in italics. At the end of the transcript you will be asked to journal about the meaning of the interview.

(At the end of the transcript this additional prompt will appear): After reading everything you shared in the interview, journal about what it means to you.
Appendix G

Field Test Results
Field Test Results

Study Design

Participants

Participants for the study were 5 LGBT-identified counselor trainees who were all currently enrolled in a counselor education program. To recruit a sample that was diverse in terms of race, gender identity, and ability, I indicated in the initial recruitment e-mail that I was interested in examining a broad range of experiences. Initial response to this recruitment e-mail was quite low; only 2 people responded. After consulting with my research advisor and reviewing the text of the recruitment script, I decided to remove this phrase for subsequent recruitment e-mails; after removal of this phrase I received more responses (7 potential participants).

Table 1 identifies participant demographics. Three participants identified as men, one identified as a woman, and one identified as transmasculine (non-binary). Two identified as gay, one as bisexual, one as lesbian, and one as androsexual (attracted to masculine features). Four participants were currently enrolled in doctoral programs, while one was enrolled in a master’s program.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through professional e-mail listservs. Specifically, recruitment e-mails (Appendix A) were sent through the CESNET listserv (a listserv for counselor educators and trainees) and the AGLBTIC listserv (the listserv for the Association of Gay Lesbian Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling, a division of the American Counseling Association which is open to both professional counselors and counseling students. The invitation to participate was therefore extended to approximately 4100 individuals. The recruitment e-mail invited potential
participants to contact me via e-mail or phone to hear more about the study. I then contacted potential participants to schedule a time to go over the informed consent document (Appendix B) and (if the potential participant chose) to complete an interview. As described above, the recruitment e-mails were sent twice to each listserv. After the first e-mail was sent, two potential participants contacted me to express interest in the study. After the e-mail had been modified, seven additional potential participants contacted me. I invited the first 5 potential participants to meet with me via Skype to review the informed consent document. Initially, participants were asked to print the document, sign it, and send a scanned copy back to me via e-mail. This proved difficult for potential participants, so after consulting with HSIRB, I modified the informed consent process so that the informed consent document was sent via the Skype comments section, reviewed verbally, and potential participants were informed that proceeding with the interview implied their consent.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Participant 1</th>
<th>Participant 2</th>
<th>Participant 3</th>
<th>Participant 4</th>
<th>Participant 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>Transmasculine</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Man</td>
</tr>
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<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Doctoral</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection**

After consent was obtained, participants were asked to complete a demographic form which they returned via e-mail, and then the interview was conducted using a semi-structured interview format (Appendix D). I began each interview by asking participants to describe their overall experience in their program, to provide context for their microaggression experiences.
Next, I asked participants to explore their microaggression experiences in detail. For this portion of the interview I used questions adapted from Nadal et al. (2011), asking participants to describe specific instances in which they experienced subtle discrimination. These questions provided a basic framework for exploring participants’ microaggression experiences as they were lived in the moment. Follow-up questions and prompts were used to elicit in-depth descriptions and attempt to get as near as possible to what experiences were like from the participants’ perspectives. Follow-up questions also explored how participants made sense of their experiences of microaggressions. Additional areas of interest that arose during the course of the interviews were also pursued. Since this field test was exploratory, designed to test my research design, I did not conduct member-checking.

Consent documents, audio files, and interview transcripts for this field test were stored in a password protected, encrypted file on an external hard drive, which was placed in a locked file cabinet in my home. Audio recordings of individual interviews were made using an electronic recording device. MP3 files from the interviews were immediately transferred to an encrypted, password-protected external hard drive after completion of the interview, and erased from the recording device SD card.

**Data Analysis**

All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Data analysis of transcripts followed the steps outlined by Smith et al. (2009) for IPA research. I began my analysis with a detailed analysis of one case, first immersing myself in the case by reading the transcript from that participant several times. I then made extensive notes of my initial impressions on the transcript, recording descriptive comments about the content of the transcript, linguistic perceptions (i.e. my perception of how the participant used language), and conceptual comments (potential
interpretations of the participant’s experience). After these steps were completed, I developed a first set of emergent themes, comparing them to the transcript to determine if they accurately reflected the participant’s experience. I then looked for connections among themes, and attempted to graphically depict the relationships among themes. I repeated this process for each interview, attempting to bracket perceptions and ideas formed in analyzing the other cases. I then compared the lists of themes developed from each transcript, and looked for patterns among the cases. Throughout the process, as suggested by Smith et al. (2009) I interpreted the data, looking carefully at the meanings of the text and how they might be explained conceptually, and checking my interpretation against the data. I kept a detailed log-trail of the data collection and data analysis process, and preserved all stages of the evolution of the process. The stages of code-book development were preserved.

**Tentative Findings**

Participants reported several thematic types of microaggressions. While the focus of this field test is not on the content of microaggressions per se, several microaggressions recurred repeatedly across interviews. Thematic microaggressions are summarized in Table 2.
In reviewing participants’ experiences across cases, several tentative themes emerged. Table 3 summarizes the themes that emerged across interviews. Participants reported similar reactions to microaggressions, and seemed to make meaning of their experiences in similar ways.

Table 3
Field Test Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Microaggressions cause participants to question themselves</td>
<td>Microaggressions cause participants to question perceptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Microaggressions cause participants to question reactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning and impact of microaggressions depend on the context</td>
<td>Meaning and impact depend on relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Meaning and impact depend on intent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microaggressions lead to a sense of vulnerability</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microaggressions create disillusionment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants desire to be seen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Microaggressions Cause Participants to Question Themselves

Participants frequently reported experiencing self-doubt, and actively questioning their own perceptions and reactions. Some participants had difficulty in determining whether a microaggression had in fact occurred, and described a lengthy process of analyzing others’ intent, seeking alternative explanations for the event, and seeking validation from others to test their perceptions. For example, participant 3 shared an event in which a fellow heterosexual male student referred to another heterosexual male student as “the only other man in the room.” The participant recalled this event from a distance of several months, but even during the interview continued to question the meaning of the event:

I mean he basically, I mean, and the stage was really set for us to probably not get along from the get-go regardless of my sexual orientation. You know, he’s, the way he goes about theory, or therapy, he’s very cognitive, very intellectualized, I go more the feeling route, so whenever we kind of critique each other it’s almost like, awkward because it’s just, it’s a totally different style. And here I am finding reasons as to, Oh, no, it’s ok, this is why. And it’s not. I’m thinking as I’m talking and I’m just kind of like, it’s reaffirming that what it was was a microaggression.

Even when participants felt confident that a microaggression had occurred, some questioned their own reactions, wondering if they were “too sensitive,” or too upset. For example, participant 2 shared that a professor repeatedly misgendered both them and a transgender client that they were seeing in a practicum setting; they reported indirectly confronting the professor by saying they “hate when people misgender me.” After the fact, however, they wondered whether this response had been too “harsh.”
I just couldn’t take it anymore, so I just passive-aggressively said “I hate,” like I compared us, like my client and myself just to get a point across, and my friend, um, [laughed] at the end of class she’s like “I like that snap-back!” And I was like, “I didn’t even realize it was supposed to be that harsh,” like I didn’t mean, I wouldn’t even stand up for myself, ever, but it was just time, I guess, and I wouldn’t usually be that rude to a professor and all, and I don’t think it was rude, I don’t know. I don’t know, now that I’m thinking about it.

**Meaning and Impact of Microaggressions Depend on the Context**

Participants’ experiences seemed to arise out of the whole context of their relationships with others. When microaggressions occurred, their relationship with the other person, the other person’s identity, and the other person’s perceived intent seemed to influence their meaning-making process. Where participants had trusting relationships with others, participants seemed to consider those relationships as they made sense of the experience. Participant 2 shared that they were often misgendered by faculty; “Yeah. I hate it when it’s actually professors. Um, not my researcher advisor or anybody like that that I was telling you about, that’s different. Those are accidents.” In some cases, what was perceived as a microaggression in one instance did not seem to be identified as a microaggression in others. Participant 2, for example, stated that they did not think it was microaggressive for other non-binary transgender people to assume they were interested in women, but when a cisgender heterosexual woman assumed they were interested in women, they experienced it differently.

But yeah, people typically think that I like the feminine, cis female things. And they’re very surprised to find that I don’t. But I don’t think that is microaggression. I mean, actually, one time I did because it was from a cis female… So yeah, when it’s from cis
females that are heterosexual and just saying it, it feels more jabby, like they’re just saying it because…that feels like a microaggression, but when it’s part of my community, like my nonbinary community, I don’t know, I’m almost scared to tell them that, yeah, that I, if I was cis female I would technically be heterosexual. At the same time, microaggressions from trusted others could be experienced as particularly painful:

I think it was much more painful that it came from, came from a doctoral student, a doctoral student in counseling, and I think that that was even more painful, because I was like, ok, I could understand if it was somebody who was maybe a little bit more conservative, and, um, less culturally sensitive, and not in a, in a place to have more of that training and understanding, but I, you know, I felt like this was somebody that I could trust.

Microaggressions Lead to a Sense of Vulnerability

When describing their microaggression experiences, participants often described feeling vulnerable or isolated. Participant 1 shared that in her first year in her program, she learned to cry over an open toilet so that no-one could tell she had been crying. Participant 4 reported that faculty members made explicit remarks about sexual roles and behaviors toward him, and reported that he and his boyfriend discussed the need for him to be careful around faculty to avoid any situation where he might have to report the faculty member or take legal action. Most participants reported avoiding interaction with specific faculty members or students.

Microaggressions Create Disillusionment

Most participants also expressed a sense of disappointment and disillusionment when experiencing microaggressions from counseling professionals. They believed that counselors
should be more accepting of others than the average person. When this expectation was not fulfilled, they expressed sadness, anger, and a sense of loss.

There’s, it’s like this balloon. You know, balloons are all happy, nice things, um, like, kids marvel at them and you know, even adults get caught marveling at them and pretend like it’s that cool when they’re full of helium, whatever. But it’s like this balloon that I had and that I loved, and then it got popped, because I trusted people in my program to not microaggress and for it to be a safe place to express myself and things like that, and it got popped, and I’m not gonna refill it until I know I’m completely safe.

**Participants Desire to be Seen**

Participants expressed a deep desire to be seen and known. Participants wanted to be able to share about their sexuality or gender identity with others:

I’m sharing a really huge piece of me, and I felt like that was part of the invalidation that I felt, that I felt, um, you, this has become your agenda now, and this has not been a safe place, a safe place for me to share this and to be able to talk about my experiences with you and to, with somebody that I felt like I could trust, and I felt like I didn’t have that in that moment.

At the same time, participants talked about wanting to be seen as fully human, as multidimensional people. After correcting a professor who misgendered them, Participant 2 reported that the professor rarely addressed them in class because she did not want to use gender-neutral pronouns to refer to them, and expressed frustration that they were singled out for this one identity: “Yep, [the professor] doesn’t refer to me at all. And if she does its first name only, and that’s totally fine. But I was like, ‘But I also prefer human! Or person! You can say any of
these about me!’ Participant 5 discussed the fact that he wanted to be able to share all his identities, not just his racial identity.

I mean, and it’s really interesting because really what I think about all the different types of intersections that I have, and what people normally see is, that’s what they will see first, is Asian American. Asian American and presents himself as a male. And so that is what they will see. Um, and I think that that’s basically how limited our conversations have become, because that’s what they will see in me, and I think in other ways we don’t talk about the other identities that I carry.

Limitations

Because this study was conducted as a field test, member-checking was not done, which meant that participants did not have a chance to correct any misinformation in the transcripts, or to elaborate on ideas. Another limitation was that one interview was not transcribed, as the audio device used for recording was not turned on during one interview; the researcher made extensive notes about what was shared immediately after the interview to ensure that data was freshly recalled. However, the need to use notes rather than the transcript introduced a greater possibility of researcher bias, and meant that some nuance from the interview was lost. In addition, as described in the full study, due to the researcher’s personal experience with the topic, there was potential that this could bias the results. Bracketing was used to limit the influence of bias on the results. Since participants were aware that results would be disseminated to the counseling profession, they may have been reluctant to share openly for fear of being identified. This threat was addressed by building rapport with participants, and carefully describing confidentiality procedures to assure participants that their identities would be protected.
Appendix H

Prevalence of Themes Table
**Prevalence of Theme 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>There are multiple microaggression experiences</th>
<th>1</th>
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<th>10</th>
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<th>12</th>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Expectations shape experience</td>
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<td>Violation of hopes and values brings surprise, disappointment, outrage, sadness</td>
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<td>Counselors are expected to affirm and know about diverse groups</td>
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<td>Faculty are expected to be knowledgeable, teach, and protect</td>
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<td>Educated people are expected to be knowledgeable</td>
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<td>Perpetrators who have been confronted are expected to learn</td>
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<td>Some expected microaggressions are easily brushed away</td>
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<td>Stressors affect well-being and microaggression experiences</td>
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<td>Pre-existing health issues influence experience</td>
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<td>Microaggressions trigger painful memories</td>
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<td>Multiple oppression intensify experience</td>
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<td>Being unheard is painful</td>
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<td>Presence or absence of support changes the experience</td>
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### Prevalence of Themes 2 and 3

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<th>• Presence of microaggressions reflect on the entire program and profession</th>
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<th>• Relative absence of microaggressions makes experience more positive</th>
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<tr>
<th>• Openness to confrontation makes overall experience more positive</th>
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<th>Faculty actions are especially significant</th>
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<th>Other factors are considered alongside microaggressions</th>
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<td>• Program diversity is important</td>
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<th>• Relationships with faculty are important</th>
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<th>• Relationships with peers are important</th>
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<th>• Opportunities for learning and growth are important</th>
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## Prevalence of Theme 4

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<th>Costs and benefits are weighed in determining choice of behavioral response</th>
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<td>Likelihood of negative response from others discourages confrontation</td>
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<td>• Participants fear being perceived negatively</td>
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<td>• Participants fear discrimination or further microaggressions</td>
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<td>• Participants anticipate negative changes to relationships</td>
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<td>• Participants anticipate that positive change will not occur</td>
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<td>• Desire to protect others’ feelings discourages confrontation</td>
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**Prevalence of Theme 5**

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<th>Participants develop coping strategies to minimize impact</th>
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<th>• Personal healing and self-affirmation desensitize microaggressions</th>
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<th>• Hope for change is affirmed</th>
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| • Coping “shortcuts” developed for typical microaggressions | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x  | x  |
|------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|
|                                                             |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |    |

| Microaggressions prompt creation of alternative support networks | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x  | x  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|
|                                                                  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |    |

| • Others provide validation                                   | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x  | x  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|
|                                                                  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |    |

| • Others provide emotional support                            | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x  | x  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|
|                                                                  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |    |

| • Faculty provide protection and advocacy                      | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x | x  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|
|                                                                  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |    |    |
Appendix I

HSIRB Approval Letter
Date: February 22, 2016

To: Patricia Reeves, Principal Investigator  
Sarah Coulter, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number 16-02-04

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project titled “LGBT Microaggression in Counselor Education” has been **approved** under the **expedited** category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note: This research may **only** be conducted exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. **You must request a post approval change to enroll subjects beyond the number stated in your application under “Number of subjects you want to complete the study.”** Failure to obtain approval for changes will result in a protocol deviation. In addition, if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

**Reapproval of the project is required if it extends beyond the termination date stated below.**

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: February 21, 2017