

**Addressing Microaggressions: A Proposed Conceptual Model for Integrating Narrative
Therapy with Corporate Well-Being Programs**

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Abstract

This work introduces a forward-thinking conceptual model utilizing narrative therapy principles with corporate well-being programs to disarm workplace microaggressions and protect employees' mental well-being. The literature review section delves into the prevalence of microaggressions in corporate office culture, specifically racial, gender, heterosexist, and ability-related microaggressions, highlighting the interconnectedness of psychological and social factors that contribute to the presence of microaggression in the workplace. This paper then explains how the conceptual model can be applied to address the identified gap between the level of psychological safety in the workplace and proactive steps to safeguard employees' mental health. Furthermore, the paper outlines the therapist's role in collaborating with corporations to implement this model and outlines the implications for counselling theory, practice, and research. Limitations of this work are discussed, and proposed next steps for further research are explored.

Key words: microaggressions, psychological safety, narrative therapy, corporate well-being

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Humans spend a significant amount of their lives at work. In Canada, the average person between the ages of 15 and 64 spends 269 minutes a day, 5 days a week at work, for an average of 40 years in their lifetime (Ortiz-Ospina et al., 2020; Statistics Canada, 2023a). The workplace is a microcosm of society, where adults spend most of their waking hours; it should be a psychologically safe environment where employees feel comfortable sharing themselves (Brown & Leigh, 1996; Fattoracci & King, 2023).

Statistics Canada (2023c) indicated that there are 655,000 individuals between the ages of 25 and 64 who are employed while living with a disability related to mental illness. This figure may encompass individuals with pre-existing mental illnesses and those who have developed a mental illness due to suboptimal workplace conditions (Statistics Canada, 2023c). These statistics suggest that enhancing psychological safety in the workplace could provide significant value in safeguarding the mental well-being of employees (Soomro et al., 2022; Statistics Canada, 2023c). In corporate office culture, poor psychological safety may be linked to unfair treatment of employees, resulting in poor employee performance (Baer & Frese, 2003; Sloan, 2012). Although mistreatment manifests in different levels of severity and frequency in the workplace, this research will explore how microaggressions, subtle, direct, or indirect insults that can be verbal, behavioural or environmental, contribute to poor psychological safety in workplace environments. A fuller description of microaggressions will be provided in the terminology section.

This literature review explores how microaggressions may contribute to psychologically damaging environments, which may have the potential to increase the frequency of mental health

problems in the workplace. Considering the increased occurrence of Canadians living with mental disorders, projected to cost the Canadian economy over 2.5 trillion dollars in the next 20 years, it may be advantageous for corporations to consider making a proactive effort to disarm microaggressions while prioritizing employees' mental well-being (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2013).

The presented model aims to address mental health concerns caused by the presence of microaggressions in the workplace, explicitly exploring racial microaggressions, gender microaggressions, microaggressions of a heterosexist nature directed toward the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, two-spirited, plus (LGBTQ2+) community, and microaggressions in relation to ability. Additionally, this research seeks to uncover narrative therapy (NT) strategies that workplaces can employ to reduce the occurrence of microaggressions, enhance psychological safety and well-being, and foster more significant equity and inclusivity in workplace environments.

Self-Positioning Statement

I am interested in investigating how microaggressions in corporate workspaces impact employee's mental well-being. My focus is on understanding employees' encounters with various microaggressions, including those related to race, sex, sexual and gender identities, and ability. As I seek to comprehend the implications of microaggressions, I acknowledge my responsibility as an individual with a certain level of privilege, so I can actively work toward preventing the common occurrence of microaggressions in the workplace. This involves disarming microaggressions and taking a stance using microinterventions, a term defined later in this paper.

I wrote this paper from a place of an aspiring psychologist, hoping to find ways to remove the stigma surrounding employee mental health. The focus of this paper stems from

observing psychologically unsafe environments throughout my career and seeing how psychologically unsafe corporate environments contribute poorly to employee's mental well-being.

In past experiences, when working in a corporate office setting, where psychological safety was not prioritized, frequent occurrences of microaggressions were normal. I observed this situation negatively impacting myself at work, an impact that poured over into my personal life. As a result of working in an environment that I deemed low in psychological safety and high in the presence of gender microaggressions, I experienced adverse effects, including burnout. Experiencing burnout negatively affected my mental health and led to time off work. During this time, I attended counselling through an employee assistance program (EAP) as part of my burnout recovery and return-to-work plan. My experience was positive, and I saw the benefits of therapy to manage daily stressors associated with work. I am proud to state that counselling was a significant part of my burnout recovery.

My experience with burnout inspired me to learn more about it; therefore, I researched the topic thoroughly. My research included discovering why some workplace cultures had higher levels of employee well-being than others. I value creativity, teamwork, and high workplace performance; therefore, I became inquisitive about what contributing factors led to higher levels of employee wellness. My curiosity about contributing factors became the catalyst for writing about this subject. I intended to challenge myself to create a framework that could be implemented in workplaces to bolster psychological safety.

Given that Canadians spend a significant amount of their lives at work, improvements in employees' mental well-being at work may positively impact their personal lives. I am interested in using evidence-based counselling practices to find ways to enhance mental well-being at

work. Further, it is essential to recognize that all aspects of an individual's life, including their professional lives, contribute to overall well-being.

I believe people are a corporation's most valuable assets, so addressing this topic is necessary. From a humanistic perspective, I find it crucial to highlight that fostering psychological safety is the primary concern in protecting people's mental well-being, which gives a compelling reason for corporations to prioritize this task. While the organizational benefits, such as the bottom line, are undeniably significant, they should be seen as a complementary means of encouraging corporations to embrace psychological safety in the workplace.

Ethical Considerations

I have identified three personal biases in relation to this paper. Subsequently, in this literature review, I will explain how I mitigated them. Firstly, I acknowledge my identity as a White, cis-gender, heterosexual student. It is important to note that I come from a privileged background as a White woman born and raised in Canada, and, therefore, I hold a certain degree of power. I recognize that I have not personally experienced the same forms of oppression or marginalization that individuals from ethnic or sexual minority backgrounds may encounter daily. My privilege is something I need to acknowledge, especially in the field of counselling, working with individuals and families from diverse backgrounds. To address my privilege, I intentionally enhance my understanding of cultural considerations when working with others and actively increase my self-awareness of my privilege on a continual basis.

Secondly, I have a personal bias regarding my upbringing and family. My biases surrounding equity, diversity, and inclusion are likely elevated because I was raised by my mother, who has a limb difference. Growing up, I witnessed my mother's limb difference being

the cause of unjust treatment at her place of work. Witnessing my mother's unfair treatment is a bias and a reason why my worldview aligns with the principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion frameworks.

Furthermore, I have witnessed the mistreatment of Indigenous people, as my sister-in-law is an Indigenous woman living in Canada. I have seen her being mistreated based on her race. Her daughter, my niece, is a biracial individual. Through experiences with my family, I feel empathy for how microaggressions may impact the lives of many individuals.

Thirdly, my firsthand experience with burnout is a source of bias. My strong belief in the advantages of psychological safety, stemming from my corporate office experience, introduces another layer of bias. I used two strategies to mitigate my ethical biases. First, I used a field journal to note when my bias arose while writing this paper. While journaling, I took part in self-reflection. Self-reflection allowed me to write about how my bias impacts me and how I reveal myself as an individual and as a professional in the field of counselling. Secondly, I employed a self-assessment questionnaire to gauge my daily stress levels and compared them with a daily self-care inventory. Reviewing them weekly, I identified any connections between the two and took proactive steps to modify my self-care routines and mindfulness techniques to maintain lower stress levels. Furthermore, I recognize that I can actively initiate open discussions to address and reduce microaggressions in the workplace as a way of addressing my biases. As I pursue a career as a therapist, I hope to continue to work my work of destigmatizing the impact of microaggressions on employee mental health.

Causes of Poor Psychological Safety in the Workplace

There are many factors that lead to poor psychological safety in the workplace. However, in this literature review, macroaggressions and four types of microaggressions that may lead to

poor psychological safety will be addressed. *Psychological safety* is an employee's sense of being able to share oneself without fear of negative consequences to their career (Brown & Leigh, 1996). A lack of psychological safety may cause harm to employees' mental well-being in corporate office culture (Baer & Frese, 2003). Many factors lead to a lack of psychological safety in work environments; however, this research will explore how microaggressions contribute to poor psychological safety.

Before defining the four forms of microaggressions that will be explored in this literature review, it is important to recognize the complexity of people's identities. Individuals can be targets of more than one form of microaggressions and can experience multiple forms of oppression simultaneously. Take, for instance, a two-spirited person of colour with a limb difference may be victim to multiple forms of microaggressions directed at their sexual identity, race and ability. When someone faces multiple microaggressions, it may intensify the harm they experience (Sue et al., 2019).

Macroaggressions and Microaggressions

Foucault's seminal works (1972, 1975) highlighted the organizational structures of institutions and their dehumanizing elements. His work explains the profound impact of our language use and how this contributes to oppression. Foucault's influence on the topic of micro and macroaggressions will be discussed further in future sections.

Oppressive language has strongly influenced the development of micro and macroaggressions in the workplace today. Both micro and macroaggressions are powerful forms of verbal and nonverbal language that stem from historical oppression (Sue, 2020). They communicate racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism. Macroaggressions actively manifest systemic or institutional biases deeply ingrained in the philosophies, policies, programs,

practices, and structures of institutions and communities such as workplaces (Sue et al., 2019; Perez Huber & Solorzano, 2015). They are responsible for creating disparities in employment, leading to harmful consequences that affect the lives of those belonging to oppressed groups (Sue et al., 2019). *Macroaggressions* are group-focused and have a broad impact on an entire socially marginalized class of people. An example of macroaggressions in the workplace are biases in standard hiring procedures, used to recruit, retain, promote, and fire employees (King et al., 2023). Effectively combatting macroaggressions requires a fundamental shift in institutional policies and practices aimed at dismantling oppressive systems and ensuring equal access and opportunities for marginalized groups.

In contrast, *microaggressions* are defined as brief, indirect, subtle indignities that happen daily in corporate office culture and can be intentional or unintentional (Sue et al., 2007). Although often subtle, microaggressions often communicate hostile and derogatory insults (Sue et al., 2007). They are the everyday putdowns that members of oppressed, systematically disadvantaged, or marginalized groups experience, consciously, or unconsciously (Sue et al., 2019). These indignities happen daily in corporate office culture and can create hostile and invalidating workplace climates (Sue et al., 2019). Microaggression may be verbal, behavioural, or environmental.

An example of a *verbal microaggression* is a man interrupting and talking over a woman coworker during a meeting. Continually being interrupted makes it challenging for the colleague to express their ideas or opinions fully and suggests a lack of respect for their contributions (Sue et al., 2021). In addition to interrupting and talking over a coworker, mispronouncing an Asian coworker's name, despite being gently corrected numerous times, is another example of a verbal microaggression. Even after an employee is informed of the correct pronunciation, the persistent

mispronunciation sends a subtle message that they do not consider the employee's name important enough to get right. Mispronouncing a coworker's name may make the employee feel undervalued and unimportant (Sue, 2015)

An example of a *behavioural microaggression* is choosing not to share an elevator with Black individuals due to the racist belief that they are dangerous. This discriminatory action singles out an individual based on their racial background, conveying racism, and contributing to feelings of exclusion, discomfort, and discrimination. Such behaviours impact the individual directly and contribute to a less inclusive and more psychologically damaging workplace environment, highlighting the importance of addressing and eliminating such biases and actions.

Environmental microaggressions, specific to the workplace, encompass actions such as male employees displaying pictures of women with minimal clothing in their offices. This example of office decor can create an uncomfortable and unwelcoming atmosphere, particularly for women colleagues or anyone who feels objectified by these images. It sends a message that the office is not a safe or inclusive space for everyone and can perpetuate harmful stereotypes related to gender and sexuality, thus contributing to an environment where individuals may feel judged, excluded, or unsafe based on their gender (Sue et al., 2021).

Everyday indignities are often unintentional; however, they affect the psychological safety of the workplace. Often, perpetrators of microaggressions are unaware that their communication is offensive; however, this does not make these microaggressions any less harmful (Sue et al., 2007). Some have suggested the downplaying of the impact is exactly what can make microaggressions even more harmful than outright racism, sexism, and other forms of systemic oppression (Sue et al., 2019). Ignorance of the perpetrator can cause the victim to doubt their experience and feelings of hurt and anger. In workplace settings, perpetrators can be fellow

employees or members of leadership (Sue et al., 2007). Many forms of microaggressions occur in the workplace; however, as mentioned previously, this paper will explore racial microaggressions, gender microaggressions, microaggressions of a heterosexist nature directed toward the LGBTQ2+ community, and microaggressions in relation to ability.

Microaggressions Based on Race

Racial microaggressions threaten the well-being of employees of marginalized groups (Cenat et al., 2023). Microaggressions against racial minorities, including Black people, Indigenous people, and people of colour, are prominent; however, due to page limitations, only microaggressions against Black people and Indigenous people will be covered in this research (Cenat et al., 2023).

Published studies have shown that racial minorities in the workplace are more prone to experiencing mistreatment based on their race when compared to the treatment of their White colleagues (McCord et al., 2018). Furthermore, individuals from marginalized racial communities, including African Americans and Latinos may face a heightened risk of developing mental disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Sibrava et al., 2019). Microaggressions against members of marginalized communities are present in various stages of employment, including recruitment, promotion, and retention of employees (King et al., 2023). For example, microaggressions targeted towards Black individuals heighten the likelihood of negative mental health consequences (King et al., 2023).

Microaggressions toward Indigenous people in the workplace are prevalent (Browne et al., 2016; Firestone et al., 2015; O'Loughlin et al., 2022), and may include but are not limited to degrading comments, threats, and intimidation, which may be intentional, or unintentional, and verbal or nonverbal (Firestone et al., 2015; Sue et al., 2019). They may also be as subtle as being

ignored, overlooked, not given service, and treated unfairly (Sue & Spanierman, 2020). An example may be people not sitting beside an Indigenous person at a workplace meeting (Sue et al., 2007). Indigenous employees are more likely to experience these behaviours than people of other ethnic backgrounds (O'Loughlin et al., 2022). It is essential to note that while racial microaggressions are a significant concern, workplace mistreatment is not limited to this aspect alone.

Microaggressions Based on Gender

Gender microaggressions represent another form of injustice that can harm employees. They are intentional or unintentional insults or invalidations based on one's gender (Gartner & Sterzing, 2016). Historically, gender microaggressions in the workplace referred to the reinforcement of men's structural power in corporate office culture (Lease et al., 2020). Derived from the concept of the umbrella term sexism, this type of microaggression is based on mistreatment according to one's sex. Sexism is defined as mistreatment based on the sex of the individual in the workplace, typically directed toward women (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2021). This type of workplace mistreatment adversely affects victims' mental well-being and functioning (Landes et al., 2023). Microaggressions directed toward women could entail the everyday sexual objectification that women experience (Sue & Spanierman, 2020). Gender microaggressions can be prejudiced comments towards women, implying mixed feelings and overall dislike. In the workplace, this appears as a power imbalance between men and women (Lease et al., 2020). Women may be portrayed as having a lower status in the workplace, thus impacting women's work performance and mental health. (Lease et al., 2020).

Microaggressions Based on Minority Gender and Sexual Identities

Another common microaggression in the workplace are those directed toward the LGBTQ2+ community (Amodeo et al., 2020). According to Amodeo et al. (2020), heterosexism is harassment specifically targeted at LGBTQ2+ individuals. Microaggressions stemming from heterosexism can manifest as everyday insults, both spoken and unspoken, and intentional or unintentional messages that are hostile and derogatory towards someone based on their sexual orientation. Members of the LGBTQ2+ community who are victims of microaggressions have reported experiencing greater internalizing issues and engaging in more risky behaviour (Suresh et al., 2023). These microaggressions against this marginalized community have been associated with decreased self-esteem, heightened stress, and increased anxiety (Seelman & Woodford, 2017; Suresh et al., 2023).

Microaggressions Based on Ability

Another form of microaggression is based on one's physical or mental abilities (Sue & Spanierman, 2020). Disability, defined by Nagi (as cited in Pope & Tarlov, 1991), is the limitation in performing various roles and tasks within a physical environment, which encompasses work, employment, and other economic activities. Additionally, it is common for unfair treatment to occur in workplaces based on psychiatric disabilities (Jette, 2006). Psychiatric disabilities, also called mental disorders, are commonly associated with significant distress or disability in social, occupational, or other vital activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). A mental disorder is a syndrome that causes clinically significant disturbances in one's cognition, emotion regulation, or behaviour and employees often get mistreated due to mental disorders (Jette, 2006).

Microaggressions related to physical and psychiatric disabilities are rooted in ableism, which is a broad term encompassing prejudiced and discriminatory actions directed at

individuals with disabilities (Kattari et al., 2018). Ableism is characterized by the promotion of a specific form of physical, mental, or emotional capability, often favouring socially constructed expectations of ability over various other forms of ability and disability (Hehir, 2002). An example of a microaggression perpetuating ableism is telling someone that they speak well for a deaf person (Kattari et al., 2018). Ableism frequently characterizes individuals with these variances as burdens, and as a result, they are often excluded. For example, asking a group of people to stand for an activity, assuming that everyone is able-bodied, would exclude someone with limited mobility, such as someone who uses a wheelchair (Kattari et al., 2018). Research has shown that encounters with ableism-centred microaggressions can have adverse impacts on employees, leading to increased somatic symptoms and heightened negative emotions (Kattari et al., 2018).

Impacts of Poor Psychological Safety in the Workplace

Whether ongoing or acute, the presence of microaggressions in the workplace usually leads to emotional upset, psychological distress, or physical deterioration, negatively impacting the lives of victims. Encountering mistreatment in the form of microaggressions can adversely influence an individual's overall quality of life, well-being, and functioning at work (Sibrava et al., 2019). Constant exposure to microaggressions hinders employees' ability to express themselves without fear of repercussions or potential retaliation (Kahn, 1990; Sue, 2019). In such environments, unfair treatment can damage workplace atmospheres (Baer, & Frese, 2003), contributing to the frequency of workplace mental health concerns (Rao & Ramesh, 2015).

Experiencing workplace mistreatment can put the victim into a state of stress (Sue & Spanierman, 2020). When a victim experiences mistreatment, their body is put into a biological state of stress, whereby the adrenal glands secrete more corticoid hormones (Sue & Spanierman,

2020). This state of stress is the body's natural response to attempt to protect itself from harm.

The body being in this state of stress may result in physical, psychological, and behavioural effects. Physical responses may be heightened blood pressure, heart rate, or changes to the immune system (Sue & Spanierman, 2020). Harmful psychological effects may manifest as anger, anxiety, or depression. These effects may impact behaviour changes in victims.

Behavioural coping strategies may appear as withdrawal. For example, when people of marginalized racial groups are victim of microaggressions they are likely to withdraw from their work, resulting in increased absenteeism or presenteeism (Fattoracci & King, 2023; Sue & Spanierman, 2020). *Presenteeism* occurs when an employee is physically at work despite poor health, resulting in decreased performance. The concept of presenteeism is associated with a variety of psychosocial outcome measures, such as poor mental health and employee well-being (Brown et al., 2011).

This section will outline the four forms of microaggressions identified in this literature review and the impact that these have on people in workplaces. First, racial microaggressions commonly remind victims of the history of racial trauma, resulting in mental stress (O'Loughlin et al., 2022; Sue; 2015). Microaggressions are linked to a wider sociopolitical context of oppression and historical trauma passed down from generation to generation. Each race-related slight, hurt, invalidation, or insult may remind people of their marginalization. For example, exposure to microaggressions may remind Indigenous people that their lands were unfairly seized from them and that they were forced onto reservations and residential schools (Sue & Spanierman, 2020).

Secondly, like racial microaggressions, gender-based microaggressions are common in the workplace (McCord et al., 2018). These microaggressions tend to be more prevalent when

aimed at females than males, often due to historical stereotypes and the societal categorization women have long contended with (McCord et al., 2018). This suggests that, within the corporate office culture, women may encounter more negative perceptions and treatment than men (McCord et al., 2018). The effects of gender-based microaggressions can result in decreased self-esteem among victims, impose limitations on career advancement, and contribute to gender inequality in the workplace (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Sue & Spanierman, 2020). Constant exposure to gender based microaggression often leads to an increase in stress levels, which may result in the onset of physiological and psychological health concerns (Marcatto et al., 2022; Sue et al., 2019). The development of a mental disorder can increase the risk of an employee needing to take an extended sick leave, which can detrimentally impact overall workplace morale (Landes et al., 2023).

Finally, throughout history, individuals within the LGBTQ2+ community have experienced unjust treatment, including employment discrimination based on their sexual identity (Casey et al., 2019). Recent published research conducted by Suresh et al. (2023) underscores the significance of implementing programs aimed at enhancing cultural competency and raising awareness about the detrimental impact of microaggressions thereby reducing harm to this marginalized community. Implementation of proactive strategies to address microaggressions against the LGBTQ2+ community have been recommended to be implemented in settings such as schools and post-secondary institutions so that young people are educated on microaggressions and how their personal bias may play into the presence of microaggressions. Efforts to educate college-age individuals about the detrimental impacts of microaggressions could reduce the occurrence of workplace microaggressions (Suresh et al., 2023). The intention

of such initiatives is to educate people about the harm associated with microaggressions before they reach the workforce (Suresh et al., 2023).

Lastly, microaggressions against individuals with physical and psychiatric disabilities often involve unintentional, discriminatory actions or comments. These microaggressions can take various forms, including pathologizing their disability, making assumptions, treating them as second-class citizens, demonstrating a lack of awareness, and practicing social distancing (Lee et al., 2019). They may manifest as ignoring or avoiding people with physical disabilities or stereotyping them based on their abilities. People with physical disabilities often experience being treated as less than others, subjected to disrespectful ableist language, and having their disability overemphasized while their other interests and strengths are overlooked (Lee et al., 2019) microaggressions have serious consequences, as they are associated with increased rates of anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and substance use (Conover & Israel, 2019).

Microaggressions directed at individuals with psychiatric disabilities often involve stigmatizing attitudes, invalidating their experiences, derogatory comments, underestimating their abilities and intelligence, and maintaining distance because of the assumption that the person is helpless or dangerous (Gonzales et al., 2015). Mental illness often carries with it a significant stigma, and microaggressions directed at individuals with psychiatric disabilities can exacerbate this issue. Such microaggressions frequently lead to the victim being treated as a second-class citizen, causing isolation, a loss of social support, and the experience of negative emotions (Gonzales et al., 2015). Often, perpetrators of these types of microaggressions are friends, family, and acquaintances of the victim. An example could be someone commenting to a person with depression that they do not seem depressed because they look cheerful or are always smiling (Gonzales et al., 2015).

Environmental Influences of Microaggressions, Including the COVID 19 Pandemic

Environmental factors may influence the prevalence of microaggressions in the workplace. For example, behavioural microaggressions are often more prevalent in virtual work environments (Lopes et al., 2023; Sue & Spanierman, 2020). The online setting can give rise to subtler forms of mistreatment due to the characteristics of digital platforms, resulting in an increased potential for gender or racial bias (Lopes et al., 2023). Behavioural microaggressions, such as the one described previously, where a man talks over a woman coworker during a meeting, are more likely to occur in virtual meeting rooms due to the ease of interruption. Additionally, in virtual meetings, there is a greater likelihood of people being misidentified regarding their sexual or gender identities, further elevating the potential for microaggressions within online work environments (Lopes et al., 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly altered many employee's work environments as virtual and hybrid workplace environments became increasingly prevalent. Virtual work environments detrimentally affected the overall well-being of employees due to the isolation associated with working remotely (Dollard & Bailey, 2021). Additionally, virtual settings caused an increase in workplace microaggressions (Lopes et al., 2023). Findings from published research showed that minority groups reported a higher frequency of adverse experiences while working on online platforms (Lopes et al., 2023). For example, women reported more microaggressions and marginalization in virtual work settings during the COVID-19 pandemic than before (Lopes et al., 2023), including silencing, ignoring, excluding, and belittling in virtual work environments. While microaggressions performed online may be less overt and more challenging to detect, they can negatively affect employees, resulting in emotional distress among employees in corporate office culture and a heightened occurrence of work-related stress,

burnout, and trauma-related symptomology (Como et al., 2021; Dollard & Bailey, 2021; Sue, 2021; Toker et al., 2015).

Work-Related Stress, Burnout, and Trauma

Work-related stress is a multifaceted issue that impacts individuals' mental and physical well-being within various corporate settings (Schonfeld & Bianchi, 2022). Close to 4.1 million people reported experiencing high levels of work-related stress, representing 21.2% of employed people (Statistics Canada, 2023b). It is described as emotional exhaustion, characterized by overwhelming feelings of fatigue, which often leads to depersonalization, where employees may become detached from their work (Marcatto et al., 2022; Schonfeld & Bianchi, 2022).

Consequently, cynicism and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment can manifest, negatively impacting job satisfaction and overall mental health. These adverse effects of work-related stress extend beyond just the emotional realm, as numerous studies have shown a strong correlation between chronic stress and an increased risk of developing physiological disorders like hypertension (Marcatto et al., 2022), in addition to psychological disorders such as burnout or trauma-related conditions (Jones et al., 2020).

Burnout is a condition that typically goes beyond the level of severity experienced in work-related stress. Burnout has been recognized in the *International Classification of Diseases, Eleventh Edition* (ICD-11; World Health Organization, 2023); however, to be explicit, it is not classified as a mental disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The *ICD-11* defined *burnout* as a syndrome that results from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterized by energy depletion, exhaustion, increased mental distance from one's job, negativism or cynicism related to one's work, and reduced professional efficacy. This

phenomenon refers to symptoms that occur from an occupational context and should not be applied to describe experiences in other areas of life (World Health Organization, 2023).

Burnout syndrome often results from prolonged exposure to stress, such as susceptibility to microaggressions contributing to autonomic arousal and emotional distress (Toker et al., 2015). There is a significant positive relationship between racial microaggressions and burnout among Black people (King et al., 2023). Encountering microaggressions can increase the vulnerability of racial minorities, making them feel threatened and more susceptible to stress, which potentially has detrimental effects on their overall health (Pieterse et al., 2023).

Trauma represents a more acute manifestation of stress, typically stemming from a specific event or a series of events that disrupt an individual's ability to manage their normal day-to-day activities (Kirkinis et al., 2021). The DSM-5 defined *trauma* as exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence, which can be experienced directly, witnessed, or learned through a family member or close friend (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Trauma involves a direct confrontation with a stressor that significantly disrupts the affected person's psychological health (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Szymanski, 2017).

Trauma manifests with symptoms that can vary in intensity, and it is essential to recognize and validate the concerns associated with all levels of symptom intensity (Koocher et al., 2013). Trauma symptoms may include unwanted images, thoughts, or dreams, avoidance behaviours, heightened arousal, disruptions in memory function, emotional processing, and regulation. Prolonged and intense psychological distress following exposure to trauma often manifests as PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Szymanski, 2017).

Exposure to microaggressions can induce feelings of threat among employees. Perceiving such threats can elevate stress levels, potentially triggering a fight or flight response (Toker et al., 2015). A fight response may manifest when an employee is a victim of microaggressions (Sue & Spanierman, 2020). Consequently, experiencing a fight response due to unjust treatment in the workplace is likely to raise the risk of burnout (Toker et al., 2015).

Protective Factors to Bolster Psychological Safety

There are various ways that protective factors can support psychological safety in the workplace to ensure that employees of marginalized groups feel safe and valued at work (Kafka, 2023). This literature review will outline three protective factors that can be implemented to bolster psychological safety and mitigate the risks of macroaggressions and microaggressions in the workplace using *macrointervention* and *microintervention* strategies. Before exploring the three protective factors, macrointervention and microintervention strategies will be defined and explained.

Macrointervention and Microintervention Strategies

The terms macrointerventions and microinterventions, as introduced by Sue (2019), are two approaches to creating psychological safety in the workplace, through addressing individual and overarching aspects related to unfair treatment towards marginalized groups.

Macrointerventions involve the substantial implementation of large-scale changes in traditions, policies, customs, or laws with the aim of transforming overarching policies and eliminating biased or unfair practices (Sue et al., 2021). Macrointerventions improve psychological well-being, while fostering a more positive workplace environment (Sue et al., 2019). They play a crucial role in shaping an inclusive societal atmosphere within organizations, reinforcing fair and respectful interactions and, as a result, enhancing psychological safety (Sue et al., 2019). An

illustrative example of a macrointervention is the implementation of policies that prevent LGBTQ2+ individuals from being terminated from their jobs due to their sexual identity (Sue et al., 2021).

Microinterventions have the power to disarm microaggressions, encompassing the daily words or actions, whether intentional or unintentional, that convey to targets of microaggressions that their worth as individuals and their racial or group identity is recognized and appreciated (Sue & Spanierman, 2020). Microinterventions affirm the lived experiences of the individuals, include support, and offer reassurance that people are not alone (Sue & Spanierman, 2020). They are interpersonal tools that counteract, change, or stop microaggressions by confronting and educating the perpetrator on an individual level (Sue et al., 2019). Microinterventions include challenging stereotypes aimed at racial, gender, and sexual identity minorities. For example, an employee might interject when a colleague is making a joke, stating that they do not want to hear the punchline of a joke as it sounds racist or sexist.

Engaging in microinterventions empowers targets, allies, and bystanders to take control and influence challenging situations (Sue & Spanierman, 2020). Another non-verbal form of a microintervention is actively participating in efforts to address workplace culture concerns, perhaps involving membership in a equity, diversity, and inclusion committee or creating networking and mentoring opportunities for underrepresented employees (Sue & Spanierman, 2020). A microintervention framework aims to make the invisible visible by first acknowledging the microaggression or bringing the microaggression to the perpetrator's awareness, stating that they have behaved or said something offensive.

Microinterventions try to stop microaggressions by communicating disagreement toward the perpetrator's actions or words. Moreover, educating the perpetrator by facilitating

conversations that explore the perpetrator's biases can help them recognize the harmful impact they have created. The aim of such interventions is to provoke behaviour change.

Given the enduring impact of generations of oppression on these institutional norms, altering the language within organizations, like workplaces, can be challenging. Therefore, microintervention strategies strive to weaken biased language by confronting stereotypes (Sue et al., 2021).

Microinterventions have been observed to facilitate a shift from disempowerment to empowerment for victims, allies, and bystanders of microaggressions, ultimately leading to a sense of liberation (Sue & Spanierman, 2020). Microinterventions seek to change the narrative of workplace culture from a culture where unfair treatment is tolerated to one where inclusivity and diversity are celebrated.

The following section will illustrate three protective factors that can be implemented to bolster psychological safety. These three factors include implementing policies and procedures, building a culture that values diversity and respect, and eliminating psychological hazards. First, an initial protective factor may involve revising unfair workplace policies and procedures (Sue et al., 2019). Upholding fair and ethical standards includes developing a clear code of ethics, ensuring all employees are aware of it, and providing necessary training (Sue et al., 2019). These actions reinforce ethical standards within the organization and are likely to mitigate the occurrence of microaggressions (Sue et al., 2019). However, it is important to recognize that simply implementing diversity management protocols is not enough. Fundamental transformation requires a comprehensive strategy that goes beyond policy implementation. (Dwivedi et al., 2023; Kafka, 2023; Parent-Lamarche & Biron, 2022;).

Secondly, corporations can build and embrace a culture that values and celebrates diversity. When an organization embraces a culture of diversity and respect, it creates an

environment where employees can freely express themselves without worrying about facing negative consequences (Parent-Lamarche & Biron, 2022). Removing this worry may lead to improved employee performance by employees in their respective roles (Dwivedi et al., 2023). A positive workplace culture, characterized by a commitment to diversity and respect, can be shaped by factors such as effective communication, strong leadership, and the presence of humility. Subsequent sections will provide detailed insights into communication, leadership, and humility.

Organizations can improve corporate culture by emphasizing internal communication strategies that welcome discussion about diversity and inclusivity and upholding ethical standards (Volevakha et al., 2021). An example of an internal communication strategy to enhance workplace culture is the promotion of transparent communication at all levels of the organization. Additionally, implementing diversity statements that communicate the organization's commitment to a culture of diversity and respect to both internal and external stakeholders (Dwivedi et al., 2023).

Leadership is another protective factor that may help foster a culture of elevated psychological safety. Leaders' demonstration of psychological safety significantly impacts how employees perceive their work environment (Loh et al., 2021). Positive psychological health of employees is closely linked to *constructive leadership* -leadership that supports overall positive well-being and lower susceptibility to burnout (Parent-Lamarche & Biron, 2022). Characteristics of constructive leadership encompass key qualities such as empathy, strong ethical standards, employee empowerment, and clear communication (Webster & Brough, 2022). Examples of constructive leadership in action involve trusting and empowering employees, demonstrating

compassion, actively listening to employee concerns, ensuring clear role definitions, and championing diversity and inclusion principles.

Conversely, poor employee well-being is associated with *destructive leadership*, characterized by leadership with low overall well-being (Parent-Lamarche & Biron, 2022). Characteristics of destructive leadership include leaders lacking empathy and ethical standards, exhibiting poor communication, avoiding accountability, and displaying favouritism (Webster & Brough, 2022). Examples of destructive leadership are manipulating or exploiting employees, creating role ambiguity among work teams, and a higher occurrence of microaggressions (Webster & Brough, 2022). High levels of employee burnout are correlated with instances of destructive leadership (Parent-Lamarche & Biron, 2022).

Another proven way employees feel safe, thus enhancing a positive workplace culture, is by experiencing humility in the workplace (Lehmann et al., 2023). *Humility* is defined as a behaviour that displays one's ability to appreciate the strengths of others, to be curious, and to show a desire to learn and to see oneself accurately (Lehmann et al., 2023). Humility is an interpersonal construct that changes based on the relational environment and how safe employees feel sharing about themselves (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). In corporate office culture, when a coworker displays a high level of humility to a coworker, the latter coworker may experience a high level of psychological safety, thus demonstrating why it is valuable for employers to promote a workplace culture where employees feel safe sharing themselves at work (Baer & Frese, 2003; Lehmann et al., 2023). Research has consistently shown that leaders who exhibit humility can enhance job engagement, job satisfaction, and overall performance (Lehmann et al., 2023). Specifically, displays of humility tailored to specific relationships, fosters psychological

safety within those relationships, which, in turn, positively correlates with improved performance (Lehmann et al., 2023).

Thirdly, eliminating psychological hazards, including microaggressions, can enhance psychological safety over time (Loh et al., 2021). Therefore, it is essential to disrupt, dismantle, and disarm microaggressions because bias and discrimination often go unchallenged (Sue et al., 2019). Remaining silent and passive in the face of microaggressions contributes to the support of the perpetrator and fosters the persistence of such behaviours (Sue et al., 2019), including the silence and passivity of workplace leaders. Whether knowingly or unknowingly, leaders may engage in microaggressions, resulting in both intentional and unintentional unfair treatment of employees. In such cases, employees may be afraid to speak up for fear of retaliation, not being considered for promotion, or fear of losing their jobs (Sue et al., 2019). Workplaces can take steps to decrease the likelihood of leaders being perpetrators by taking strategic action to dismantle microaggressions with appropriate microintervention strategies.

Building Protective Factors Through Narrative Therapy Techniques

This literature review has explored the identified gap between workplace psychological safety and strategies that can be leveraged to protect employee mental well-being. Next, this work will propose how psychotherapy may be a suitable intervention to bridge this gap, specifically using narrative therapy (NT) techniques proactively to limit microaggressions in workplace environments. Several systemic concepts employed by NT share common ground with various workplace organizational practices. As such, it could be a beneficial intervention for application in workplace settings (Barry, 1997; Freedman & Combs, 1996;).

Before delving into how NT can proactively limit microaggressions in workplace environments, I return to the work of Foucault. Foucault's philosophy highlighted the significant

impact that language has within workplace settings as mentioned earlier in this paper. His influence shed light on how language shapes power structures of institutions (Kelly, 2008).

Central to Foucault's philosophy is the role of language in communicating social norms and power dynamics (Kelly, 2008). He introduced the concept of *epistemes*, historical systems of knowledge influencing language usage (Kelly, 2008). His work investigates the organizational structures of institutions, emphasizing their dehumanizing aspects. For instance, Foucault questioned the historical treatment of individuals with mental illnesses, revealing that in the past, people who lived with mental illness were often relegated to second-class status and institutionalized. Foucault believed oppression impacted the evolution of institutions such as workplaces (Kelly, 2008; Sue & Spanierman, 2020). This is perhaps one reason why microaggressions have developed in institutions over time (Kelly, 2008; Sue, 2015).

Similarly, Sue (2015), illustrated how microaggressions are influenced by historical oppression and acknowledges that workplace microaggressions lie in the roots of deeply entwined systemic problems, such as racism, sexism, and ableism. Victims of microaggressions are essentially victims of systemic oppression, and these incidents in the workplace are one way in which individuals experience the effects of this deeply ingrained societal problem (Sue, 2015).

Historically, organizations may not have adequately addressed cultural differences in the workplace; however, the work of Foucault (1972, 1975) and Sue (2015) shows the value of recognizing differences in the workplace. Not recognizing differences may lead to the reinforcement of prejudice and discrimination rather than actively working to eliminate them (Sue, 2015). Further, neglecting to recognize cultural differences may perpetuate the dominance of the majority group and increase the marginalization of minority groups within the workplace

(Plaut et al., 2009; Sue, 2015). Failure to recognize cultural differences can be termed *colour blindness*. *Colour blindness* pertains to the notion that an individual's group affiliation or physical appearance does not impact how they are perceived or inform our decision-making and policymaking processes (Sue, 2015). Some organizations may employ colour blindness in an attempt to promote equality in the workplace; however, this perspective is highly problematic (Sue, 2015). Research findings have shown that when workplaces endorse colour blindness, employees often feel excluded and disengaged from their roles, resulting in decreased productivity. Further, colour blindness has been found to correlate with greater bias in the workplace (Sue, 2015). These incidents in the workplace are one way individuals experience the effects of this deeply ingrained societal problem (Sue, 2015). How people make meaning of these experiences is reflected in their own personal narratives (White & Epston, 1990), which is what NT is concerned with.

Rooted in social justice principles, NT is a form of therapy centred around the stories people tell about their lives and experiences. This therapeutic modality is based on the idea that people make meaning in the world through relationships shaped by cultural narratives (White & Epston, 1990). Therefore, NT may be a good therapeutic intervention to treat victims of microaggressions (Combs & Freedman, 2012).

The principles of NT suggest that the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem (White & Epston, 1990). Further, from a NT lens, it is believed that personal stories often emerge from a limited perspective, representing only a fraction of one's lived experiences (White & Epston, 1990). Moreover, these stories may be influenced by dominant groups' cultural expectations and norms (Combs & Freedman, 2012; Madigan, 2019). Unfortunately, cultural expectations are often created and maintained by the dominant groups. Therefore, cultural norms

often lack the representation of minority groups (Combs & Freedman, 2012; Madigan, 2019), impacting corporate culture as many companies and corporate workplaces lack representatives of diversity and inclusion principles (Combs & Freedman, 2012). Given the fundamentals of NT, this theory may be a helpful intervention to aid employees in understanding their personal stories and challenging problematic dominant discourses.

Narrative Therapy Techniques

This section illustrates how NT is a viable solution to help employees gain insights into how their unique differences contribute to their understanding of multiculturalism in the workplace. There are many NT techniques; due to page limitations, only two techniques will be highlighted in this paper. However, first, an overview will be provided on effectively utilizing NT as a therapeutic intervention in the workplace.

NT as a therapeutic intervention can guide employees through exercises to comprehend their intersectionalities and how their personal narratives are interconnected with their experiences in the workplace. This approach has an innovative way of honouring employees' lived experiences, while emphasizing the significance of the diverse paths that people may take in their unique stories (Madigan, 2019). Applying an NT model may be appealing because the intervention asks the employee to elaborate on a series of problematic life narratives. Using NT gives employees space to process their stories and understand that societal conditioning has influenced their narrative (Sue, 2015).

Furthermore, Sue et al. (2019) suggests that utilizing therapy is a proactive strategy to disarm microaggressions. Therapy is a way of seeking external reinforcement and support for victims and a method of maintaining psychological wellness (Sue et al., 2019), making it a valuable addition to corporate well-being strategies. According to published research of

workplace studies, employees witnessed positive changes in their work and lives while participating in NT interventions (Geraghty, 2010). A consulting psychologist may be helpful in the implementation of NT techniques for employees to understand their unique stories; however, the psychologist must be attuned to an employee's background, recognizing that reprocessing experiences, especially for those who have endured racial microaggressions, can be a way of bearing witness to past historical injustices. This experience has the potential to be triggering for some; therefore, it is important to ensure additional support from psychologists where necessary (Buda, 2005).

Employees undergoing NT interventions may experience positive changes in both work and personal life and reporting reduced distress levels (Geraghty, 2010). A consulting narrative psychologist can be instrumental in assisting corporate leadership to positively influence the overall psychological climate by addressing the adverse impact of microaggressions using NT (Barry, 1997; Çavuşoğlu & Bekiroğullari, 2019; Sue et al., 2019). Employee mental well-being should be at the forefront of such initiative because published research suggests that there is a positive correlation between employee mental well-being and the overall efficiency and effectiveness of corporate operations (Çavuşoğlu & Bekiroğullari, 2019).

Secondary to the positive impact on employee well-being, it is worth noting, from a business perspective, that NT interventions may yield financial benefits to employers. Given that poor mental health costs employers between \$125 and \$190 billion annually (Place, 2020), hiring consulting narrative psychologists may result in cost savings for corporations through increased employee productivity (Place, 2020).

The two NT techniques that will be outlined are counterviewing and stories of resistance using reauthoring. *Counterviewing* is a NT technique that encourages individuals to explore

alternative or opposing viewpoints to their dominant story or problem (White & Epston, 1990). This technique attempts to do justice to the stories people tell about their distress. This intervention respects the experiences that have been problematic for individuals in their lives and appreciates the struggle that they are dealing with. Counterviewing makes note of documenting how the person has responded to the problem (Madigan, 2019; White & Epston, 1990). This method respects where people have come from and acknowledges the complexities of their stories; however, noting the incongruities of a person's story, counterviewing attempts to help people see alternative perspectives (Madigan, 2019; White & Epston, 1990).

The second technique that will be highlighted is stories of resistance. This technique is grounded in the idea that individuals who have experienced various forms of oppression and mistreatment in their lives resist (Wade, 1997). A prominent element of this NT approach is centred in exploring the impacts of oppression and individuals' resistance to it (Wade, 1997). The primary objective of incorporating stories of resistance in NT is to examine how individuals instinctively counter unfair treatment, encompassing responses to issues, such as verbal abuse, sexual assault, harassment, humiliation, exclusion, or discrimination (Wade, 1997). In using stories of resistance, a narrative therapist prompts individuals to describe their responses to unjust treatment instead of solely focusing on the impact of the poor treatment on them. This method underscores the individual's resilience and personal agency and emphasizes their ability to overcome challenges, taking a strength-based perspective rather than solely portraying the individual as a victim (Wade, 1997).

Wade (1997) acknowledged these acts of resistance are often disregarded or misinterpreted as pathological. To illustrate, a sad, worried, and anxious employee may be diagnosed with depression based on observed symptoms; however, a narrative therapist would

delve into the employee's history and background to reveal additional details and potential consequences of their resistance, such as a history of unfair treatment in the workplace, including verbal abuse, sexual assault, harassment, humiliation, exclusion, or discrimination (Wade, 1997). A narrative therapist might pose questions to the employee, guiding them to reflect on the beliefs, values, and commitments they held in response to the unfair treatment at work. The goal is to assist the employee in recognizing their inner strength amid their resistance to unjust treatment (Wade, 1997).

Grounded in social justice, the NT approach highlights how individuals shape their identities through storytelling, providing them with the power to influence the narrative of their lives (Combs & Freedman, 2012). This post-structuralist approach underscores the significance of stories in assigning meaning to the lives of individuals and communities. Wade (1997) suggested this approach operates on the assumption that individuals engaging in NT inherently possess the capacity to respond effectively to their challenges; however, the aim of this narrative approach is to initiate a dialogue with individuals who have experienced unfair treatment, delving into the details and implications of their resistance (Wade, 1997). Through this therapeutic process, individuals gradually come to perceive themselves as more resilient, insightful, and better equipped to respond effectively to their challenges (Wade, 1997).

Fostering Psychological Safety: A Conceptual Model

Based on the literature reviewed in previous sections, I propose a conceptual model that integrates microintervention strategies, as discussed by Sue et al. (2021), and NT, for both leaders and employees. Subsequent sections will explain this conceptual model and discuss its potential implications for counselling theory, practice, and research. Although this model can be applied to a broader audience, this paper focuses on exploring its relevance in corporate office

settings.

Objectives of the Conceptual Model

The model encompasses three key objectives. Firstly, it seeks to enhance employees' and leaders' understanding of cultural safety in the workplace through cultural safety training. Secondly, the model incorporates the principles of NT to explore how employees' individual narratives intersect with the larger framework of historical systemic oppression that has influenced workplaces today. Thirdly, it aims to equip individuals with effective strategies to address and disarm microaggressions, drawing from the work of Sue (2015) on microintervention techniques. Specifically for workplace leaders, this model provides tools and training for leaders to recognize signs of poor mental health among their team members.

Part 1: Cultural Safety Training

Cultural safety training intends to make all employees feel safe at work; this cultural training intends to disarm microaggressions, specifically racial microaggressions, gender microaggressions, microaggressions of a heterosexist nature directed toward the LGBTQ2+ community, and microaggressions concerning ability. Cultural safety training proposed here is based on the work of Sue et al. (2019) and aims to educate employees about microaggressions. It covers topics such as recognizing verbal and non-verbal forms of discriminatory language and highlights the advantages of having a diverse workforce. Cultivating a sense of community while acknowledging employees' differences and fostering empathy is one deliverable of this model. This training involves presenting employees with real-world examples of various cultures to counteract and question negative stereotypes and biases.

The cultural safety training will provide guidance to employees on implementing microinterventions, such as engaging in one-on-one dialogues with individuals who exhibit

bigoted behaviour. This training underscores the importance of making these open and honest conversations about microaggressions a common and accepted practice. These conversations often go unaddressed because people are afraid to ask questions about diversity (Sue et al., 2019). Consequently, people frequently opt to remain silent and avoid acknowledging microaggressions about critical topics such as race, gender, sexuality, and ability within the workplace (Sue et al., 2019). This reluctance to confront microaggressions has negative implications for victims, allies, and bystanders (Sue et al., 2019). This research conducted by Sue et al. (2019) may suggest the reluctance to address microaggressions in the workplace may negatively impact psychological safety. Finally, the cultural safety training will educate employees on the benefits of maintaining good mental well-being and the benefits of self-care.

Part 2: Narrative Therapy for Employees

The second component of this conceptual model offers employees the chance to engage in individual NT. The primary objective of this model is to leverage NT principles to promote the acceptance of stories of diversity and inclusion in the workplace. The employee program consists of six sessions that can be conducted either online or in person, with the online format potentially enhancing accessibility (Tan et al., 2014). First, employees will be encouraged to engage in a NT intervention known as *altered bookmaking*, a creative process that enables individuals to visually represent their encounters with workplace microaggressions as outlined by Cobb and Negash (2010). The primary objective of this exercise is for employees to find stories in their lives that allow them to gain insight into their abilities to resolve challenges and help them explore alternative narratives for their lives from a corporate organizational perspective or from a societal perspective (Cobb & Negash, 2010). This exercise helps facilitate

an experience for employees to observe their dominant stories, perhaps the story of their cultural background and how it plays into how they show up in the workplace (Cobb & Negash, 2010).

Secondly, this conceptual model employs NT techniques, counterviewing, and stories of resistance using re-authoring techniques to assist employees in reframing their problems. This method aims to help the employee understand their current narratives and how they may have been influenced by exposure to microaggressions over time. Further, employees may use this understanding of their stories to gain insight into how their cultural background influences their intersectionality in the workplace.

Counterviewing serves as a critical and politically aware method of assessing systems and understanding their functioning (Madigan, 2019). Therefore, it may be a well-suited technique for application within a corporate organizational setting (Barry, 1997; Madigan, 2019). Using the counterviewing approach, the consulting narrative therapist may initiate a dialogue with the employee to facilitate an examination of instances in which the employee responded to situations at work (Madigan, 2019; White & Epston, 1990). The objective of this technique is to guide the client in transitioning their focus from a narrative saturated with problems to one that emphasizes empowerment and strength (Madigan, 2019; White & Epston, 1990).

Counterviewing allows employees to contemplate how they shape their lives through moral-political endeavours rather than, for example, being defined solely by a particular psychiatric diagnosis (Madigan, 2019). Consider this example to illustrate counterviewing: a woman employee experiences anxiety and depression due to enduring persistent gender microaggressions in her workplace. Instead of solely viewing herself as someone living with two mental disorders, this technique allows her to recognize her strength and resilience in persevering through challenging working conditions. This example underscores the issue of gender

oppression and proposes that historically, men's structural power in corporate office culture may have contributed to the reinforcement of gender oppression (Lease et al., 2020; Madigan, 2019).

Moreover, a consulting narrative therapist facilitating a session revolving around stories of resistance may engage the employee in dialogue, such as asking them to remember moments when they responded positively in a difficult circumstance at work involving microaggressions. This dialogue between the therapist and the employee aims to shift the employee's focus from a problem-focused narrative to a more empowering one (Madigan, 2019). For example, when working with a victim of microaggression, a narrative therapist might inquire about the individual's cognitive and behavioural responses to a perpetrator of microaggressions (Wade, 1997).

The therapist may pose questions aimed at assisting the individual in articulating their beliefs and values, thus reinforcing the person's inherent strengths (Wade, 1997). The line of questioning used by the therapist encourages the individual to reflect on how they navigated a situation where they were a victim. The dialogue between the therapist and the employee may include the therapist asking the employee if the problem they bring to therapy is a protest against something. Further, the therapist may ask the employee processing questions to initiate a reflective experience for the employee in how they have historically been treated in the workplace. This may help the employee gain an understanding of themselves, such as how the way they responded to past incidents in the office says about them (Combs & Freeman, 2012). Using a double listening technique, the narrative therapist is attuned to broader cultural and societal issues that may shape both the employee's challenges and understanding of themselves (Combs & Freeman, 2012). Additionally, such questions foster a deeper understanding of the

employee's personal agency to manage exposure to adversity (Wade, 1997). Focusing on their responses to the poor treatment rather than solely on how they were affected by it (Wade, 1997).

Part 3: Narrative Therapy for Workplace Leaders

The third component of this conceptual model focuses on NT for workplace leaders. This module is designed to empower leaders to assume responsibility for the psychological safety of the workplace (Çavuşoğlu & Bekiroğullari, 2019). This model encourages leaders to play a significant role in establishing diverse workplaces that are free of microaggressions while gaining a better understanding of their personal biases. The central focus of this model is to guide managers in taking daily actions to counteract bias and bigotry, implicit or explicit, that manifest as microaggressions in the workplace. Enabling leaders to acknowledge their biases and grasp their influence on workplace policies and practices (Sue et al., 2021). Becoming aware of their personal biases allows leaders to receive coaching and mentoring, facilitating their understanding of these biases. This awareness is crucial for creating and sustaining inclusive workplace cultures that are free of microaggressions and prioritize high levels of psychological safety (Loh et al., 2021).

Leaders can play a significant role in helping to spot warning signs of poor mental health in their employees. It is worth understanding the potential impact that workplace leaders may have on the mental well-being of employees. Therefore, the section incorporates the Signs of Struggle Scale (SOS) training, which equips leaders with the skills to identify signs of compromised mental health in their employees. After spotting potential signs, the next step is engaging in compassionate communication while simultaneously investigating the signs and symptoms. This section educates leaders on the importance of showing empathy to employees while maintaining professional boundaries. This process can be a challenging task for some

leaders; therefore, this section of the conceptual model includes Mental Health Awareness Training (MHAT). This awareness training is designed for workplace leaders to enhance their understanding and self-confidence in promoting employee mental well-being (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2013). Additionally, leader's involvement in MHAT equips them with the skills needed to engage in more effective mental health conversations (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2019). The MHAT training may provide leaders with the skill to initiate conversations with employees about mental health and suggest employee participation in the workplace NT program (Dimoff and Kelloway, 2019).

The concluding part of this section consists of one-on-one sessions between the workplace leader and the consulting narrative therapist. These individual sessions can promote empathetic communication and facilitate discussions that encourage humility among leaders and employees. To exemplify the profound impact narrative storytelling can have in enhancing psychological safety and bolstering the mental well-being of employees, this part of this model will highlight Microsoft Corporation's remarkable mental health initiative (Pinsker, 2019). At Microsoft, the corporate culture has witnessed a transformative shift as workplace leaders have proactively chosen to share their personal mental health experiences (Pinsker, 2019). This significant practice has become deeply ingrained in the fabric of Microsoft's workplace and has also cultivated an environment of unprecedented openness and transparent communication (Pinsker, 2019).

Leaders at Microsoft have set an inspiring precedent by openly discussing their mental health journeys, thereby dismantling the stigma surrounding mental health concerns (Pinsker, 2019). In doing so, they have created a safe space where employees feel encouraged to share their experiences, seek support, and engage in meaningful dialogues about mental health

challenges. This initiative has fostered a workplace culture where employees are heard and valued for their overall well-being. By leveraging the power of narrative storytelling, Microsoft has made great strides in promoting psychological safety and supporting employee mental well-being (Pinsker, 2019).

Benefits of Implementing the Conceptual Model

Implementing workplace mental health strategies, such as the proposed model, could have many benefits. This section will highlight four benefits of implementing the proposed conceptual model. First, as mentioned previously, an unsafe work environment, including exposure to microaggressions, is a risk factor for common mental disorders such as anxiety and depression, work-related stress, burnout, and trauma symptomology; however, a benefit to the implementation of work-based interventions may reduce known risk factors for developing a mental disorder. Simultaneously, work-based interventions offer multiple advantages and can enhance employee's resiliency and individual coping skills.

Secondly, another potential benefit of implementing the proposed conceptual model is that the model aims to be accessible. This model was designed to potentially reach a broader range of employees, including those who might hesitate to seek treatment due to concerns about stigma and potential negative effects on their job security access (Tan et al., 2014). In many workplaces, individual counselling services are available to employees through EAP; however, surprisingly, many employees do not use these mental health resources (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2019). Conversely, prior research has shown that employees who utilize counselling and EAP programs can positively impact the overall workplace environment (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2019). This underutilization is primarily attributed to employees not recognizing their own challenges and concerns about the perceived stigma surrounding seeking help for mental health issues

(Dimoff & Kelloway, 2019). Therefore, the proposed model is designed to enhance the accessibility of mental health resources, including NT, and to combat the stigma associated with mental health.

A third potential benefit of the proposed model is using psychoeducation to reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness in the workplace. Psychoeducation involving workplace mental health aims to educate employees on why certain therapeutic interventions may help individuals who struggle with their mental health. This way of educating employees may increase awareness of mental disorders while simultaneously helping reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness in the workplace by educating and informing employees of mental health resources. To bolster this idea of incorporating psychoeducation, we can draw from the research of Tan et al. (2014), that supports the concept of therapeutic interventions held in a workplace environment, stating that such interventions positively affect the workplace, reducing the rate of mental disorders in employees.

Lastly, the proposed conceptual model provides an opportunity for effective therapeutic interventions traditionally applied in a counselling environment to be implemented in a workplace setting (Barry, 1997). The feasibility of implementing workplace mental health strategies and interventions to enhance employees' overall mental health may depend heavily on the relationship built between researchers, practitioners, and organizational leaders (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2013). This is an essential step because there is an existing gap between integrating research findings and implementation. This is the juncture where the conceptual model will serve as a bridge between research, theory, and practical implementation, facilitating a seamless connection between theory and real-world application.

Moreover, in the realm of occupational health research, there is a need to focus on tracking and assessing workplace strategies such as the proposed model. Evaluating data can guide future research endeavours, aiding in developing programs to enhance workplace psychological safety. This data can be instrumental in gauging the effectiveness of implementing and assessing such programs; however, an integral step in obtaining and evaluating such data would involve proper legal and ethical procedures that would have to be performed prior to such initiatives to ensure the confidentiality of participants (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017). More legal and ethical considerations will be outlined in subsequent sections.

Fundamental Next Steps in Research

Further research on this topic could inform practices to reduce the frequency of mental health concerns in the workplace. Given that most Canadians invest a significant amount of their time in the workplace, emphasizing workplace strategies to tackle the mental health challenges of Canadians appears to be a logical approach. Traditionally, mental health research has predominantly approached the subject from a clinical or medical perspective, necessitating more exploration into pragmatic approaches for improving employees' mental well-being in a workplace context.

Directions for future research include further investigation of motivation and reasoning behind the perpetration of microaggressions because, currently, little research on microaggressions within the workplace exists (Gonzales et al., 2015). For instance, further analysis on the effective implementation of microinterventions to mitigate workplace microaggressions is warranted, given existing studies' findings on the detrimental impact of these microaggressions on employees' mental health (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2013).

Furthermore, future research could explore how implementing organizational policies could contribute to heightened psychological safety in corporate office culture and mitigate the harm microaggressions cause to employee mental health. The overarching goal of further research could be to create inclusive, diverse workplaces while reducing harm to employee mental well-being (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2013). First, workplaces must identify and understand the gaps in inclusivity in the workplace and create evidence-based approaches to enhancing occupational mental health strategies. An example of further potential research may consider strategies that the Canadian workforce can implement to enhance the acceptance of Indigenous employees and determine how equitable employment opportunities can be achieved (O'Loughlin et al., 2022).

Historically, there has not been much development of theoretical approaches regarding workplace mental health (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2013). This makes implementing workplace mental health strategies challenging. In the absence of a solid theoretical foundation, terminology inconsistencies arise, undermining the validity of the approach. This inconsistency underscores the necessity for additional occupational research and the subsequent application of these research findings within workplace frameworks, thereby creating opportunities for further research (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2013). Therefore, the next step in the research could be to examine the efficacy of the proposed concept model presented in this paper.

To evaluate the efficacy of the proposed conceptual model, it is recommended to administer questionnaires measuring workplace stress, burnout, and trauma symptoms of employees and leaders before and after participation in the conceptual model. Qualitative research can be employed to elucidate the experiences of participants undergoing the treatment model. Utilizing pre and post-questionnaires facilitates the assessment of employee and leader

improvements throughout their engagement with the conceptual model. Incorporating targeted guiding questions for participants can provide valuable insights into the perceived benefits of the intervention. Examples of guiding questions may include: “What are the benefits of taking part in the intervention?” Or “What did you find most and least helpful as a result of participation in this intervention?”.

Moreover, gathering data directly from employees and leaders who participated in the conceptual model about their overall experience can serve as an additional method for assessing outcomes. These inquiries may not only inform future research but also contribute to the ongoing refinement of the conceptual model.

Furthermore, workplace frameworks can play a crucial role by concentrating on the existing research regarding psychological safety in the workplace and translating this knowledge into practical strategies for mental health. This step involves making research findings accessible to workplace leaders for actual implementation, effectively bridging the gap between research and practical application.

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the cost of the solution and to explore the feasibility of implementing mental health strategies in the workplace, with an emphasis on the significance of building strong relationships between researchers and organizational leaders. Such partnerships are vital for successfully implementing mental health strategies in the workplace, ultimately improving employees' mental well-being (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2013). This suggests a research question: How can organizations foster strong, psychologically safe workplaces through disseminating research into viable workplace mental health frameworks?

Finally, although the primary focus of this literature review was to find solutions to enhance mental well-being in the workplace, it may be naïve not to consider a crucial factor for

achieving successful implementation is the cost-effectiveness of the proposed model. Therefore, financial feasibility could be considered a crucial part of further research. The substantial economic impact of mental illness to the Canadian economy has been established, predicting the annual cost of around 50 billion dollars. As stated previously in the literature review, within the next 20 years, it is predicted that mental illness will cost the Canadian economy over \$2.5 trillion dollars (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2013). Given how economics influence decision-making, it is essential to understand the financial impacts of workplace well-being strategies. With economic considerations influencing action on mental health, it may be beneficial for more research to be conducted to support why workplace environments may benefit by prioritizing employees' mental well-being (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2013).

Ethical and Legal Considerations

This section addresses legal and ethical aspects associated with consulting psychologists working in workplaces. Four primary considerations regarding legal and ethical facets will be explored in this section. First, it is imperative to establish a formal informed consent procedure for the integration of NT into corporate well-being programs. Obtaining informed consent from all employees who participate in NT in a corporate setting is imperative. The informed consent process serves as a protective measure for both the employee and the consulting psychologist, safeguarding them from potential harm. Before seeking informed consent from the employee, the consulting psychologist evaluates the employee's privacy and identifies potential risks to the client. This assessment is crucial for ensuring that the client is adequately informed about the potential risks of therapy during the informed consent process (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017).

This informed consent process can be adjusted to suit online or telepsychology, just as it would be for implementing NT in a workplace context (Barnett et al., 2023). Consulting psychologists working within corporate settings must obtain the necessary knowledge and skills to provide services ethically (Barnett et al., 2023). This process encompasses the preparation for crises and emergencies and addressing legal compliance issues, including considerations related to office setup and security (Barnett et al., 2023; College of Alberta Psychologists, 2019).

Second, accessibility of NT must be considered, and ethical responsibility relating to the respect and dignity of all people, including non-discriminatory delivery of NT, and ensuring social justice in the workplace is the highest priority with such initiatives (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017), must be at the forefront on this initiative. Consulting psychologists should uphold the responsibility to honour and respect all employees, who will be esteemed for their inherent human worth. In alignment with Principle I of the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017), it is crucial for consulting psychologists to uphold the dignity of the individuals with whom they engage. Consulting psychologists working within corporate office environments can achieve this by acknowledging and honouring the diversity of employees in terms of their cultural background, nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, marital status, sexual orientation, physical or mental abilities, age, and socio-economic status (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017).

Third, microaggressions contribute to low psychological safety in the workplace and correlate with higher rates of work-related stress, burnout, and trauma symptoms. Consulting psychologists must work with this population to address their own risk of work-related stress, burnout, and secondary trauma proactively. Pre-emptively managing personal stress levels is critical in sustaining an ethical practice for consulting psychologists, as work-related stress,

burnout, and secondary trauma can adversely impact clinical effectiveness and the therapeutic alliance between clients and psychologists (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017; Simionato et al., 2019). Moreover, unaddressed burnout represents an ethical breach for licensed psychologists (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017).

Finally, recognizing countertransference is an ethical imperative for consulting psychologists operating in workplace settings. Consulting psychologists must consistently demonstrate profound respect for individuals' cultural perspectives, meeting employees where they are at, and treating them with unwavering positive regard (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017); however, the presence of countertransference may signal potential bias on the part of the consulting psychologist. As a result, it is vital to implement mechanisms to mitigate bias, such as seeking consultation with other psychologists or obtaining supervision with a more senior psychologist (Canadian Psychological Association, 2017).

Reflexive Self Statement

This capstone project originated from my experience in corporate office culture, where I observed varying impacts on colleagues' mental health. By delving into the literature, I aimed to understand the correlation between workplace culture variables and employee well-being. The research revealed the positive link between psychological safety and employee well-being and the detrimental impacts of macroaggressions and microaggressions, encompassing issues related to race, gender, LGBTQ2+, and abilities.

Moreover, the literature review emphasized how microaggressions negatively affect psychological safety in workplaces, possibly leading to stress-related disorders, burnout, and trauma symptoms. This solidified the validity of the conceptual model proposed in this paper, which suggests that NT may be an effective intervention for addressing work-related stress,

burnout, and trauma related symptoms. The model aims to empower employees to reshape their narratives, acknowledging them as the authorities on their experiences. Another integral piece of the model is implementing cultural safety training, to disarm microaggressions using microinterventions (Sue et al., 2019).

My experiences, having been exposed to microaggressions in corporate office culture, both as a target and an ally, have taught me to recognize signs of poor mental health. Researching for this capstone has been a journey of personal growth which has prepared me to counsel individuals in my future clinical practice as an aspiring therapist. This research project taught me the value of educating employees and leaders on cultural sensitivity and signifies the need for the presented model.

While writing this capstone project, I consulted with peers and professionals in the field to approach the research from the perspective of an emerging consulting psychologist rather than an employee. The feedback highlighted the potential broad applicability of this conceptual model, which could be used in medium to large corporations where microaggressions are prevalent, offering employees an opportunity to reshape their narratives and boost self-efficacy and self-esteem. I am intrigued by this conceptual model and its feasibility. While it is essential to consider the potential positive impact on employees' mental well-being worldwide, exploring this globally is beyond the scope of this capstone research; however, future research initiatives may investigate the applicability of this model in diverse international contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this literature review comprehensively examined the fundamental factors contributing to low psychological safety in corporate office culture. The literature review showed the influence of macro and microaggressions as contributing factors to poor psychological safety

in the workplace, underscoring how being subjected to microaggressions, specifically racial microaggressions, gender microaggressions, microaggressions of a heterosexist nature directed toward the LGBTQ2+ community, and microaggressions in relation to ability adversely impacts an individual's well-being.

The consequences of inadequate psychological safety and potential contributions to work-related stress, burnout, and trauma symptoms among employees, were highlighted (Rao & Ramesh, 2015). Additionally, a further understanding of why the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic heightened the prevalence of work-related stress, burnout and trauma symptoms was examined (Como et al., 2021; Dollard & Bailey, 2021). Protective factors were established regarding mitigating negative impacts associated with poor psychological safety. Finally, a proposed solution using psychotherapy, specifically NT, to bridge the gap between the level of psychological safety and what is being done to protect employee's mental health was highlighted. The immediate and long-term benefits of NT including positive improvement in employee mental being and employee productivity were highlighted.

A conceptual model utilizing principles of NT to address the implications of microaggressions in the workplace was proposed. The proposed model identified three key objectives. Firstly, to enhance employees' and leaders' understanding of cultural safety in the workplace through cultural safety training. Secondly, the model incorporated the principles of NT to explore how employees' individual narratives intersect with the workplace. Finally, the third objective was to recognize how to address and disarm microaggressions using microinterventions strategies (Sue & Spanierman, 2020). Further, the proposed conceptual model explored the influence of leadership on employee mental health and acknowledged the necessity of providing leaders with the tools to enhance the well-being of their teams.

This research aimed to underscore the importance of fostering inclusive, diverse, and psychologically safe workplaces, all while discovering methods of minimizing potential harm to employee mental well-being (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2013). The findings of this literature review revealed the importance of implementing the proposed model, which includes addressing potential costs associated with mental illness that workplaces and governments may face in the future. Emphasizing that Canadians spend a significant amount of their lives at work; therefore, work should be a psychologically safe environment where employees feel safe sharing themselves (Brown & Leigh, 1996; Fattoracci & King, 2023).

Moreover, this capstone project presented a proposed intervention for employees affected by psychologically unsafe environments. Indicating that the application of NT may lead to favourable personal and professional transformations, enhancing well-being, self-efficacy, and workplace performance (Geraghty, 2010). Subsequently, the next steps for research and ethical considerations were outlined. In summary, this capstone project highlights integrating NT with corporate well-being programs to help bolster psychological safety in the workplace.

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