


Exploring microinequities: Dynamics and implications in the South African workplace



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Orientation: Microinequities, encompassing subtle, unintended and disconcerting behaviours directed towards colleagues, detrimentally influence employee productivity and hinder organisational goals' attainment within the workplace setting.

Research purpose: This study aimed to examine the nature and influence of microinequities within a workplace environment in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, and propose strategies for mitigating their occurrence.

Motivation for the study: Microinequities need to be explored in terms of their influence, typology and specific manifestations within the South African workplace.

Research approach/design and method: An interpretive qualitative research design, using 13 semi-structured interviews conducted with employees from a South African manufacturing company. Nonprobability convenience sampling was used. Thematic content analysis was employed for data analysis.

Main findings: Study participants experienced diverse microinequity acts intertwined with power dynamics, manifesting through subtle discriminatory actions and personal aggressions hampering worker performance and organisational efficacy. These included interpersonal discrimination scenarios, toxic behaviours, rank-based bias and deviant practices, culminating in challenges across organisational levels.

Practical/managerial implications: The findings can be incorporated into educational, mentorship, sponsorship and training initiatives for work personnel at all hierarchies. These can facilitate the managerial formulation and enforcement of nondiscriminatory, nonharassment policies. Cultivating transparent, rule-based and ethically sound work practices via two-way communication and an inclusive leadership approach is advocated.

Contribution/value-add: This research makes a significant scholarly contribution to understanding microinequity dynamics within the South African context. Moreover, the study posits that managerial teams can operationalise the proffered recommendations to nurture an all-inclusive work ambience, enhance awareness, reinforce principles of equity and facilitate constructive dialogues concerning microinequities across diverse workforces.

Keywords: microinequities; subtle discrimination; workplace dynamics; inclusion interpersonal discrimination; toxic behaviours; rank-based bias; deviant practices.

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a significant scholarly interest directed towards understanding the complex phenomenon of microinequities within workplace environments and their potential influence on employee well-being (Aiston & Fo, 2020; Işık-Güler & Erdoğan, 2022). Microinequities can be described as subtle expressions of discrimination, superiority and inequity enrolling themselves into work interactions, thereby exerting a notable influence on employee morale, performance and the overall success of the organisation (Noviski, 2021).

Amid the global economic disruption instigated by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, which led to business closures, microinequities complexities got more attention (Mitonga-Monga et al., 2023). Reports of employee dissatisfaction emerged, creating an environment conducive to aggressive behaviours and conflicts among senior staff and subordinates (Behie et al., 2023). Subtle actions within the work environment that manifest as power differentials result in adverse consequences, including inequity, unjust treatment and discrimination (Aiston & Fo, 2020). Microinequities cast shadows over staff morale, collaborative efforts and achieving organisational objectives (Bin Othayman et al., 2022; Gill & Olson, 2023;

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Nazir et al., 2023). Within this context, addressing the dynamics of microinequities has become imperative, necessitating the development of effective strategies to comprehend its multifaceted aspects (Nazir et al., 2023).

Workplace mistreatment in the form of bullying and deviant conduct elucidates the hidden nuances of discrimination (Chaudhry et al., 2017; Peter, 2019). Existing literature stresses the pressing need for more comprehensive research into microinequity dynamics within the South African context (Badenhorst & Botha, 2022; Herbst & Roux, 2023). This is a matter of significant concern in a post-apartheid nation grappling with the enduring legacies of historical inequalities. Hirudayaraj and Shields (2019) accentuate the need for research studies focussing on women's professional development in developing regions. This study delves into employees' lived experiences within the context of microinequities in South Africa. This exploration recognises the subjectivity of these experiences and their profound significance in shaping workplace interactions.

Research context

The *South African Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Discrimination Amendment Act 52 of 2002* serves as a legal defence tool against discrimination rooted in unchangeable attributes such as race, gender and disability. Despite such legislative measures, workplace discrimination persists in subtle forms that elude immediate detection (Badenhorst & Botha, 2022; Jones et al., 2017; Storrs, 2020). This gap between legislative intent and workplace reality motivates this study to navigate the intricate nuances of microinequities within South African workplaces.

The contemporary workplace becomes a space where past injustices echo in present interactions (De Villiers, 2021). This study's distinctiveness lies in its focus on a local South African manufacturing company, serving as a microcosm of the broader workforce. Examining workplace dynamics within this context provides insight into multifaceted microinequity manifestations. This analysis contributes to scholarly discourse and highlights the nexus between individual well-being and organisational achievement. The research context encapsulates the interplay of legislative safeguards and post-apartheid nuances in the modern South African workplace.

The need to explore microinequities emanates from their potential to undermine positive interactions, which is essential for fostering an inclusive and harmonious work environment (Pierce, 1970). As employees drive organisational success, their well-being significantly shapes productivity and effectiveness (Samartha et al., 2019). Recognising the importance of employee satisfaction becomes imperative for achieving organisational success, as workplace dissatisfaction can lead to adverse consequences (Okundia, 2021). This study employs an interpretive approach to examining the intricacies of microinequities

within organisational contexts, acknowledging the profound significance of individuals' subjective experiences and the meanings they attribute to their interactions and behaviours in the workplace.

Employee behaviour is influenced by many factors, including attitudes, perceptions, ethics, authority, culture, values and personality (Al-Saidi et al., 2021). Microinequities are subtle occurrences that often escape immediate notice yet yield significant challenges. These incidents remain hidden, often but not always arising from unintentional origins and frequently eluding the recognition of those responsible. They manifest whenever individual differences come into play (Rowe, 1990). The term 'different' refers to dimensions of workplace diversity, including race, gender, ethnicity, age, personal traits, cognitive style, tenure, organisational function, education and individual background (Green et al., 2002). However, individuals belonging to specific minority groups, particularly those with distinct sexual and gender differences, are more vulnerable to discriminatory and stressful experiences (Hatzebuehler & Pachankis, 2016).

An employee's well-being is influenced by microinequities arising from perceiving differences or specific internal emotions towards others, influencing their ability to fulfil job duties (Silver et al., 2018). Frequently, these often covert yet unsettling emotions are unintentionally directed at colleagues by the affected individuals. Microinequity taxonomy yields diverse effects on employees, ranging from instances where individuals are singled out, overlooked, marginalised or devalued based on inherent characteristics such as race or sexual orientation (Wright, 2013). These recurring and cumulative behaviours foster an environment of discouragement and devaluation that detrimentally affects workplace performance (Brennan, 2014).

The perspective of Social Identity theory

Social Identity theory divulges the subtle conflicting interactions among employees holding distinct positions of authority and responsibility within organisations. Social Identity theory proposes that individuals seek positive self-esteem, a sense of belonging, safety and socio-economic stability by affiliating with groups or forming relationships with those with similar backgrounds (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Wharton, 2002). The authors suggest that individuals from various social backgrounds might be less willing to collaborate with peers on professional matters, which could hinder organisational goals (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

The theory elucidates the potential influence of microaggressions on group identity and stereotype reinforcement as some individuals may consider colleagues from similar backgrounds more favourably while potentially mistreating those from distinct groups (Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Wharton, 2002). A pertinent illustration of micro-aggressions is negative workplace gossip, which can detrimentally affect vulnerable employees and weaken their connection with the

organisation (Ye et al., 2019). Social Identity theory elucidates the consequences of socially constructed identities and addresses a range of influences, including group favouritism, negative stereotypes, subordination, the exclusion of minority groups, intergroup competition, limited involvement in decision-making processes and the emergence of role conflicts (Brown, 2000).

Dynamics of microinequities in the workplace

Unintentionally, inconspicuous and unconscious behaviours and cues foster an environment of exclusion within work settings (Silver et al., 2018). The concept of microinequities exposes different acts, from interpersonal discrimination and toxic behaviours to instances of rankism and deviant conduct. The infiltration of micro-aggressive expressions within the workplace leads to negative consequences, influencing individuals' perceptions of their prospects for personal and professional growth (Molina et al., 2019).

Microinequity behaviours take on the role of interpersonal discrimination when they involve discreet yet detrimental biased treatment targeted at social minority groups (Fibbi et al., 2021). A closer examination of interpersonal discrimination reveals that it materialises through negative nonverbal, paraverbal or verbal actions during social exchanges. Owing to their inconspicuous nature, these discriminatory behaviours often elude legal measures and preventative interventions, posing a challenge to effective solutions (Storrs, 2020). Examples involve situations when individuals are subjected to excessive politeness, displays of superiority, presumptions of inadequate performance and responses that convey bewilderment or apprehension towards specific individuals (Jones et al., 2017), different displays of courtesy and respect or encounters with inferior service compared to colleagues (Smith & Griffiths, 2022).

Toxic behaviour represents an additional dimension of microinequities, highlighting psychological traits that can vary depending on the prevailing workplace culture and environment (Muhammad, 2018). Instances of toxic behaviour emerge when managers engage in actions such as door slamming, sulking, evading accountability, making decisions for convenience rather than merit, and displaying solid inflexibility and control (McClure, 2009). Further manifestations include yelling, using abusive language, belittling peers, issuing insults, employing intimidation tactics, utilising sarcasm, exhibiting extreme rudeness and demonstrating disrespect (Holloway & Kusy, 2010; Sue & Spanierman, 2020).

Rankism and deviant behaviour

Rankism is deeply rooted in power dynamics, compromising employees' dignity by rendering them invisible and eroding staff morale (Christensen-Mandel, 2019; Fuller, 2012). Hofstede's cultural dimensions can be used as a framework to theorise rankism; however, for the purpose of this study, only one of the dimensions will be used, namely 'power distance', which strongly relates to rankism. This dimension

describes the extent to which less powerful people accept that they can be dominated by more powerful people (Hofstede, 2011). This dimension represents inequality and unbalanced power between victims and perpetrators where one may occupy a higher rank than the other and use one's power and authority to one's advancement.

Interpersonal bullying emerges as a prevalent manifestation of rankism experienced by employees from diverse backgrounds and can be demonstrated in various ways namely downwards from superior to subordinate, which is the most common form; upwards which is from subordinate to superior; and cross-level 'co-bullying' where peers join superiors in bullying (Christensen-Mandel, 2019; D'Cruz & Noronha, 2013). Moreover, deviant behaviour constitutes a distinct facet of microinequities, symbolising a rejection of established organisational norms. Deviance can be visible in gossip, rumour-mongering, personal aggression, other aggressive behaviours, malicious statements, and even instances of sexual assault, verbal abuse, physical altercations and property destruction (Pierce, 1970).

Catalysing change: Nurturing a conducive work environment

The fundamental aim of exploring microinequities is to catalyse transformative efforts and provide human resource (HR) practitioners with the tools to establish an environment that fosters improved employee well-being and organisational productivity (Brennan, 2014). By capturing participants' narratives and lived experiences, this research contributes significantly to the existing body of knowledge by offering meaningful insights into workplace diversity and inclusion. In this context, the examination of microinequities assumes relevance as it seeks to address the unacceptable yet often subtle behaviours that undermine the cultivation of healthy workplace interactions (Sue & Spanierman, 2020).

Study aim

The main objective of this study is to explore the dynamics inherent in microinequities within a workplace in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The objectives include exploring the multifaceted expressions of microinequities at the workplace and examining their influence on employees' well-being and productivity.

Research design

A cross-sectional research design was adopted in order to collect data from many different individuals at a single point in time. Using a qualitative methodology, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees from a South African manufacturing company to gain insights into workers' experiences and the influence of microinequity incidents on their well-being. The sample of 13 participants was made up of six women and seven men. For further details on the demographic profile of the participants, please refer to Table 1.

TABLE 1: Demographic information of the participants of the study.

Participant number	Occupational level	Gender	Race
1	Semi-skilled	Female	Indian
2	Semi-skilled	Male	Mixed race
3	Skilled	Female	Mixed race
4	Middle management	Male	Black
5	Unskilled	Female	Black
6	Skilled	Male	White
7	Middle management	Female	Indian
8	Unskilled	Male	Black
9	Semi-skilled	Female	Black
10	Skilled	Male	Black
11	Middle management	Male	Black
12	Middle management	Female	White
13	Senior management	Male	Black

The selection process followed a case study approach, allowing for an in-depth examination of microinequities within a specific organisational setting. Participants were selected from various occupational levels, including skilled, unskilled, semi-skilled and middle management positions, representing the company's diverse gender, racial, skill and positional backgrounds.

Research setting

This research was conducted in a manufacturing company in Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. This company was selected based on its diverse workforce composition and convenient proximity for research purposes. The company's name has been withheld per their request to maintain anonymity.

Study population

The target population comprised 353 employees, including managers at all hierarchical levels and shop floor employees across various departments within the chosen manufacturing company. This company was representative of the microcosm of the broader South African workforce.

Sample size

The standard in qualitative research is that it takes 12–13 responses to reach data saturation (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012). The nonprobability convenience sampling technique was employed to select participants. As a result, this study included 13 participants, derived from the larger study population of 353 employees spanning all occupational levels within the organisation.

Data collection

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with study participants. An interview guide was developed based on existing literature, consisting of open-ended questions designed to elicit comprehensive responses and encourage active engagement. The interview schedule presented in Table 2 contained questions designed to address the study's objectives and encourage participants to share their experiences, viewpoints and interpretations of microinequities.

TABLE 2: Interview schedule.

No.	Interview questions
1	Do you believe that microinequities exist in this organisation? In your opinion, why do you think microinequities exist in this organisation?
2	What kind of microinequities have you personally experienced or have witnessed someone experience? Describe the microinequity that was experienced
3	In your own understanding, do microinequities affect employees? If yes, how do microinequities affect employees?
4	When you witnessed or experienced a microinequity, how did it affect you? How did you feel or react? And what was done about the situation?
5	When employees are faced with microinequities, how do you think they react to it? Do you believe that their performance decreases if they experience microinequities? If yes, what signs and indications do employees possess that show you that their performance is decreasing or has decreased?
6	What do you think motivates an individual to exhibit negative behaviours towards other employees in the workplace? What can be done to mitigate or eradicate such negative behaviours?
7	What solutions would you recommend to the human resource department to address issues of microinequities in this organisation?

Procedure

The researcher approached the human resource (HR) manager of the organisation with the accepted proposal and ethical clearance approval from the university and requested permission in writing to conduct the research at the organisation. Once permission was granted, a list of the organisation's employees with their respective details was provided. The researcher then contacted the employees and requested interviews based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was acquired from the participants; in addition, they all were informed that they could stop participating in the study at any time without repercussions. Thereafter, employees were contacted via email and invited to participate in the study, with interview schedules and locations arranged according to their availability and preferences. Each interview lasted 60–90 min and was audio-recorded to facilitate accurate transcription. The transcribed data were later analysed, leading to the extraction of thematic patterns.

Data analysis

The study employed a thematic content analysis approach to identify recurring trends and patterns within participants' narratives. This process followed the six distinct phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), as the data familiarisation, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, review of themes, definition, labelling of themes and compilation of the final report.

Ethical considerations

Before data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Research Ethical Committee. The ethics approval number is HSS/0910/0ISM. Participants provided informed consent before their interviews. The study strictly adhered to ethical guidelines, protecting participants' rights and well-being. Participants were informed about available counselling services in the event of emotional distress. Throughout the research process, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained.

Findings of the study

The thematic analysis of participants' responses revealed crucial insights into their experiences and perceptions of microinequities within the study area. The findings shed light on the diverse manifestations of microinequities, their influence on employee well-being and the implications for organisational sustainability. Table 3 presents the thematic findings that emerged from the analysis.

It is important to note that the frequency of responses observed in the study exhibited a degree of overlap, as specific descriptions provided by participants highlighted various manifestations of microinequities. Consequently, these descriptions often aligned with two or more themes concurrently. Three prominent themes have surfaced from the analysis of semi-structured interviews, as depicted in Table 3. These themes collectively offer an understanding of microinequities within this particular workplace but not necessarily at every workplace.

Theme 1: Power play

A central and pivotal theme from the participants' narratives was the intricate interplay of power dynamics within microinequities. The participants provided detailed accounts of encountering manifestations of microinequities, which comprised ranking and interpersonal bullying. These accounts emphasised how individuals occupying authority positions employed these subtle yet influential acts to establish control, reinforce existing hierarchies and perpetuate dominance. The subthemes that emerged from this main theme were ranking and interpersonal bullying.

Subtheme 1: Rankism

Participants shared instances where individuals in senior positions deliberately utilised microinequity acts to establish control, assert their perceived superiority and bolster the prevailing hierarchies within the organisation. The participants vividly recounted experiences of being assigned tasks executed condescendingly and encountering instances where their opinions were dismissed. These actions involved gestures indicating dismissal, patronising language and the uneven distribution of opportunities. These manifestations of power distinctly reflected a

TABLE 3: Emerging themes of microinequities within the workplace context.

Themes	Subthemes	Frequency of emerging themes
Power play	Rankism	6
	Interpersonal bullying	3
	Total	9
Personal aggression	Absence from workstation and tardiness	2
	Damaging company property	1
	Sexual harassment	3
	Total	6
Subtle discrimination	Negative jokes	3
	Perceived low language proficiency	1
	Paraverbal behaviours	1
	Total	5

conscious act to exercise hierarchical control and reinforce disparities in positional authority throughout the organisational structure, as stated:

'So, when people talk to me, they either talk down to me or they talk to me like, "this is what you need to do!" No opinion asked, no nothing. That kind of behavior. So, that's what I face.' (Participant 3, skilled, female)

Participants disclosed microinequities targeted at specific individuals or groups, contributing to power imbalances. Notably, female participants expressed feeling overshadowed by their male counterparts, highlighting a prevailing sense of male superiority and a perceived lack of support for women within the organisation as reported:

'I have experienced it myself where in being a woman at the workplace you have all these [men] around you that think that you know you're a woman so you don't know any better than they do.' (Participant 12, middle manager, female)

The findings indicated that expressions of microinequities were not unintentionally lashed but deliberately done to exert control, manipulate and maintain power differentials as follows:

'He looks at people like a, like that person that seems like a TV. You use remote control. He talks to people like he is using his remote control.' (Participant 10, skilled, male)

Subtheme 2: Interpersonal bullying

The subtheme 'interpersonal bullying' encompassed behaviours such as the propagation of rumours, the humiliation of individuals, the undermining of their contributions and the relegation of their perceived status within the organisational hierarchy. Remarkably, many participants emphasised the prevalence of rumours as a prominent manifestation of microinequity within the organisation as stated:

'It's not happening to me. Because it's happening to other women. Sometimes they know. Sometimes they don't know that if you are friends with a manager then they say that he's having an affair or they make up stories and they say they went on the top they were doing something.' (Participant 1, semi-skilled, female)

Participant 13, a male senior manager, raised concerns about the negative influence of rumours on individuals' morale and sense of ease within the workplace. These rumours often pertained to sensitive topics such as salary discrepancies and the possibility of retrenchments as added:

'Yes, I had quite a bad patch about 2 years ago at this organisation just cause of one or two people spreading rumors talking behind your back... Treating you like you're nothing.' (Participant 6, skilled, male)

Based on the participants' responses provided earlier, it becomes clear that the propagation of rumours posed a significant issue within the organisation, leading to a sense of demoralisation among employees. Additionally, participants recounted experiencing public humiliation, another subtype of interpersonal bullying as stated:

'But for a supervisor to come when there's everyone around and say that "this is what you did wrong," in front of everyone so I believe he could've taken me away put me somewhere you know where it will just be the 2 of us cause you will find that people will refer whatever the supervisor pointed you your wrongdoing.' (Participant 9, semi-skilled, female)

Participants' narrations accentuated the deliberate exercise of microinequities by individuals in authoritative roles to marginalise specific individuals or even entire groups, thus perpetuating existing power disparities and cultivating a work environment of inequity.

Theme 2: Personal aggression

Acts of personal aggression emerged within the context of microinequities. Participants recounted experiences where they were targeted with subtle yet harmful behaviours aimed directly at their personal attributes, identities or unique traits in the form of derogatory comments, offensive jokes, verbal abuse and damage to facilities. A respondent shared a perspective on encountering instances of personal aggression during an interaction with a colleague as indicated:

'He tends to be violent in his approach to things because he feels that the company is being violent towards his safety and his health. So, you would go to him and when step on the work floor he's going to raise his voice and show different hand signs.' (Participant 11, middle manager, male)

Subtheme 1: Absence from workstation and tardiness

The subtheme of absence from workstation and tardiness emerged within this category. Participants described how their colleagues were not present at their work stations when needed and instructed. Instead, colleagues used work time to engage in social activities; therefore, their line managers got unhappy and frustrated. Participants further stated that some employees deliberately worked at a slower pace, came to work late and took longer periods of time in the lavatory:

'Like for instant maybe sometimes the person is supposed to be on his own machine is going there by his friend during work time. See, now the managers' get angry about that, you see.' (Participant 8, unskilled, male)

Subtheme 2: Damaging company property

Another subtheme that emerged from the data is the negative behaviour of employees damaging company property as a way to express their dissatisfaction. Negative actions, such as not taking care of their environment, deliberate sabotage of equipment and not maintaining their equipment instead of voicing their concerns to HR:

'My portfolio suffers. In terms of how I see it from my portfolio, if the employees are satisfied or dissatisfied, more litter as I said. With our facilities, damage of facilities not caring for the facilities. The machines are not taken care of.' (Participant 11, middle manager, male)

Subtheme 3: Sexual harassment

The subtheme of sexual harassment emerged within this category, with participants recounting experiences of sexist

comments and actions that left them feeling demoralised and unsafe as stated:

'When she comes in, she's friends with all of them she's a very nice person but they also say you know, "look at her behind." I will be sitting there and they will be talking about her. And this fellow will say I like your legs. You know it's like so terrible.' (Participant 1, semi-skilled, female)

Personal aggression often leaves a lasting emotional influence on the individuals, inducing feelings of humiliation, frustration and isolation. Despite one female employee voicing her experience, she still experienced hurt, upset feelings and demoralisation because of the challenge of proving the guilt of the male offender.

Theme 3: Subtle discrimination

Subtle acts of discrimination, commonly emerged as another significant theme manifested through subtle comments, gestures or behaviours that conveyed unequal treatment and undermined participants' sense of belonging and contribution. Challenges persist in addressing those acts because of their ambiguous nature, making it difficult to confront them directly. Participant 1, for example, was accused of stealing by her colleagues and overheard the accuser conversing with another employee where the accuser verbally attacked her. Even though this statement was not said directly to the participant, she felt hurt and attacked as she was the only female in her department and felt that she should be treated with respect:

'And I heard him saying "oh, there's nobody that took the vouchers besides this f**** aunty here..."' (Participant 1, semi-skilled, female)

Subtheme 1: Negative jokes

Participants also recounted instances when subjected to subtle jokes that left them feeling demotivated and devalued because of the perpetrator's hurtful comments disguising their statements as jokes, as stated:

'And there are people here that some of them they can just tell you straight but it's just that they tell you like you like you are all joking. In a joking manner, but because you got mind you think. Then when he says things of that nature you say that that person is not joking with me but he's referring. And undermining me. He's demotivating me. He's showing me that he is at a better level than me.' (Participant 4, middle manager, male)

This type of humour, unintentional in its influence, appears to be commonplace and a part of everyday interactions, as suggested by Van Laer and Janssen (2011) – a characteristic that was evident in this organisation. Respondents mentioned that colleagues from the same occupational level or higher treated them differently from how they treated others. Often, these differential treatments were conveyed through nonverbal cues and expressions that subtly communicated unequal treatment:

'Even if when I'm trying so hard to bring my opinions no one will say "I understand" but I could feel that he doesn't look at me

like how he's looking at that other person.' (Participant 4, middle manager, male)

Subtheme 2: Perceived low language proficiency

Respondents shared how individuals are treated differently because of varying levels of English language proficiency. Participant 4 shared his perspective by revealing that despite his efforts to voice his opinions, he often feels ignored or disregarded by others because of language barriers. This discrepancy in treatment becomes particularly evident in his case, as he feels that others do not view him in the same light because of his limited English proficiency as an IsiZulu-speaking individual and dismiss his opinions in favour of opinions presented by those who communicate more fluently in English.

Subtheme 3: Paraverbal behaviours

Participants also shared additional instances of subtle discrimination, including paraverbal behaviours that encompass changes in tone and enthusiasm in one's voice when communicating with different individuals as reported:

'And it's that particular employee sort of exuberating hostile behaviors towards the people that are responsible for addressing such issues. So, you would go to him on the work floor he's going to raise his voice or show different hand signs.' (Participant 11, middle manager, male)

The theme of subtle acts of discrimination sheds light on the potential accumulation of seemingly minor incidents over time, resulting in a toxic work environment and a subsequent decrease in job satisfaction.

Theme 4: The influence of microinequity on employees with the workplace

Participants addressed the influence of the existence of microinequities on employees, offering insights into their influence on emotional well-being, individual work performance and overall behaviour, as presented in Table 4.

Table 4 highlights microinequities' influence on employees' emotional well-being, behaviour and work performance. Notably, the participants identified the emotional state as the most prevalent effect experienced by employees, with a frequency of 10 (76.9%). The second most significant influence was observed in employees' overall behaviour, accounting for a frequency of 8 (61.5%). Furthermore, microinequities influence employees' work performance, albeit with a relatively lower frequency of 7 (53.8%).

Participants experienced various emotions and feelings that indicated shifts in their emotional states. These changes encompassed emotions such as low self-esteem,

TABLE 4: Influence of microinequities on employees within the workplace.

Themes	Frequency of emerging themes	%
Change in emotional state	10	76.90
Changes in overall behaviour	8	61.50
Changes in work performance	7	53.80

demoralisation and fear. Low self-esteem was characterised by self-doubt regarding one's worth and capabilities, as well as uncertainties about personal character and was reflected as follows:

'Honestly, it made me feel almost like I wasn't part of either the discussion we were having or for me, it made me look at myself and my worth. You know, "Am I capable," You know, "What do they take me for," You know?' (Participant 3, skilled, female)

'I think the moral of people their ability to want to perform brings that person down and it brings negative connotations to that person and they won't perform as best as they should because they are continuously being put down or being spoken down to it sort of breaks down their character.' (Participant 12, middle manager, female)

The preceding statements illustrate the influence of microinequities on employees within the workplace. Rowe (2008) supported this observation, adding that persistent acts of microinequities give rise to harmful cycles, translated into low self-esteem, diminished work performance, a sense of exclusion and even potential aggression.

Experiencing demoralisation emerges as an additional effect of microinequities influencing employees' well-being, as articulated:

'Got quite upset about it and because of that whole thing it demoralized me I didn't take pride in my work.' (Participant 6, skilled, male)

'So, if a person treats you like a nobody, that person will never perform at his or her best because his morale is very down, firstly.' (Participant 10, skilled, male)

Participant 6 conveyed how they and their team felt demoralised when another individual stole their idea and received credit for it. Holloway and Kusy (2010) argued that demoralisation aligned with the concept of toxic behaviour and stemmed from the perception that their diligent efforts in conceiving the idea were disregarded and their work was essentially stolen. Indeed, Jones et al. (2017) suggested that an evident correlation exists between feeling demoralisation because of microinequities and a subsequent decrease in work performance. This phenomenon serves to clarify why employees might produce output below the expected levels, predominantly originating from the reduced morale they experience.

Participants also conveyed emotions of fear, indicating that they felt apprehensive about voicing their experiences of subtle injustices, as they believed such actions could jeopardise their job security as reported:

'I actually heard this and I kept it to myself. I kept quiet for trouble's sake. Just to save my job, I don't want to fight in work. And they always make you feel small and low.' (Participant 1, semi-skilled, female)

The theme of overall behaviour emerged as the second most prevalent, with various behaviours such as changes in

home life, reluctance to attend work, reciprocation of negative behaviour, social withdrawal, resilience, increased absenteeism and attempts to maintain a positive and self-driven attitude. Several participants mentioned instances where they would unintentionally direct their emotions onto their children or spouse:

'I wasn't eating, I couldn't eat. When I used to go home, my children, I used to take it out on them.' (Participant 1, semi-skilled, female)

'I've experienced in my extended family is that typically a person works very hard at work and he's treated very unfairly because they feel powerless at work when they go back home, they want to assert that power and want to feel that dominance again.' (Participant 11, middle manager, male)

From the participants' narrations presented earlier, it is evident that not only do women feel their behaviour changing at home because of the microinequities they face, but men also get affected by microinequities. Emotions, including anger, appear to be influential in shaping participants' behaviours. This is consistent with the findings of Porath and Pearson (2012), who emphasised that anger often arises as a response to perceived injustice or threats. Additionally, as Van Kleef (2014) noted, individuals' behaviour tends to align with their emotional state. Consequently, when participants experience anger, it can manifest in aggressive behaviours at home. This can be attributed to the inability to express these emotions within the workplace because of power dynamics or stringent policies.

Other effects from the acts of microinequities experienced by the employees include reciprocating the same unjust behaviour towards their perpetrators as described:

'Sometimes they will talk to you and they try to make you stupid. So, you know what I do? I do the same thing to them. Now I've changed. This place changed me a lot. Now I do the same thing back to them. So, they just keep quiet. I will put them in their places.' (Participant 1, semi-skilled, female)

Other negative effects include an increase in absenteeism which occurs as a result of not wanting to go to work or when individuals try to hide from their injustices:

'I think absenteeism is one of them. Staying away from work to stay away from the problem.' (Participant 12, middle manager, female)

The statements presented earlier clearly indicate that participants' behaviour changed in response to microinequities, leading them to resort to absenteeism to distance themselves from their emotional experiences. This phenomenon resonates with Cornerstone (2015), who suggested that diminished attendance and dependability are significant indicators of the possible presence of toxic behaviour.

In addition, distancing oneself from others emerged as another behavioural response that employees exhibited because of the influence of microinequities. This observation is reinforced by Richardson's (2017) assertion that individuals subjected to microinequities might face challenges in

conveying the significance of these adverse behaviours to others. This challenge could stem from a gradual erosion of self-esteem over time, leading to withdrawal behaviours within the work environment.

Lastly, modifications in work performance emerged as the least frequent consequence associated with the experienced microinequities among employees. These changes in work performance comprised both negative and positive transitions, forming subthemes within this overarching theme, as depicted in Figure 1:

Figure 1 shows that employees influenced by microinequities experience changes in their work performance. Participants who experienced negative sexual remarks aimed at themselves and their colleagues expressed their discomfort and conveyed how distressing it was to hear such comments from their male counterparts which ultimately affected their engagement and work productivity. Participant 1 articulated that certain employees refrain from participating in meetings and avoid engaging in assigned tasks as a result of negative comments and displayed behaviours. The participant further highlighted that these employees tend to disregard instructions and are more eager to leave work rather than show enthusiasm within the work environment. Moreover, employees confronted with microinequities experience a lack of focus and diminished interest in task completion, leading to reduced overall effectiveness in productivity, as indicated by the following statement:

'You can see their morale changes and they make stupid mistakes. And, because maybe it's either playing in their mind or you know, it's hindering their work performance.' (Participant 3, skilled, female)

Some employees express their discontentment with the effects of microinequities, indirectly through their work output. Participants highlighted difficulties in addressing microaggression because of its subtle nature. In certain situations, female employees refrained from reporting instances of sexual acts performed by their male colleagues to supervisors, which left them feeling demoralised and unsafe even when they did report. The accounts provided by participants illustrate instances where employees feel

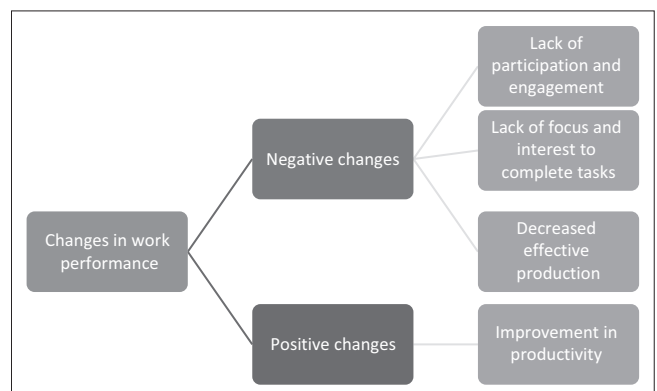


FIGURE 1: Representation of subthemes and their components within the theme of 'changes in work performance' as an effect of microinequities.

distressed and fall short of attaining the expected output, showcasing decreased efforts and overall work performance.

Discussion

Examining participants' responses revealed several significant aspects of their experiences and perceptions of microinequities within the workplace in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. The identified themes of 'power play', 'personal aggression' and 'subtle discrimination' provide valuable insights into the nature of microinequities and their effects on employees' well-being and workplace dynamics. These findings align with previous research that has portrayed the multifaceted nature of workplace discrimination (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016; Rowe, 1990; Van Laer & Janssen, 2011).

Theme 1: Power play

The emergence of power dynamics within microinequities accentuates the intricate interplay between organisational hierarchies and power imbalances (Alemán, 2014; Hennekam & Syed, 2018; Khilji, 2021). This study illustrates how senior staff employs microinequities to establish dominance, emphasising the connection between power dynamics and discriminatory behaviours. This observation resonates with previous research (Behie et al., 2023; Belias & Koustelios, 2014) that has reported mistreatment of lower-level workers by senior managers. Uzun (2020) highlights Hofstede's (2011) concept of power distance, where subordinates accept the dominance of senior managers as indicative of imbalanced power dynamics. Participants consistently revealed that those in authoritative positions exploit their power and roles to mistreat their colleagues.

Of particular note is the gender-based perception of superiority, particularly among female participants, especially visible among black women. As McCluney et al. (2021) revealed, individuals frequently experience microaggressive acts such as workplace discrimination, stereotypes and pressure to conform. Smith and Griffiths (2022) also corroborate the prevalence of micro-aggressions and everyday discrimination faced by specific demographic groups, aligning with the findings of this study. Thus, positional power alone cannot account for the lack of disrespect. Gender-based superiority primarily affects women and other marginalised groups, contributing significantly to feelings of disrespect and the decline of dignity.

The prevalence of workplace rumours represents a significant issue that leads to demoralisation across all levels of the organisation. This pattern signifies indirect bullying, known as 'co-bullying' in interpersonal bullying terms (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2013). Interestingly, superiors often tolerate or even participate in this behaviour rather than intervening. The accumulation of rumours exacerbates demoralisation, potentially undermining organisational efficacy and complicating HR's behavioural strategies (Cortina et al., 2017; Leigh & Melwani, 2019; Metinyurt et al., 2021). This challenges

managers to find appropriate interventions (Smith & Griffiths, 2022). Public humiliation often supersedes private confrontation when addressing wrongdoings, with senior managers publicly using their authority to shame subordinates (Morten et al., 2022). This dynamic derives from power imbalances inherent in organisational roles or informal sources such as social support, knowledge and experience.

The study's results reveal an asymmetrical pattern in which lower-ranking employees tend to respect their superiors, but the reverse is not consistently true. This finding aligns with studies conducted in South Africa, which demonstrate that lower-educated individuals experience more workplace bullying (Badenhorst & Botha, 2022; Botha, 2019). Additionally, the study confirms the findings of Namie et al. (2014), revealing that 27% of participants experienced workplace bullying. Botha (2019) reports that workplace bullying, linked to hierarchical status, results in subordinates reporting more instances of bullying, thereby increasing their exposure to a potentially hostile work environment.

Theme 2: Personal aggression

Personal aggression encompasses a spectrum of negative behaviours, including derogatory comments, offensive jokes, verbal abuse and even acts of facility damage, all of which collectively contribute to the creation of an emotionally taxing and hostile work environment (Nazir et al., 2023; Noviski, 2021; Van Laer & Janssen, 2011). Our study stresses that individuals who experience personal aggression deal with emotional repercussions such as humiliation, frustration and isolation. Similarly, even subtle forms of workplace aggression can significantly induce psychological distress (Cortina et al., 2017; Einarsen & Neilson, 2015).

Within personal aggression, derogatory comments and offensive jokes negatively influence individuals and the broader work environment. This observation aligns with prior research that has explored the repercussions of mistreatment on individuals' well-being and job satisfaction (Rowe, 2008; Silver et al., 2018). Notably, the prevalence of sexual harassment, often manifesting as sexist comments, is a cause for concern. Research indicates that approximately half of the women in the workplace experience sexual harassment (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018). Female respondents in our study recounted instances of explicit comments, which elicited feelings of discomfort and demoralisation. This theme highlights the distressing consequences of seemingly innocuous comments, underscoring how such remarks perpetuate feelings of humiliation. Karami et al. (2018) also described instances of unfair treatment, discrimination and harassment as subtle acts in the workplace.

Addressing personal aggression presents notable challenges because of its often subtle nature. Victims frequently hesitate to confront these behaviours, feeling powerless and frustrated, a phenomenon that aligns with Rowe's (2008) observations on identifying microinequities. Our findings further suggest that personal aggression frequently targets

individuals based on characteristics such as gender, race or ethnicity (Karami et al., 2018). Marginalised groups are particularly affected by these behaviours, further exacerbating their workplace challenges.

Theme 3: Subtle discrimination

The 'subtle discrimination' theme reflects participants' exposure to subtle behaviours undermining their sense of belonging and work performance. These actions involve ambiguous comments, gestures or behaviours targeting individual attributes. The findings portray discrimination's intricate nature, affecting well-being and job satisfaction, and influencing self-esteem and identity (Gray, 2018).

Participants' narratives unveil the prevalence of subtle discrimination, showing how harmless actions perpetuate workplace inequality. Offensive language as a form of aggression is often observed. This insidious practice often lacks concrete evidence. Rowe and Giraldo-Kerr (2017) and Storrs (2020) explain how subtle discrimination thrives in social interactions, evading legal scrutiny.

Subtle acts of discrimination accumulate over time, fostering a toxic work environment and decreased job satisfaction. Participants noted how subtle jokes allow individuals to express negativity while avoiding legal consequences, resonating with the views of Jones et al. (2017). Rowe's (1990) understanding that these behaviours arise from personal insecurities projected onto others echoes sadly here.

Language barriers emerged as another facet of subtle discrimination, making participants feel disregarded. This aligns with Louw's (2022) observation of language-based discrimination and validates Rowe's (2017) characterisation of microinequities, emphasising singling out based on unchallengeable traits. Addressing subtle discrimination is complex because of its covert nature. Unlike overt forms, it operates in a grey area, challenging confrontation. The lack of explicit aggression complicates efforts as perpetrators dismiss concerns. This power imbalance, compounded by behaviour ambiguity, leads to frustration.

The theme also highlights nonverbal cues' role, such as tone changes, perpetuating subtle discrimination. These cues convey unequal treatment, thus undermining confidence (Burgoon et al., 2021). Interestingly, participants noted subtle discrimination transcending hierarchies, affecting various levels. Normalising such behaviour compounds its influence, prompting coping mechanisms. Jones et al.'s (2017) notion of cultivating resilience because of repeated exposure applies. Participants often employed strategies to establish resilience, normalise norms and foster empathy.

Recommendations

The study suggests a range of interventions to tackle microinequities effectively. Firstly, organisations should embark on inclusive awareness and training programmes to

educate employees at all levels about the dynamics and adverse influence of microinequities. This recommendation aligns with existing literature that discusses strategies for addressing microinequities within work environments (Boyce-Rosen & Mecedon, 2023; Cooper Brathwaite et al., 2022).

Secondly, employees in leadership positions should undergo specialised training to identify and address microinequities effectively. The training should promote inclusivity in decision-making processes. Research suggests that organisational leaders should foster meaningful dialogues and collaborative efforts to design interventions and establish policies of zero tolerance to combat microinequities across all levels (Cooper Brathwaite et al., 2022). Consequently, organisations should review and strengthen their policies to address microinequities while highlighting the significance of equity, diversity and inclusion within the workplace.

Thirdly, addressing microinequities requires the establishment of precise and confidential mechanisms for reporting incidents to ensure that staff members feel empowered to come forward without fear of retaliation. This was supported by our findings and corroborated by other researchers (Pouwelse et al., 2021). Fourthly, our findings revealed that mentoring and support systems are also vital to tackling microinequities effectively. These initiatives offer resources and guidance to affected employees, enabling them to build resilience and effectively manage the effects of work-related micro-aggressions. Other initiatives should introduce regular feedback, a mechanism that allows employees to share their experiences, observations and suggestions related to microinequities. Wong et al. (2014) acknowledge the methodological challenge in identifying and observing subtle acts of microinequities. Therefore, Smith and Griffiths (2022) suggest actions to uncover and spotlight these 'often' invisible harmful behaviours through records or transcripts, labelling employee interactions into different microinequity categories.

Fifthly, our findings revealed that efforts to address manifestations of microinequities should focus on fostering greater accountability within the organisation by holding employees and leaders responsible for their actions related to microinequities. Of particular importance is the role of organisational leadership, as highlighted by Toler (2021) who asserts that leaders should feel obligated to openly communicate about subtle discriminatory acts and their detrimental influences on the workforce and the organisation. Moreover, the findings suggest that actions aimed at engaging a full spectrum of stakeholders in addressing microinequities should involve recognising and rewarding those actively contributing to diversity-related goals while concurrently taking punitive measures, such as threats of dismissal or suspensions, against those perpetuating discriminatory behaviours (Tankard & Paluck, 2016).

Finally, the organisation should consistently assess the effectiveness of implemented strategies and policies addressing microinequities while considering employees' feedback and external factors. It is also imperative for the

organisation to proactively adopt a culture of respect, empathy and collaboration among staff members from diverse positions. Some suggestions include diversity awareness training, emotional intelligence training and team building, thereby fostering strong interpersonal relationships among team members. Lee and Kim (2023) suggest that fostering employee positive work experience translated by a sense of belonging, acceptance and value among employees contributes to improved engagement, productivity, reduced conflict, enhanced relationships, lower stress levels, better health, greater resilience, and increased job satisfaction and psychological well-being. By implementing the aforementioned recommendations, organisations can take resolute steps towards cultivating an equitable, inclusive and supportive work environment for all employees, regardless of their gender, race, background or other personal attributes.

Strengths and limitations

The use of qualitative research design allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences of microinequities. The utilisation of semi-structured interviews facilitated the capturing of rich narratives and personal perspectives, enhancing the depth of understanding (Braun & Clarke cited in Gray, 2018). The case study approach provided context-specific insights, offering a microcosmic view of broader workplace dynamics (Yazan, 2015). However, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations. The study's sample size of 13 participants may limit the generalisability of the findings to larger populations. Additionally, the use of self-reported experiences may be susceptible to recall bias or subjective interpretations. Furthermore, the anonymity of the participating organisation may hinder the transparency of the research context.

Implications

The power play theme unveils the deliberate use of microinequities for control and power maintenance. This necessitates addressing not just the acts but the underlying dynamics as well. Creating a culture of transparency and ethical leadership can deter microinequities. In addition, personal aggression's theme reveals the emotional influence, leaving lasting scars. Acknowledging this, organisations can create a supportive environment and provide tools for intervention. Cultivating empathy and respect helps prevent such behaviours. The subtle discrimination theme highlights microinequities' insidiousness and influence on well-being. A comprehensive approach involving training and inclusivity is essential. Bystander intervention is also crucial, as colleagues can contribute to a culture shift by challenging such behaviours.

Future research

The theme of power play opens avenues for further research into the motivations behind the intentional use of microinequities as power tools. Exploring the psychological and behavioural mechanisms that drive individuals to employ such tactics could provide a deeper understanding of

the underlying dynamics. Moreover, investigating the influence of power play on employee morale, job satisfaction and overall organisational functioning is crucial to comprehending the far-reaching consequences of these actions. The theme of personal aggression invites further exploration into the psychological and emotional effects of these behaviours on individuals over time. Investigating coping mechanisms and strategies individuals employ to navigate personal aggression could provide valuable insights into resilience-building in microinequities.

Furthermore, understanding the role of bystanders and allies in addressing personal aggression can contribute to developing comprehensive interventions. The theme of subtle acts of discrimination invites further exploration into the long-term effects of these behaviours on individuals' career trajectories and psychological well-being. Investigating how individuals cope with and navigate these subtle forms of discrimination can provide valuable insights into strategies for resilience-building. Additionally, examining the role of organisational policies and leadership in mitigating microinequities can contribute to developing effective interventions.

Conclusion

This study adds to the expanding knowledge of workplace microinequities, revealing the intricate relationship between power dynamics, personal aggression and subtle discrimination. It is important to acknowledge that there is limited research in this area in South Africa. This case study serves to highlight the high prevalence of microinequities in the workplace. It is important to note that the power dynamic is very dominant as a mechanism in this manufacturing environment where not only does the cultural aspect of power distance play a role in gender bias but also a role in supervisor-supervisee relationships. Furthermore, the differences in level of skills play an important role here in how the microinequities manifest in the different power relationships in the workplace.

The identified themes show how these behaviours manifest and affect individuals within organisations. As organisations aim for inclusivity, addressing microinequities becomes crucial for a healthier workplace and overall success. Recognising and tackling power imbalances is vital to establishing an inclusive, equitable and supportive environment. Cultivating respect, transparent communication and clear anti-discrimination guidelines can foster a safer and more inclusive workplace. Understanding the influence of these behaviours enables organisations to proactively create an inclusive, respectful environment where all employees feel valued and empowered. Addressing subtle discrimination is pivotal for equality and employees' well-being.

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Authors' contributions

L.M. conceptualised the study including collecting and analysing the data. A.M. supervised and assisted in its conception.

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Data availability

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Disclaimer

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