"If Another Person Says, 'You're So Articulate,' So Help Me": Microaggressions Experienced By Employees of Human Service Agencies

Berg Miller
Annahita Ball

Abstract: Few studies have examined the nature of microaggressions experienced by employees of human service agencies. This exploratory study identified the types of microaggressions that women and non-binary people of color experience within their agency settings. Narrative data were collected using a web survey. The survey consisted of two instruments, both developed by the researcher--a non-categorical demographic questionnaire and a survey that asked participants about their experiences of four types of workplace microaggressions. The sample consisted of 52 self-identified women and non-binary people of color employed by non-profit agencies or governmental departments providing human services in the United States. Data were analyzed by applying interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and a constant comparative approach, generating three overarching themes: (a) misperceptions of identity or circumstances, (b) navigating racial stereotypes, and (c) racialized objectification. Findings stress the importance of addressing microaggressions among employees to foster inclusive workplaces and the salience of race/ethnicity as a targeted identity in the human service professions. Recommendations include the development of workplace policies that create clear and effective avenues for addressing subtle discrimination. Individual social workers can effectively implement these policies by acknowledging, validating, and ultimately reducing unintended harm to colleagues.

Keywords: Microaggressions, intersectionality, organizations, women of color, non-binary people

Microaggressions are defined in the literature as slights or subtle insults towards a person's marginalized identity that are often perceived as harmless by their perpetrators (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggression research examines the impact of these insults, shifting attention away from the intentions of perpetrators to a focus on measuring the consequences of covert discrimination (Fleras, 2016). While perpetrators of subtle discrimination may be well-meaning, these acts are not inherently less damaging than blatant and malicious discrimination (Cortina, 2008). Findings of a meta-analysis by Jones et al. (2013) comparing effect sizes in 90 studies found that subtle discrimination generally had a slightly greater effect than overt discrimination on psychological and physical health as well as work performance.

Within the human service sector, there is a responsibility to maintain socially-just organizations that address microaggressions, consistent with the formalized ethics of these professions. Human service employees who receive education in serving diverse client populations also ought to be able to demonstrate cultural humility towards colleagues and recognize their role in creating an inclusive workplace.

Berg Miller, PhD, LMSW, MA, Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Buffalo State University, Buffalo, NY. Annahita Ball, PhD, MSW, School of Social Work, University at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY.

Microaggressions and the Role of Organizations

Sue et al.'s (2007) taxonomy of microaggressions, which originally defined microaggressions as racial slights towards people of color, catalyzed a body of scholarship primarily focused on counseling practice as it related to client outcomes. The literature has since expanded to study the impact of subtle discrimination on a wide range of oppressed and marginalized groups. However, studies remain centered on the harmful psychological impact of microaggressions on individuals. This study examined the microaggressions that occur among employees of human service agencies within the context of organizations.

A lesser explored feature of microaggressions is their role as a vehicle for maintaining patterns of discrimination within organizations. Organizations perpetuate the effects of macroaggressions, or large-scale inequities, through microaggressions (Huber & Soloranzo, 2015). Organizations, which routinely bring people into relationships with one another, have a responsibility for the quality of human interactions among their employees (Gonzalez & Denisi, 2009). Workplaces can either interrupt systemic oppression by setting standards of equitable employee relationships as a condition for employment or produce systemic oppression by normalizing oppressive behaviors (Proudfoot & Kay, 2014).

While there are not yet prevalence rates for either microaggression or workplace microaggression, a nationally representative study conducted by the Workplace Bullying Institute in 2014 (n=1000) on workplace bullying, a serious form of non-physical workplace violence, found that 72% of American employer reactions either implicitly condoned or explicitly sustained bullying behaviors. Among witnesses to bullying in this same study, only 29% made some attempt to intervene or help the target; 38% did not respond, while 7% ostracized the target, and another 4% sided with the perpetrator (Namie et al., 2014). The pervasiveness of workplace cultures that normalize bullying indicates the need for interventions that address microaggressions.

Findings from an emergent workplace microaggression literature highlighted that the harm of microaggressions to individuals is interconnected with systemic disadvantage. Shoshana's (2016) study about Palestinian professionals in Israel found that microaggressive comments and language in the workplace evoked distressing thoughts about oppressive systems, and about one's powerlessness to effect a change in those systems. Similarly, a study of workplace microaggressions experienced by people with multiple sclerosis indicated that microaggressions prompted anxiety about job security (Lee et al., 2019). Recent scholarship has further explored connections between subtle discrimination towards individuals and large-scale inequities. For example, studies with Native Americans (Senter & Ling, 2017) and Chinese migrant workers (Li, 2019) suggest that microaggressions functioned to maintain macro-level discrimination.

Legal scholars have concluded that there is a discrepancy between employee experiences of workplace discrimination and U.S. law (Jones et al., 2013). In a random sampling of 219 legal cases filed for workplace discrimination between 2000 and 2008, King et al. (2011) ascertained that unintentional microaggressions were frequently a part of discrimination claims yet did not impact court case outcomes. According to the findings of this study, microaggressions were not relevant in court, although people filing

discrimination claims saw them as part of larger patterns of discrimination. Subsequently, microaggressions can be overlooked as minor or well-intended even while targets recognize them as having significant consequences in perpetuating systemic oppression.

Human service organizations have stated missions to provide compassionate and empowering services to underserved populations. Organizations are accountable for fostering equitable workplace environments where all employees can thrive and achieve the aims of these missions (Majiros, 2013). An agency-level commitment to acknowledge and reduce microaggressions among employees is needed to foster social justice at the level of individuals and organizations across the whole of the human service professions (Gómez, 2015). Furthermore, research exploring the phenomenon of microaggressions within these settings would potentially allow for the development of evidence-based interventions. Research is needed to assess the occurrence of microaggressions within the human services.

Feminist Intersectionality Theory

Feminist intersectionality theory asserts that a paradigm focused on multiple marginalization is key to comprehensively addressing systems of oppression (Bowleg, 2012). The concept of "multiple marginalization" or of being "multiply-marginalized" refers to the complex position of holding an underserved identity or status in more than one category. Intersectionality was first formally theorized in the scholarship by Black feminists as a means of asserting their multidimensional experiences of systemic oppression based on combined racism, classism, and sexism (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989). This theoretical approach was further elaborated by a broad base of women of color who developed a conceptual framework to account for their lived experiences (Hulko, 2009).

Feminist intersectionality theory has remained mostly open-ended and inherently interdisciplinary. It does not have one established and agreed-upon set of tenets. Instead, intersectional scholars across disciplines have implemented an intersectional lens within their respective fields of expertise to challenge existing paradigms (Collins, 2015). This study applied feminist intersectionality theory to explore microaggressions between employees in the human services, with a focus on self-identified women and non-binary people of color. We applied three guiding concepts of intersectionality outlined by Bowleg (2012) that are relevant to an organizational context. First, social identities are multiple and interact with one another. This served as an underlying premise of all stages of the research. Second, an issue of relevance to a broader population is most effectively addressed by accounting for the needs of people who face barriers based on having multiple marginalized identities. Our examination of microaggressions towards self-identified women and non-binary people of color did not systemically disadvantage white, male, or cisgender people but, instead, accounted for the needs of human service agency employees representing oppressed groups. Third, individuals with marginalized identities are delegitimized in daily life when they encounter systemic barriers, with agency operations and service providers themselves often functioning as a barrier for clients to receive adequate care. This study

took the perspective that microaggressions between employees are indicative of greater gaps in organizational policies overall and are inextricably linked to the quality of services.

Current Study

Research exploring the phenomenon of microaggressions in human service organizations is needed for the development of evidence-based interventions. This study addressed that need with the application of feminist intersectionality theory to an exploratory analysis of microaggressions experienced by women and non-binary people of color employed by human service agencies.

Methods

Positionality Statement

Data analysis in this study was a collaboration between the Principal Investigator (PI) and a Research Assistant (RA). The PI was a PhD student conducting the study as part of their dissertation. Their research interest was informed by the experience of developing and facilitating trainings on microaggressions for social service settings. The PI identified as a white, non-binary woman. The RA was an MSW student hired to conduct a comparative analysis and to provide a final audit of themes. The RA identified as a cisgender woman of color. This collaboration between the PI and the RA aimed to increase the reliability of the study by bringing two perspectives to the process of data analysis, inclusive of a researcher reflective of the participant demographics.

Procedures

We used qualitative analysis to explore text submitted on an online survey for women and non-binary people of color employed by human service agencies. Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling techniques through the Facebook group for the National Organization for Human Services (NOHS). A response rate cannot be calculated due to the nature of the snowball sampling technique since it is unknown how many people received the survey. Each participant received a $5 gift card to Starbucks, and the first 100 participants were given the option to enter a drawing for one of two $50 Amazon gift cards. Text responses to open-ended questions were used for data analysis. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University at Buffalo.

Sample

The sample consisted of 52 self-identified women and non-binary people of color employed by human service agencies or governmental departments in the United States with at least five staff. The study excluded people under the age of eighteen. The largest racial group of participants, representing two-thirds of the total sample (n = 35), identified as either Black or African American. The second-largest group was participants who identified as either biracial or multiracial (n = 9). The majority of the sample was cisgender

women, who made up nearly 95% of the participants in the study (n = 49). Over two-thirds of participants identified as heterosexual (n = 38), with bisexual or pansexual representing the second largest group (n = 6). The age of participants spanned from 18 to over 65 years old.

Instruments

The survey consisted of two self-developed instruments: a population-specific non-categorical demographic questionnaire and the Women of Color Workplace Microaggressions Survey. The non-categorical demographic questionnaire was specific to the population and the purposes of the study. The questionnaire had a total of 41 closed and open-ended questions to collect both quantitative and narrative data. Questions asked participants about their age, religious or spiritual identity, financial situation during childhood, current financial situation, immigration status, race/ethnicity, biological sex or gender assigned at birth, gender identity, sexuality, physical disability, mental illness, and body size. Every demographic question about identity or status gave participants the option of filling in a blank text box, to recognize the non-categorical experience of having marginalized identities (McCall, 2005).

The 28-item Women of Color Workplace Microaggressions Survey had 4 sets of questions about the 4 types of workplace microaggressions identified by Van Laer and Janssens (2011), followed by 7 open-ended questions. Each of the 4 sets of questions about the types of workplace microaggressions asked participants if they experienced these microaggressions and offered an open-text box that allowed participants to provide a description of their experiences. The 7 additional open-ended questions gave participants the opportunity to further elaborate on their experiences. Example questions included: "Please describe a microaggression that you have experienced," "How did you respond to the above microaggression or to microaggressions in general?" and "Do you have any supports at your agency that have helped you to cope with microaggressions?" A final survey question asked participants to choose a pseudonym, which was used to de-identify each piece of datum.

Analysis

An interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) examines how individuals perceive their own lives and allowed this study to elevate participants' voices, especially because experiences of microaggressions are often invalidated (Smith et al., 2009). Two researchers used IPA to conduct a comparative analysis of the brief text responses. The use of a comparative analysis between the two researchers improved the rigor of the analysis by reducing the potential for bias (Morse, 2015).

First, we independently read all the data at once to get a broad overview of its content. Afterward, we did independent interpretive analyses using Microsoft Word. Once we completed separate interpretive analyses, we continued to the second stage of IPA, initial noting (Smith et al., 2009). For initial noting, we first independently conducted line-by-line readings to identify meaning units, or specific segments of data, that helped to explore

the research aim. We made line-by-line comparisons of our separate interpretative analyses and completed the initial noting. We then conducted a line-by-line comparative analysis to develop a list of emergent themes using ATLAS.ti. During this process, we engaged in another aspect of IPA, referred to as psychological reflection, which consisted of assigning a code to each meaning unit as well as reflecting on individual instances of the phenomenon of workplace microaggressions. At this point, the PI developed superordinate and subordinate themes. The second researcher took the role of an auditor to review the development of themes by the PI.

Memoing was done throughout the course of analysis as a bracketing technique. We practiced reflexivity by openly addressing and documenting personal biases throughout the duration of the study (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Results

The first superordinate theme, *misperceptions of identity or circumstances*, explored three primary types of misperceptions, or assumptions, that participants experienced as an insult to their identities. The second superordinate theme, *navigating racial stereotypes*, described two means by which participants negotiated assumptions about their racial group. The third superordinate theme, *racialized objectification*, addressed the two ways that participants' physical characteristics were evaluated through a lens of race. Themes are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. *Superordinate and Subordinate Themes for Types of Workplace Microaggressions*

Groupings	Themes	
	Superordinate	Subordinate
Types of workplace microaggressions	Misperceptions of identity or circumstances	• Assumptions of poverty • Assumptions of financial stability • Racial or ethnic ambiguity
	Navigating racial stereotypes	• Stereotyped one-dimensionally • Exception to group
	Racialized objectification	• Skin color • Hair

Misperceptions of Identity or Circumstances. The first superordinate theme--misperceptions of identity or circumstances--had three subordinate themes: (a) *assumptions of poverty*, (b) *assumptions of financial stability*, and (c) *racial or ethnic ambiguity*.

Assumptions of Poverty. Participants described assumptions of financial instability or poverty, both past and present. Some implicitly linked these false conjectures to racial stereotypes of dependence on government welfare systems. Leticia, an administrator (18-29-year-old, Latina, heterosexual, cisgender woman), wrote, "People often think my whole childhood was on food stamps when, in fact, my father worked hard to ensure that was not always the case." Keisha, a social worker in foster care (50-64-year-old, Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman), relayed similar presumptions of childhood poverty:

> *Sometimes people assume I had a poor or harsh childhood. In fact, my parents worked hard and bought a home. I grew up in a nice home with hardworking parents. I always had food, and there were no instances of utilities being shut off.*

Keisha also experienced stereotyping about her current income based on race and neighborhood of residence: "I think that people shouldn't assume they know your background or your present situation based on knowing your address and that you're Black."

Assumptions of Financial Stability. In contrast to assumptions of financial insecurity, participants also wrote of mistaken conceptions about financial stability. Although some held a title at their agency suggesting to colleagues that they had an income sufficient for a sense of economic stability, the financial responsibilities in participants' lives were sometimes significant enough to cause strain despite their holding a position of status. Rachel, a program manager (40-49-year-old, biracial Black and Native American, heterosexual, cisgender woman), described, "People assume that I make more than I do because I'm a manager. But, with childcare costing $800 a month, school fees, food, transportation, car maintenance, etc., I'm struggling as a single mother of four." Ava, a quality assurance analyst, alluded to having a childhood where her family had lower socio-economic status than she did at present and stated that although her income was comparable to her colleagues, she did not share their financial security:

> *There's a disconnect between where I've been and where I am financially. I'm not one to share my past financial status as finances aren't ever a topic we were allowed to discuss. Although, because I have a similar income to others in my department, it is assumed that I don't have financial burdens that weigh heavily on my mind in the workplace. I'm highly dependent on getting an annual raise and bonus check every year to keep up with my student debt and the student debt of my family. These raises and bonus checks aren't guaranteed and don't match the increased cost of living. I find myself constantly assessing my finances in my spare time and meticulously monitoring my payroll.* (18-29-year-old, biracial Black and White, bisexual, cisgender woman)

Miranda M., a frontline provider with muscular dystrophy, shared that her income level was often assumed to be higher than it was because she owned a vehicle with costly modifications to accommodate her disabilities:

> *I think that because I'm able to drive my own modified vehicle, people think I'm well off. Half of my vehicle was paid for by state vocational/rehabilitation Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) in Virginia, and I was denied three times for funds before getting a new case manager. I live at home and pay little rent, because the area is much too expensive and because I need assistance. I have had new aides who come work for me also ask me for money when they start after seeing where I live. Most of my aide's salary is also paid for by state vocation/rehabilitation (DARS), and I may pay a small co-pay depending on my income.* (40-49-year-old, Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman)

Most participants depicted presumptions of financial well-being as a source of distress. However, Queen E, a frontline provider, stated that she is perceived as having more economic resources than she does due to successful money management: "I'm frugal and perceived as far more well off than I am. I buy quality, classic clothes and shoes that last a long time, and I live pretty simply" (50-64-year-old, Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman).

Racial or Ethnic Ambiguity. Participants were also misperceived based on racial and ethnic identity. Some appeared racially or ethnically ambiguous, to which others made inaccurate judgments about their background. Sarah, a frontline provider, said, "People know I'm Asian but often assume I'm Chinese" (30-39-year-old, Asian American, heterosexual, cisgender woman). Brenda, a director, wrote, "Some think, at least in this area, that I am Puerto Rican because they look at my hair texture and length. But I have deep Native American and Creole roots" (30-39-year-old, Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman). Janilys, a frontline provider, wrote that she was repeatedly told her physical appearance did not match her ethnicity: "I have been told: 'You don't look Hispanic'" (30-39-year-old, Latina, heterosexual, cisgender woman).

Several participants shared challenges resulting from being mistaken as either biracial or monoracial. Keily, generally assumed to be biracial, listed several incredulous remarks that frequently accompanied this misperception: "I'm often asked if I'm mixed, and when I say I'm not, the response is always, 'Are you sure?' or 'You're lying' or 'You can't have good hair without being mixed'" (40-49-year-old, Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman). These comments about Keily's hair had the underlying connotation that physical traits associated with her racial group were unattractive. Ava elaborated upon a demoralizing microaggression she commonly encountered as a biracial person:

> *Navigating the world as biracial (Black and White), I've found the Black community to be more accepting and supportive of my struggles in social and professional settings. I'm fairly light-skinned, but not enough to fully pass in white spaces. Due to this, I am eventually asked the most dehumanizing question of "what am I." Although I, at all times, work to keep an open heart and offer a helping hand when facing unintentional racism, it still cuts deeply to hear these types of microaggressions.* (18-29-year-old, biracial Black and White, bisexual, cisgender woman)

In contrast, Christina F., a program manager, wrote about being inaccurately perceived as biracial: "I present as racially ambiguous. Most people perceive me as biracial because of my physical features, but I am not biracial. Both of my parents and both sets of grandparents are African American" (30-39-year-old, Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman). In the context of a racialized society, false assumptions about racial and ethnic identity sometimes held great weight for participants regarding feeling understood and appreciated in their interactions.

Navigating Racial Stereotypes. The second superordinate theme of navigating racial stereotypes had two subordinate themes: (a) *stereotyped one-dimensionally* and (b) *exception to group.* The first subordinate theme, stereotyped one-dimensionally, encompassed being perceived as a person who confirmed stereotypes of their racial group

and was consequently reduced to a stereotype rather than being seen for their whole humanity. The second subordinate theme, exception to group, included situations in which participants were regarded as having commendable qualities incongruent with their racial and ethnic identity, and consequently viewed as superior to their group. Being perceived as an exception to their racial group implicitly degraded that racial group while simultaneously denying that participant recognition of their racial identity.

Stereotyped One-Dimensionally. The experience of being stereotyped one-dimensionally was tied to false presumptions about multiple aspects of participants' lives. Terry T., an audit manager, wrote of the myriad stereotypes prescribed to her:

> *It is often assumed that I am a single parent when I have been married to the father of both of my children for 16 years. It is also assumed that I live in an apartment in the city when my family lives in an affluent suburb in a top-performing school district.* (40-49-year-old, Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman)

Michelle B., a clinical supervisor, likewise described a wide range of conjectures made about her based on racial stereotypes:

> *People have asked to touch my hair, assumed I know about hip-hop music, are surprised that I am married, are surprised that I am the supervisor, and over the phone have assumed that I am White because of my position and presentation.* (30-39-year-old, Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman)

The comments suggest that these participants were sometimes a point of curiosity and represented identities for which colleagues had gaps in knowledge about how to interact in a considerate and respectful manner.

Several participants wrote about being stereotyped one-dimensionally within their agency setting. Queen E, describing the similarity between overt and subtle discrimination, wrote: "Similarities include things like assuming all Black women can cook, or that we'll bring fried chicken to the company potluck!" (50-64-year-old, Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman). Anastasia B., a frontline provider, said that people sometimes drew inaccurate conclusions about the languages that she spoke and her role at the agency. Her examples of microaggressions included, "Oh, you do speak English" and "Oh, you're not an interpreter" (18-29-year-old, Latina, bisexual, cisgender woman). These instances may have reminded participants that their race was highly salient to others and that racial stereotypes led to false conceptions about their professional capabilities and their lives in general. Comparable assumptions came up for participants around race or ethnicity paired with religion. Rowan, a program manager who identified as agnostic, wrote, "Some think Latina and automatically think I'm Catholic. I was brought up Catholic and Southern Baptist and am neither since high school" (40-49-year-old, biracial Latina and White, Queer-identified, non-binary woman). Rose, a counselor who identified as both Christian and spiritual, wrote, "White people assume I'm Baptist, they think all Blacks are Baptist" (18-29-year-old, Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman).

Exception to Group. For the second subordinate theme, exception to group, participants who were perceived as superior to their racial group had their identities dismissed or overlooked. In some instances, participants were denied acknowledgment of

their expertise as a person of color with knowledge based on lived experience. Sarah G. wrote, "I have been told by a supervisor that because I don't look like a Native American, I must not know as much as those who 'look' Native" (30-39-year-old, biracial Native American and White, bisexual, non-binary woman). Violet, a program manager, described a situation in which, "[My colleagues] talked about asking certain other Black people who did not work for us to read over something, to make sure they hadn't missed any biased language. As if I was not a person of color who worked there already" (18-29-year-old, biracial Black and White, heterosexual, cisgender woman). She explained, "My coworkers treating me as though I wasn't a person of color when we were serving mainly people of color added another layer of difficulty to my job."

Some participants recounted surprise from others in response to their intellect and competence. Tee, a mid-level supervisor, listed among her experiences of microaggressions presumptions of ineptness, "'I don't see color'; 'You are not like the rest of them'; 'You don't talk ghetto'; assumptions that I grew up poor or in the ghetto; visibly surprised by my intellect" (30-39-year-old, Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman). Queen E wrote:

I have varied interests, and White people are clearly surprised when they see me at a concert or event that is attended by predominantly them. They're also surprised by my knowledge of so many things, and the fact that I write and speak well! If another person says, "You're so articulate," so help me. What an insult! English is my native language; I read; I'm educated. What did they expect, for me to grunt?! (50-64-year-old, Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman)

Others wrote of colleagues explicitly stating their speech was inconsistent with their race. Brenda wrote, "I have been told that I am 'not like other Black people' or that I seem White because of my speech and mannerisms" (30-39-year-old, Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman). These responses communicated biases to participants about their racial group which reflect larger societal patterns. Rose said, "People tell me that I 'talk white' (18-29-year-old, Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman). Elaine, a frontline provider, described a situation in which someone over the phone expressed bewilderment at learning of her race:

I was speaking to someone on the phone at work, and the person made a comment about not knowing that I was Black. It wasn't a negative comment necessarily, but they did not know they were speaking to a Black woman due to my professionalism over the phone. (40-49-year-old, Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman)

Although the participant believed that the comment was not intended as an insult, it nevertheless revealed a bias about her racial group. Kim, a program manager, shared a microaggression that explicitly linked the disproving of stereotypes to perceptions of being an exception to their group: "I have been told, 'You're not like a stereotypical Black person or woman. When I see you, I don't see race or gender'" (50-64-year-old, Black, lesbian, non-binary woman). Such remarks conveyed a prejudiced view of the participants' race and sex or gender identity.

Racialized Objectification. The third superordinate theme of racialized objectification had two subordinate themes: (a) *skin color* and (b) *hair*. The first subordinate theme, physical appearance, captured comments on the attractiveness of participants, as seen through a lens of race paired with gender. The second subordinate theme, hair, encompassed a range of attention towards participants' hair that included both statements and unwanted touch, which were felt to be intrusive. The superordinate theme of racialized objectification shared patterns similar to navigating racial stereotypes, in which participants were either stereotyped one-dimensionally or praised as an exception to their group. As compared to the navigating racial stereotypes theme, the microaggressions in the racialized objectification category were an intersectional experience based on race interacting with gender, and sometimes additional identities.

Skin color. Compliments about physical appearance referenced a standard of femininity in which light skin was upheld as a beauty norm. These inadvertent slights were analogous. Asia B., a recreation aide, was told, "You're so pretty for a Black girl" (24-29-year-old, Black, lesbian, cisgender woman). Kc, a frontline provider, very similarly was told, "You're cute to be dark-skinned" (30-39-year-old, Black, lesbian, cisgender woman). Rachel, who identified as biracial, also received the insulting praise, "You're pretty for a Black woman" (40-49-year-old, biracial Black and Native American, heterosexual, cisgender woman). Terry T., when providing an example of a microaggression, shared a compliment with multiple connotations: "Often told that I am a beautiful dark-skinned woman," (40-49-year-old, Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman). This remark could have been either an evaluation of Terry T.'s beauty as an exception to her race or the sexualization of her race. It is unclear whether this comment was made by her clients, colleagues, or both, or if it also extended beyond the workplace.

Hair. Another aspect of the racialized objectification of participants were statements about their hair and the touching of their hair. Comments implied that participants' hair had a novel quality which led to a diminishment of their professionalism and seriousness. Samantha, a training coordinator, wrote, "I change my hair frequently. Co-workers often comment on that, saying things like, 'You look different every day!' or 'I never know which version of you I'm going to get,' and other comments that make me feel uncomfortable" (30-39-year-old, Black, Queer-identified, cisgender woman). Respondents also shared about intrusive questions about the characteristics of their hair. Mary D., a clerical staff and frontline provider, wrote that she was asked, "Is that your real hair?" and "Are you mixed? Because you have curly hair" (40-49-year-old, biracial Black and Native American, Queer-identified, cisgender woman). Mimi, a frontline provider, offered the following instance of a microaggression: "Asked to tone down my appearance in terms of my hair texture" (18-29-year-old, Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman).

In addition to remarks about hair, participants also stated that colleagues would reach for their hair without permission, or otherwise ask to feel its texture, incidents which were a transgression of personal boundaries. Samantha elaborated on her experience: "I've had people ask to touch my hair and actually reach out and touch it" (30-39-year-old, Black, Queer-identified, cisgender woman). KayK, a frontline provider in foster care, gave the following example: "'I love how your hair springs back' as they reach out to touch it" (30-39-year-old, multiracial Black, Native American, and White, heterosexual, cisgender

woman). Christina F. described how a coworker touched her hair within the presence of several colleagues, none of whom attempted to help or intervene: "At that agency, a White colleague ACTUALLY touched my hair while I was in a crowded elevator without my permission. There was no support [emphasis in original]" (30-39-year-old, Black, heterosexual, cisgender woman). When the other employees did not intervene, the participant was additionally subjected to a bystander microaggression in which the offensive behavior was tolerated.

Discussion

This study addresses gaps in the scholarship about microaggressions while contributing to an emergent workplace microaggression literature. The findings show that, among participants in the sample, race/ethnicity was the most salient aspect of identity in their environments. Participants most often reported in the narrative data that their race was targeted for microaggressions, even though the demographic questionnaire asked about twelve different aspects of identity, and the Women of Color Workplace Microaggressions Survey asked participants to choose which identities were targeted by microaggressions from among the same twelve categories. Navigating racial bias was consistent across all themes while other forms of discrimination received little or no mention. These findings suggested that for women and non-binary people of color in the human services, subtle discrimination based on race is an area in particular need of attention for increased equity in the workplace.

Participants described either being reduced to a racial stereotype by colleagues, or alternately, being seen as someone for whom racial or ethnic identity was not relevant. Some experienced false assumptions made about them in the workplace based on stereotypes of their racial groups. Inversely, those participants who were perceived as having behaviors inconsistent with racial stereotypes were sometimes seen as exceptional to their racial group. These results build on Van Laer and Janssens' (2011) four categories of workplace microaggressions. The findings about racial stereotypes are congruent with two of the workplace microaggression categories; *normalization*, in which an individual is expected to be open about their identity while they are simultaneously judged for that identity, and *legitimization of only the individual*, in which an individual is seen as superior to others in their racial group.

When the race/ethnicity of participants stood out above other qualities, particularly in environments with very few visible people of color, colleagues and supervisors sometimes deferred to racial stereotypes about incompetence rather than familiarizing themselves with an individual's skills and job performance. The experience of being highly visible as a member of one's racial group while simultaneously devalued due to racial group membership is a distinct form of alienation.

Women of color also experienced microaggressions at the intersection of race and biological sex paired with gender identity. Many are objectified and perceived as exotic in comparison to conventional white feminine beauty ideals (Schaper et al., 2020). Participants, primarily Black cisgender women, wrote of attention to their hair, with colleagues touching it, asking to touch it, or otherwise making comments suggesting that

its texture and style were not consistent with professional dress attire. They also offered instances of microaggressive compliments that they were attractive despite their skin color, which is often explicitly referred to as dark.

Implications

The study fills gaps in research that have implications for practice, organizational policy, education, and research. The human service professions should place an increased emphasis on reducing racial microaggressions as part of creating inclusive, non-discriminatory workplaces. It is vital that self-identified women and non-binary people of color be treated as employees valued for their work performance rather than their visible racial difference. At all levels, administrators, direct service providers, and clients ought to remain cognizant of the indirect relationship between inequities in agency environments and disparate outcomes for client populations who are often underrepresented by agency staff. Addressing subtle discrimination among agency employees is integral to just operations of human service organizations.

At the agency level, organizations need to acknowledge that microaggressions occur within the workplace environment and are even perpetrated by well-intended and high-performing employees. Findings about the occurrence and impact of microaggressions ought to inform policies aimed at workplace equity and the enhancement of human service provision. Non-discrimination statements need to be modified to openly recognize that subtle forms of bias pervade society and do not stop within the agency context, despite organizational missions that promote social justice. Instead, non-discrimination statements can make an explicit commitment to addressing implicit bias and microaggressions between employees as they arise. The implementation of modified policy statements should include simultaneously critical and supportive responses from management to microaggressions as they occur, holding employees accountable for demonstrating growth in needed areas.

Workplace policies that create clear and effective avenues for addressing subtle discrimination could be used by women and non-binary employees of color, serving individual career advancement and well-being, to the overall betterment of these professions. After explicit acknowledgment that microaggressions occur, agencies can make reducing microaggressions among employees a priority. A focus on the reduction of workplace microaggressions ought to be reflected in Human Resource policies. Workplace microaggressions can become part of new employee orientations to establish an expectation that part of each person's job responsibilities is to create an inclusive environment by actively acknowledging and reducing microaggressions. Policies should clearly outline processes for remediation that hold employees accountable for subtle discrimination while also making clear that admitting fault does not immediately put an employee on the path to termination.

Internal or external assessment of the agency environment should consider that an initial increase in formal and informal complaints is a positive sign, which indicates that employees may feel newly empowered to exercise channels for remediation. Assessments of the agency ought to include attention to which employees are most vulnerable to bias

and marginalization within a given agency setting. Depending on the organizational culture, the history of the organization, and the groups most represented at levels of power and influence, specific groups are most likely to experience microaggressions, with people from racial and ethnic minority groups often facing nuanced forms of subtle discrimination.

A commitment to reducing microaggressions can be explicitly included among participants' job responsibilities as part of maintaining relationships with colleagues. Some organizations have invested in implicit bias training, for example, yet this is supported by mixed research results (Fujimoto & Härtel, 2017). Other options may include one-to-one supervision for staff perpetuating microaggressions, agency assessments of dynamics and climate among employees to identify specific issues, and the implementation of targeted team-building techniques that address gaps in inclusion and foster greater cultural humility. A recommendation for organizational policies is that employees targeted for microaggressions can witness critical responses to these incidents. Even though certain administrative actions need to happen in privacy with respect to confidentiality and staff development, microaggressions need to be publicly addressed as they occur to create more inclusive and non-discriminatory environments. Furthermore, managers should be held accountable for neglecting to provide a timely, visible response to microaggressions. Employees are not entitled to perpetuate microaggressions in a group setting without also receiving a critical response in that same group setting.

In social work curricula, diversity courses can foster greater cultural humility in students by dispelling racial stereotypes and with explicit education about microaggressions perpetrated by human service providers and more generally throughout society (Fisher, 2021). A commitment to the reduction of microaggressions can be part of formal training for developing an identity as a helping professional. Microaggressions that occur between students in the classroom should be framed as essential opportunities for learning and professional preparation, integral to the implementation of best practices within the human services (Thurber & DiAngelo, 2018). Student orientations can inform students of the human service professions of a department's commitment to reducing microaggressions among its students, faculty, and staff.

Future research with larger sample sizes is needed to advance research about workplace microaggressions within human service agencies. We recommend that studies explore the impact of microaggressions on organizations more broadly, with measures focused on agency functioning, beyond the experiences of individual employees. Larger studies could also examine the generalizability of the finding that racial/ethnic identity was, by far, the most salient identity that this population experienced as a target of discrimination. To improve upon the application of intersectionality theory to the research process, purposive recruitment techniques could be used to recruit larger samples that more broadly and evenly reflect the wide range of groups who are subsumed under the umbrella of "self-identified women and non-binary people of color." Inversely, studies explicitly focused on subpopulations therein, such as Indigenous women, would allow for greater precision in studying the needs of specific marginalized groups.

Limitations

Targeting the National Organization for Human Services for recruitment led to an overrepresentation of people who are members of such organizations, and who subsequently have higher income and possibly also greater career ambition than average among the broader demographic of human service employees. Additionally, snowball sampling is a form of convenience sampling which limits the generalizability of the sample. However, recruitment based on existing relationships between those participants recruited via purposive sampling and their own contacts was a valuable strategy for increasing the sample size of a population underrepresented in scholarly research (Valerio et al., 2016). Lastly, the sample represented those who self-selected to participate in the study with limited incentives and was likely biased towards those with a greater interest in the focus of the study (Brick & Tourangeau, 2017).

Conclusion

Human service organizations must treat workplace microaggressions as serious gaps in their operations. Patterns of subtle discrimination that occur in agency settings serve to maintain large-scale social inequities. Subtle discrimination can have severe consequences at all levels of administration and service provision, despite perceptions of microaggressions as harmless by many people in positions of privilege. Organizational structures that do not address microaggressions inadvertently allow inequities to persist by covert means. To foster inclusion across the human service professions, organizations need to both acknowledge and reduce workplace microaggressions among employees.

It is vital that human service organizations not only attract and retain employees of color but also offer opportunities for professional development and resources for navigating subtle discrimination. Self-identified women and non-binary people of color are belittled when not valued primarily for their skills and job performance. Multiply-marginalized human service professionals are alienated when colleagues' stereotypes distort perceptions of their identities and actions. When seen through a lens of racial stereotypes, many self-identified women and non-binary people of color are either valued for their visible racial difference while seen as incompetent or recognized for their competency yet perceived as unrepresentative of their racial group. Patterns of subtle discrimination that denigrate employees prevent professional growth and stymie potentially rich dialogues about socially-just practices.

The advancement of knowledge about workplace microaggressions has great potential to foster social justice in the human services. Empirical research would aid in the development of evidence-based organizational practices to increase accountability for employees who perpetuate microaggressions. Employees who are otherwise high performing may need additional incentives and guidance to make these seemingly small but impactful changes to their behavior. Studies about workplace microaggressions can be applied to promote socially-just workplace environments, in which organizations aspire towards culturally humble operations, and employees take a more comprehensive view of their responsibilities towards social change.

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Author note: Address correspondence to Berg Miller, Department of Social Work, Buffalo State University, 1300 Elmwood Ave., Caudell Hall 361, Buffalo, NY 14222. Email: millerbk@buffalostate.edu