LGB MICROAGGRESSIONS AND OVERALL COMFORT WITH UNIVERSITY CLIMATE: PRELIMINARY DATA FROM AN ITALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

Amodeo A.L., Esposito C., Bacchini D.

Department of Humanistic Studies, University of Naples “Federico II”, Naples, Italy

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Background and aims. Higher education contexts (HEIs) are generally hostile environments for homosexual students due to homophobia and heterosexism. Discriminations against lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people within US universities have received considerable attention in the literature of the last two decades (Rankin, 2010). Still scarce is research at European level. The aim of this study was to investigate the association between environmental microaggressions (i.e., subtle forms of discriminations) targeting LGB students and the overall perception of comfort with university climate in a sample of Italian heterosexual and homosexual students.

Methods. Participants were 471 students from a large university of Southern Italy (65% Females, Mage = 22.95, SD = 4.57), enrolled at both humanistic (56%) and scientific (44%) academic programs. Students completed a web-based survey in 2018. Students who identified as LGB were 42 (9%). The frequency of homonegative microaggressions within the university was collected through the LGB Environmental Microaggression Scale (Woodford et al., 2015). Also, participants were asked to indicate their overall comfort with university climate on a scale ranging from 1 to 5, with higher values indicating high comfort.

Results. T-test for independent samples revealed no significant differences between heterosexual and LGB students in levels of comfort with campus climate and reports of homonegative microaggression in the university context (ps > .001). The regression analysis showed that microaggressions negatively predicted students’ perceptions of comfort in both samples, with a stronger impact in LGB students (unstandardized interaction coefficient = -.39, p < .05; simple slope analysis: bs = -.53 and -.14, p < .05 for LGB and heterosexual group, respectively).

Conclusions. Students’ perceptions of comfort within the university are all impacted by a climate of homonegativity. HEIs should prioritise inclusive policies and practices, based on respect and valorisation of differences and promoting social cohesion, educational inclusion and active citizenship.