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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Microaggression or micromessage? How choice of term influences working adults' emotional reactions to a training module about subtle slights

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Abstract

The need for workplace training about diversity, equity and inclusion is widely acknowledged. To date, however, there is conflicting evidence as to its effectiveness. Various aspects of design and content may be influential. This study explored the relationship between the terminology used in diversity training and trainee reactions. It employed two versions of a short e-learning module about subtle slights (a range of ambiguous and negative interactions) to explore whether using the term 'micro-aggression' or 'micromessage' affected trainee emotional reactions to the module. The sample comprised 630 working adults in the United Kingdom representing different ethnic, gender and age groups. Results suggested that there were differences in trainee emotional reactions to the term used. The term 'micromessage' resulted in more positive reactions; significantly more trainees expressed interest, and significantly fewer reported sadness and anger than when the term 'microaggression' was used. There were also some small differences in reactions between the various demographic groups. This study adds

to the literature exploring the terminology used to refer to subtle slights and how terminology might influence trainee reactions in diversity training. It also provides researchers and training providers with a methodology to assess aspects of diversity training before deployment.

INTRODUCTION

A focus on diversity, equity & inclusion (DEI) is a significant factor shaping the future of employing organizations and the function of their Human Resources departments [(HR), Torraco & Lundgren, 2020]. The employer focus on DEI began in the United States following civil rights legislation in 1964 (Anand & Winters, 2008) and has evolved in breadth and complexity. Employers have spent billions of dollars annually (Rodgers et al., 2019) on DEI interventions, defined as 'the implementation of one or more practices aimed at improving the workplace experiences and outcomes of groups that face disadvantage' (Leslie, 2019, p. 538). Creating interventions that adequately address DEI has been described as the most complex HR challenge of the century (Heitner et al., 2013). When DEI interventions are successful, employers benefit from better innovation, decision-making, talent sourcing and customer service (Guillaume et al., 2017). However, it has been suggested that employers whose DEI interventions fail can experience lower employee morale, more conflict between employees and poorer job performance (Guillaume et al., 2017).

Although there is evidence that diversity training can be effective, studies have been subject to limitations, and few experimental evaluations have taken place (Chang et al., 2019). The desired outcomes from training have often been unclear or unmeasured (Royall et al., 2022), and overall, results do not provide a coherent picture (Devine & Ash, 2021). Nonetheless, past studies have demonstrated the importance of exploring many facets of DEI training design and outcomes. For example, while positive changes in both attitude and behaviour have been reported for trainees who are supportive of gender initiatives, positive change in attitudes but not in behaviour was found for trainees who were not supportive of such initiatives (Chang et al., 2019). Such findings highlight the usefulness of measuring a variety of possible predictors and outcomes when exploring to what extent a training initiative has met all its objectives.

A common area of focus in DEI training is the topic of 'subtle slights', described as 'a range of ambiguous negative interactions between people' (Smith & Griffiths, 2022, p. 2). One type of subtle slight that is frequently talked about is a 'microaggression' (Jamieson, 2020; Shepherd, 2019). Microaggressions have been described as 'subtle, stunning, often automatic and nonverbal exchanges which are 'put downs'' (Pierce et al., 1978). Evidence for employees' experience of microaggression in the workplace has been found on the grounds of race (Pitcan et al., 2018), gender (Basford et al., 2014), sexual orientation (Resnick & Galupo, 2019), disability (Lee et al., 2019) and immigration (Shenoy-Packer, 2015). Initial research on the outcomes of microaggressions in the workplace suggests that they have adverse impacts on the experience of those who receive them, including attitudes to work (Offermann et al., 2013), job performance (Basford et al., 2014) and sense of interpersonal justice (Woznyj et al., 2017).

There has been increasing interest in how best to address microaggressions and reduce their impact (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008; Byrd, 2018; Morales, 2021; Wheeler et al., 2019). This has led to the development of 'microintervention strategies' (Sue et al., 2019), described as the

promotion of 'everyday words or deeds that communicate to targets of microaggressions (a) validation of their experiential reality, (b) value as a person, (c) affirmation of their racial or group identity, (d) support and encouragement and (e) reassurance that they are not alone' (p. 134). As well as addressing the needs of targets of microaggressions, training initiatives also aim to change the knowledge, attitude and behaviours of those who send them. Implementing these strategies usually requires steps consistent with change management literature (Armenakis et al., 1993; Michie et al., 2011). These include: (1) raising awareness of the concept of microaggressions, (2) agreeing that it is a concept worth caring about, (3) creating motivation to act when a microaggression is seen, (4) training behaviours that align with the appropriate strategies and (5) reinforcing motivation and skills after training. Steps one to three highlight the importance for trainees to experience positive reactions to training.

Novel research suggests that the design of DEI training interventions is more nuanced than may have been recognized in the past. In one interview study, HR leaders described using multiple terms to introduce the concept of subtle slights to different audiences (Smith & Griffiths, 2023), choosing terms based on how provocative and coherent they would seem to a given audience. A range of different terms were used, including 'microaggression', 'micromessage' and 'banter'. In another study, the authors acknowledged a tendency of organizations to use a 'direct approach' in training to raise awareness of bias but noted that this approach can be ineffective or even harmful (Okonofua et al., 2022, p. 1). Using exploratory methods, the latter study found initial evidence to suggest that appealing to a person's ideal self or goals could be more effective than assuming the person is inherently bad or biased and attempting to change that. These studies indicate that DEI training is beginning to be tailored to the audiences it serves. We now take a deeper look at conceptualizations of those audiences: trainee reactions to DEI training.

Trainee reactions to DEI training

Reactions to DEI training have been described in two categories: (1) post-training motivation, defined as the extent to which trainees are willing and motivated to change or do something (Sitzmann et al., 2008), and (2) post-training self-efficacy, defined as the extent to which trainees feel able to change or to do something in practice (Ruona et al., 2002). These are often assessed as trainee satisfaction with aspects of learning design, including format, organization, content relevance, delivery quality and the amount learned (Martins et al., 2018, 2019). However, these measures may not pick up on trainees' emotional experiences of training.

Experiencing positive emotions in response to training, such as finding it interesting, has been shown to be related to trainees' motivation to apply what they have learned (Paulsen & Kauffeld, 2017). There is also some evidence that trainees who experience positive emotional reactions to training are more likely to change their behaviour (Kim et al., 2020). However, it has been noted that this does not necessarily lead to behaviour change, particularly in moral domains (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010). Nonetheless, experiencing positive emotional reactions to training would logically seem an important first step in preempting behaviour change in the desired direction (Sitzmann et al., 2008). This is particularly the case in light of findings that show that adverse emotional reactions to training can lead to undesired behaviours that undermine workplace DEI initiatives (Brannon et al., 2018; Wiggins-Romesburg & Githens, 2018).

There is a growing body of literature about the importance of developing 'diversity openness' and mitigating 'diversity resistance' (Brannon et al., 2018; Dover et al., 2016, 2020; Leslie, 2019; Moss et al., 2018). Diversity openness is defined as employees' receptivity to diverse values, communities and perspectives (Moss et al., 2018). In contrast, diversity resistance refers to undesired reactions such as silence, inaction, hostility and workplace violence (Wiggins-Romesburg & Githens, 2018). These latter types of reactions are hypothesized to occur when dominant group members feel that they will be treated unfairly or excluded (Dover et al., 2020), that their autonomy or freedom is being reduced (Brannon et al., 2018), or that they are being labelled as immoral (Moss et al., 2018).

Managing diversity resistance and creating acceptance are important considerations when designing DEI training. Whereas an adverse reaction to training in technical fields (e.g., presentation or customer experience training) may result in trainees being less likely to apply what they have learned, negative emotional reactions to DEI training could escalate into more outspoken and destructive displays of division and conflict. Real-world examples of this include an incident when an engineer employed by Google released into the public domain an internal memorandum about Google's inclusion policy, arguing against it (Conger, 2017) and an incident at Coca-Cola when employees publicly criticized an organization-wide DEI training module particularly on the grounds of its suggestions to be 'less white, less arrogant, less certain, less defensive, less ignorant and more humble' (Bremner, 2021). Thus, it is important to explore how to maximize positive emotional reactions and minimize negative emotional reactions (Paulsen & Kauffeld, 2017).

Training providers face a balancing act: ensuring they speak to the lived experience of underrepresented group members who may experience microaggressions regularly while supporting the development of dominant group members whose behaviour needs to change (Brannon et al., 2018). The term 'microaggression', which is often used in DEI training about subtle slights, has been suggested to be an oxymoron (Priscilla Lui et al., 2020) the first part of the word (micro) may trivialize the experiences of the underrepresented groups who receive them, whereas the second part of the word (aggression) may seem highly critical of, and even threatening, for those who send this type of subtle slight, often unconsciously. It has been suggested that the term is overly provocative (Lilienfeld, 2017). Understanding the usefulness of the term and how it influences emotional reactions to training may be helpful.

This study explored trainees' reactions to two versions of a short DEI training module about subtle slights. The only difference between the modules was the term employed to refer to subtle slights. We asked two questions: (1) Is there a difference in trainee emotional reactions to the two versions of the module? (2) Do trainee emotional reactions vary with ethnicity, gender or age?

METHOD

A two-way, randomized, unrelated samples design was employed. A bespoke, e-learning animation about subtle slights was designed. It had two versions (henceforth referred to as learning conditions). In content they were identical, but each used a different term to refer to subtle slights. Ethnicity, gender and age each had two levels, as set out in Table 1. Whilst we acknowledge the existence of more than two levels in these demographic factors, in this small exploratory study, ethnicity and gender were limited to two levels to ensure recruitment of sufficient numbers. These categories were informed by the most recent UK census and UK

TABLE 1 Independent variables.

Independent variable	Levels
Learning condition	Use of the term 'microaggression'
	Use of the term 'micromessage'
Ethnicity	Black British
	White British
Gender	Male
	Female
Age	Younger (18–49 years of age)
	Older (50–80 years of age)

workforce demographic analyses (Storey et al., 2019). Older working adults were defined as older than 49, based on definitions from the UK's Office for National Statistics (Casey et al., 2022). Dependent variables were trainee reactions to the module.

Participants

This study used a paid-for panel of participants provided by Qualtrics (2022). Panel samples are now commonly used in workplace research and papers published in scientific journals (e.g., Agley et al., 2021; Holgersen et al., 2021; Klucarova & Hasford, 2021). Research into these recruitment tools has shown the samples to be as reliable and valid as cross-sectional samples of public populations and student or professional panel samples (Clifford et al., 2015; Kees et al., 2017). An extensive meta-analysis (Walter et al., 2019) demonstrated that the properties of data collected through panel surveys were comparable to those collected via more conventional methods.

The sample was comprised of full-time workers in the United Kingdom ($n = 630$). Participants were already enroled with Qualtrics and had previously provided their demographic information. This information was used for targeted sampling. Nonetheless, the survey subsequently sent to those who agreed to participate included a request for demographic information to ensure accuracy. Sampling aimed for an even representation of the selected ethnicities, genders and ages. The demographic characteristics of the final sample are presented in Table 2. A balanced split was achieved for ethnicity and gender, but the sample was biased towards a younger age group.

Participants were renumerated for their contribution, with remuneration based on the upper level of estimated participation time to ensure it exceeded the minimum hourly wage.

Materials and measures

The materials were built into one online survey hosted and distributed by Qualtrics. The materials consisted of a participant information sheet, a consent form, a demographic

TABLE 2 Demographic characteristics of sample by learning condition.

Demographic characteristic	Total sample *n* (%)	Microaggression learning condition *n* (%)	Micromessage learning condition *n* (%)
Ethnicity			
White British	315 (50%)	157 (50%)	158 (50%)
Black British	315 (50%)	157 (50%)	158 (50%)
Gender			
Male	308 (49%)	154 (49%)	154 (49%)
Female	322 (51%)	160 (51%)	162 (51%)
Age			
18–49	455 (72%)	225 (72%)	230 (73%)
50–80	175 (28%)	89 (28%)	86 (27%)

questionnaire, the training module and three measures (emotion, utility and topic) of trainee reactions. These are outlined below.

Demographic questionnaire

Demographic data collection was limited to the variables under examination (ethnicity, gender and age), as described in Table 1 above.

Training module

A bespoke, animated e-learning training module about subtle slights was designed for the purposes of this study. There were two versions. One used a frequently employed term to refer to subtle slights ('microaggression'), whilst the other employed a less provocative, more neutral term: 'micromessage'. The term featured 13 times in the module. An example frame is presented in Figure 1. The module was embedded within the online survey and was available as a transcript in case participants encountered technical challenges. The module was designed, in consultation with a third-party training expert, using the platform Vyond (Vyond, 2023) and ran for 3 min and 15 s. It was presented as an animation video and was designed using on-screen text without reliance on a voiceover to support accessibility.

Trainee emotional reactions to the term used in the module

Items to measure participants' emotional reactions to the term used in each learning condition were drawn from Izard's list of 10 basic emotions: anger, contempt, disgust, fear, guilt, interest, joy, sadness, shame and surprise (Izard, 2007, 2009). The order in which the emotions appeared in the survey was randomized to reduce the risk of skewed results due to participants choosing the most immediate emotion presented to them. The question participants were asked was:

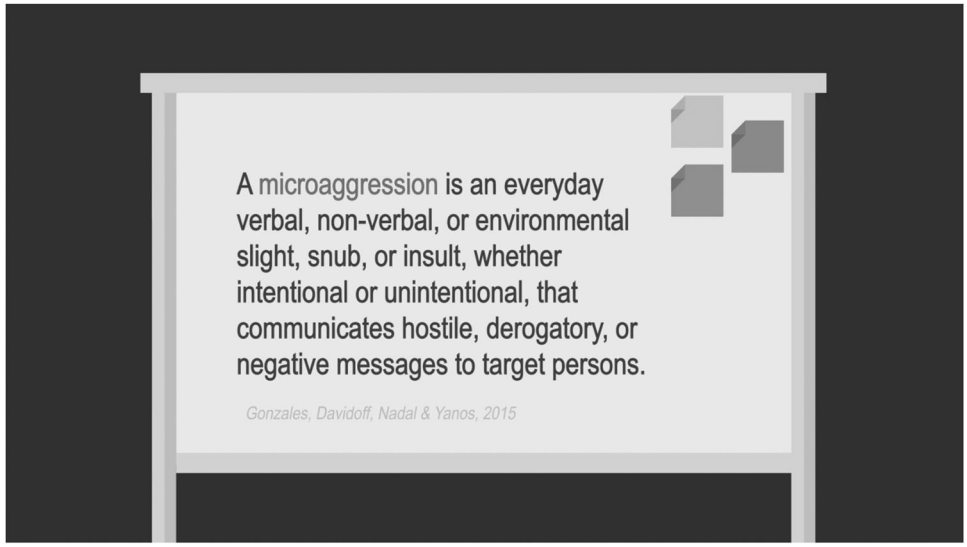

FIGURE 1 Example frame from the e-learning animation.

'which emotion best describes the reaction you had to the term?' Participants could choose one emotion.

Trainee reactions to the utility of the module

To explore whether trainees found the module itself useful (whichever term was employed), we also included a measure of utility, using items adapted from Brown, (2005) measure of reactions to training (Cronbach's α 0.834). The five items explored whether the module was enjoyed, considered relevant, provided useful examples and whether trainees would recommend this module to their colleagues. Participants responded to these using a five-point Likert scale with the labels: (a) 'strongly agree', (b) 'agree', (c) 'neutral', (d) 'disagree' and (e) 'strongly disagree'.

Trainee reactions to the topic of the module

To explore whether trainees regarded the topic of subtle slights itself as important (whichever term was employed), we used six items created specifically for this study. Shown below are items as presented in the first learning condition (where the term 'microaggression' was employed to refer to subtle slights). The six items were: (a) 'microaggressions are a topic that organizations are right to focus on', (b) 'I have seen microaggressions taking place during my time at work', (c) 'a focus on microaggressions is an example of 'political correctness gone mad'', (d) 'learning about microaggressions has caused me to reflect on my own behaviour', (e) 'learning about microaggressions has given me language to explain my own experiences' and (f) 'learning about microaggressions has given me language to explain others' experiences'. In the second learning condition, the term 'micromessage' was substituted for 'microaggression'

throughout. Item (c) was phrased negatively in contrast to the other items to disrupt respondents who quickly clicked through the measure and served to identify inauthentic responses (Weijters et al., 2013). Participants responded to these items using a five-point Likert scale with the labels: (1) 'strongly agree', (2) 'agree', (3) 'neutral', (4) 'disagree' and (5) 'strongly disagree'.

Procedure

Potential participants were contacted by Qualtrics about the study in two ways. The first method was an invitation sent to those who met the study's demographic requirements, explaining the purpose of the study, its duration and available remuneration. The second method consisted of a general advertisement about the study on Qualtrics' home screen portal. To minimize self-selection bias, the information provided at this stage was general, simply referring to a study about diversity and inclusion. The survey was piloted to ensure it took no longer than 10 min to complete. No amendments were deemed necessary to materials or survey design after piloting. Data collection took place over 5 weeks, from 24 September 2020 to 2 November 2020.

The final data set provided by Qualtrics was inspected for possible falsified responses. A response was considered at risk of being falsified if it was completed unusually quickly compared to the mean response time or if the same response had been given across all items, including reverse-scored items. A total of 53 responses (9%) were flagged as being at risk of being falsified; these were removed from the data set. Resampling took place to restore the number. Once the data set was finalized, data were organized in SPSS for analysis.

RESULTS

We first present the mean scores for trainee reactions to the utility and topic of the module, then explore findings for trainee emotional reactions with regard to our research questions: Did reactions vary according to the term used? Did reactions to those terms vary with ethnicity, gender and age?

Trainee reactions to the utility and topic of the module

Mean item scores and standard deviations for trainee reactions to the utility of the module were very similar between learning conditions and gave no cause for further exploration. These data are presented in Table 3.

Mean item scores and standard deviations for trainee reactions to the topic of the module were also very similar between learning conditions and gave no cause for further exploration. These data are summarized in Table 4.

Trainee emotional reactions to the term used in the module

The number of trainees who reported each emotion as the response that best described their reaction to the term employed for subtle slights is presented in Table 5. It shows that

TABLE 3 Trainee reactions to the utility of the module: Scores for each learning condition (means and standard deviations).

	Microaggression learning condition		Micromessage learning condition	
Item	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**
Enjoyment of module	4.35	0.942	4.35	0.915
Relevance for experience of work	4.07	1.009	4.15	1.018
Useful examples and illustrations	4.20	0.924	4.25	0.925
Desire to learn more about the topic	4.01	1.042	4.09	0.984
Would recommend to colleagues	4.22	1.014	4.35	0.911

Abbreviations: M, mean; SD, standard deviation; 5, strongly agree.

TABLE 4 Trainee reactions to the topic of the module: Scores for each learning condition (means and standard deviations).

	Microaggression learning condition		Micromessage learning condition	
Item	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**
'This is a topic that organizations are right to focus on'	4.22	1.015	4.34	0.952
'I have seen this taking place during my time at work'	3.97	1.125	4.02	1.175
'A focus on this topic is an example of 'political correctness gone mad"	3.00	1.341	2.89	1.406
'Learning about this topic has caused me to reflect on my own behaviour'	3.79	1.066	3.84	1.135
'Learning about this topic has given me language to explain my own experiences'	3.89	1.058	3.94	1.019
'Learning about this topic has given me language to explain others' experiences'	3.89	0.986	3.95	0.992

Abbreviations: M, mean; SD, standard deviation; 5, strongly agree.

participants in the microaggression learning condition were twice as likely to report 'anger', 'guilt' and 'sadness' as their main reaction than those in the micromessage learning condition. They were also less likely to report 'interest' than those in the micromessage learning condition. These differences were statistically significant. A χ^2 test of independence was used to explore differences between the groups, using pairwise z-scores. Significantly more participants reported 'anger' and 'interest' in the microaggression learning condition (68.7%) than in the micromessage learning condition (31.3%), χ^2 $(1,\ N = 630) = 30.08,\ p \leq 0.001,$ Cramer's $V = 0.219$. The proportion of participants reporting 'interest' was significantly less in the microaggressions learning condition (42.2%) than in the micromessage learning condition (57.8%).

TABLE 5 Trainees' reported emotional reactions to the term used.

	Microaggression learning condition	Micromessage learning condition
Anger	46	21
Contempt	29	34
Disgust	28	20
Fear	14	9
Guilt	14	7
Interest	111	152
Joy	8	13
Sadness	34	17
Shame	7	11
Surprise	23	32

A χ^2 test of independence was also performed to examine overall differences between learning conditions regarding the positivity or negativity of emotional reactions to the term used. The difference between learning conditions was significant; participants in the microaggression learning condition were significantly more likely to report negative emotions (59.1%) than those in the micromessage learning condition (40.9%), χ^2 (1, $N = 630$) = 18.57, $p \leq 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.172$.

Ethnicity, gender and age

The second research question sought to understand whether participant reactions varied with ethnicity, gender and age. χ^2 tests were used to analyse emotional reactions as a categorical variable. Three χ^2 tests of independence were conducted, looking at the relationship between learning conditions and emotional reactions, with results presented by ethnicity, gender and age. An α level of 0.05 was used. Percentages refer to the proportion of responses for each emotion by each demographic group.

Ethnicity

There was a statistically significant difference in emotional reactions reported by White participants in the two learning conditions [$\chi^2(9,\ n = 315) = 18.97,\ p = 0.025$, Cramer's $V = 0.245$]. White participants were significantly more likely to report 'sadness' in the microaggression learning condition (77.4%, $n = 24$) than in the micromessage learning condition (22.6%, $n = 7$). White participants were significantly less likely to report 'interest' in the microaggression learning condition (43.2%, $n = 57$) than the micromessage learning condition (56.8%, $n = 75$).

There was also a statistically significant difference in emotional reactions reported between Black participants in the two learning conditions [$\chi^2(9,\ n = 315) = 23.65,\ p = 0.005$, Cramer's $V = 0.274$]. Black participants were significantly more likely to report 'anger' in the

microaggression learning condition (79.1%, $n = 34$) than in the micromessage learning condition (20.9%, $n = 9$). Black participants were significantly less likely to report 'interest' in the microaggression learning condition (41.2%, $n = 54$) than the micromessage learning condition (58.8%, $n = 77$). Black participants were also significantly less likely to report 'contempt' in the microaggression learning condition (40%, $n = 12$) than in the micromessage learning condition (60%, $n = 18$).

Gender

There was a statistically significant difference in emotional reactions reported by female participants in the two learning conditions, $\chi^2(9, n = 322) = 23.38$, $p = 0.005$, Cramer's $V = 0.269$. Female participants were significantly more likely to report 'sadness' in the microaggression learning condition (73.5%, $n = 25$) than in the micromessage learning condition (26.5%, $n = 9$). Female participants were significantly less likely to report 'interest' in the microaggression learning condition (40.6%, $n = 58$) than the micromessage learning condition (59.4%, $n = 85$).

There was no statistically significant difference in emotional reactions reported by male participants in the two learning conditions [$\chi^2(9, n = 308) = 12.37$, $p = 0.194$, Cramer's $V = 0.200$].

Age

There was a statistically significant difference in emotional reactions reported by younger participants in the two learning conditions [$\chi^2(9, n = 455) = 24.22$, $p = 0.004$, Cramer's $V = 0.231$]. Younger participants were significantly more likely to report 'anger' in the microaggression learning condition (70%, $n = 42$) than in the micromessage learning condition (30%, $n = 18$). Younger participants were significantly less likely to report 'contempt' in the microaggression learning condition (38.3%, $n = 18$) than in the micromessage learning condition (61.7%, $n = 29$). Younger participants were also significantly less likely to report 'interest' in the microaggression learning condition (42.4%, $n = 72$) than the micromessage learning condition (57.6%, $n = 98$).

There was also a statistically significant difference in emotional reactions reported by older participants in the two learning conditions [$\chi^2(9, n = 175) = 17.43$, $p = 0.042$, Cramer's $V = 0.316$]. Older participants were significantly more likely to report 'contempt' in the microaggression learning condition (68.8%, $n = 11$) than in the micromessage learning condition (31.3%, $n = 5$). Older participants were significantly more likely to report 'disgust' in the microaggression learning condition (100%, $n = 6$) than in the micromessage learning condition (0%, $n = 0$) and significantly more likely to report 'guilt' in the microaggression learning condition (75%, $n = 6$) than in the micromessage learning condition (25%, $n = 2$). Furthermore, older participants were significantly more likely to report 'sadness' in the microaggression learning condition (66.7%, $n = 10$) than in the micromessage learning condition (33.3%, $n = 5$). On the other hand, older participants were significantly less likely to report 'interest' in the microaggression learning condition (41.9%, $n = 39$) than the micromessage learning condition (58.1%, $n = 54$). They were also significantly less likely to

report 'surprise' in the microaggression learning condition (33.3%, $n = 6$) than in the micromessage learning condition (66.7%, $n = 12$).

DISCUSSION

This study addressed under-researched areas; reactions to training about subtle slights in United Kingdom workplaces, and the use of a paid-for panel of participants as a research method for exploring subtle slights that enabled access to a 'real-world' sample. Findings revealed that the difference in terminology for subtle slights in this short training module had no distinguishable impact on participants' reports about the utility and topic of the training. However, there was evidence that using a low-provocative term, such as 'micromessage', led, overall, to a more positive emotional reaction to this learning experience than did a high-provocative term, such as 'microaggression'.

Past research has been limited by the binary nature in which reactions to DEI interventions have been categorized as either 'good' or 'bad' (Brannon et al., 2018; Dover et al., 2016, 2020; Leslie, 2019). The findings of this study support this criticism and reveal the complexity of trainee responses. Although a generally more positive response emerged for one term for subtle slights over another, findings also pointed to a complex variety of emotional reactions to the terms reported by the different demographic groups in the sample. While it may be unwise to focus on the potential reasons for all these differences in a small exploratory study, two examples may be worth highlighting. Older participants reported significantly more contempt, disgust, guilt and sadness and significantly less interest and surprise in the microaggression learning condition than in the micromessage learning condition. Black and younger participants were significantly more likely to report anger in the microaggression learning condition than in the micromessage learning condition. It may be that such disparities arise from differences in age and work experience, and exposure to subtle slights among underrepresented groups.

The findings raise the question: why was there a significant difference in emotional reactions but not in the reactions to the utility of the module? One explanation could be social desirability bias—the tendency to underreport socially undesirable attitudes and behaviours (Latkin et al., 2017). Participants may have felt able to be more honest about their emotional response than their response to the utility of the module because the utility items resembled an evaluation of material. In contrast, the emotional reaction may have been experienced simply as being about how participants felt. Another explanation is that the difference in scores highlights the cognitive dissonance (Elliot & Devine, 1994) that some participants may have experienced: rationally agreeing with the concept but selecting an emotional response that suggests unease. This suggests that the idea of subtle slights is accepted, but the term 'microaggression' may create heightened emotions and concern.

This study builds on the past theoretical frameworks of diversity openness and diversity resistance (Brannon et al., 2018; Dover et al., 2016, 2020; Leslie, 2019; Moss et al., 2018). With choice of term seeming to affect emotions, but not views of utility, we present an important future clarification for these frameworks: what role does emotion play in fostering openness or resistance? For instance, in this study we might speculate that a reduction of anger in employees might lead to greater diversity openness. However, anger has been shown to motivate behaviour (Seip et al., 2014), and could, therefore, be helpful rather than harmful. This study was unable to differentiate between anger towards the term and anger towards the

experience. As these theoretical frameworks develop there is an opportunity to clarify the role of emotion in training. Employers need to promote DEI initiatives and to protect employee well-being; a better understanding of the role of emotion in choice of term and intervention design may enable them to balance these requirements appropriately.

This study had several limitations. The imbalance in the proportions of older and younger participants may have affected our findings. The study did not allow for an exploration of the causation of the reported emotional responses. It did not include measurement of potentially influential factors such as negative affect and religious or political beliefs. As an exploratory study, its findings cannot be generalized without further research. Furthermore, in line with good ethical practice for an exploratory study, we aimed to minimize the burden on participants and so collected only the crucial data we needed to address our research question. As a result, we did not collect information about participants' employers, their geographical location, their past experiences with DEI training or other factors that could be covariables. There are many opportunities for further research.

Further study is required to explore which emotions may be helpful and unhelpful in training about subtle slights. Does eliciting certain emotions affect the likelihood that trainee attitudes and subsequent behaviour will change? Will that change be in the desired direction? Is there a risk of distress for trainees due to their emotional reactions? How can training providers maximize the benefits of DEI training whilst minimizing harm? Would differences in emotional reactions between dominant and underrepresented groups lead to conflict between those groups and impact negatively on their future working relationships? Further exploration of emotional reactions to training might enrich studies on diversity resistance.

Future studies could employ a more extensive measure of emotions, such as PANAS (Crawford & Henry, 2004), which would also allow for the exploration of negative and positive affect. They could also explore mediating and moderating variables, such as trainees' beliefs and their existing understanding of different cultures. A wider range of terms for subtle slights could be investigated, as could whether other language used in DEI initiatives, such as 'unconscious bias' and 'psychological safety', might influence trainees' reactions. Further research could examine the role of different emotional reactions in predicting attitudinal and behavioural change. Finally, future research could explore emotional reactions to training in delivery formats other than e-learning. For example, in classroom-style training with a facilitator, it may be possible to neutralize any adverse emotional reactions, as a facilitator could guide and translate terminology to be meaningful to learners in the room.

In summary, this small and exploratory study suggests that using a low provocative term to refer to subtle sights rather than a high provocative term was associated with more trainee interest and fewer negative emotional reactions. However, there is a need for more research. Meanwhile, training providers might consider employees' emotional responses to alternative terminologies, using the methods described in this paper, and could test reactions to training content before deployment.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study received ethics approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Division of Psychiatry and Applied Psychology, School of Medicine, University of Nottingham (ref 1580).

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