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Do You See What I See? Perceptions of Gender Microaggressions in the Workplace

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Abstract

Although blatant expressions of sexism in the American workforce appear on the decline, many researchers note that discrimination is not disappearing but is instead becoming more subtle and ambiguous. Drawing from Sue et al.'s construct of microaggressions, which examines manifestations of prejudice ranging from subtle to overt, the present research provides the first known empirical investigation of gender differences in third-party perceptions of microaggressions against women at work. Undergraduate women and men read vignettes describing interactions between male supervisors and female subordinates, which portrayed potentially discriminatory supervisor behavior, ranging in explicitness from subtle to blatant. Results indicate that although both men and women perceive differences in microaggression explicitness, women tend to detect greater discrimination than men, particularly when instances are subtle in nature. Both genders expect microaggressions to generate more negative work outcomes as explicitness increases. We discuss practical implications of our research, including the importance of raising awareness of workplace gender microaggressions, especially its most subtle forms, and of developing supporting programs to help observers of discrimination, who may be more likely to be women in cases of perceived microaggressions against women. Future research directions for addressing the broad range of discrimination facing working women today are also explored.

Keywords

sexism, microaggression, social discrimination, organizational behavior, human sex differences, social perception

Women continue to face challenges in the workplace, which put them at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts. Factors such as negative stereotypes and perceptions, limited mentoring and networking options, family-related issues, funding availability, and discrimination remain as problems confronting today's working women (Bible & Hill, 2007; Evers & Sieverding, **In Press**). In the present investigation, we focus on one of the most persistent factors still challenging working women—workplace gender discrimination—in order to better understand its contemporary manifestations.

Gender discrimination is defined as occurring "when personnel decisions are based on gender, an ascribed characteristic, rather than on an individual's qualifications or job performance" (Foley, Hang-yue, & Wong, 2005, p. 423). The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (2013) cites over 30,000 sex-based charges of discrimination in 2012, and research suggests that far more cases likely go unreported (Leslie & Gelfand, 2008). Better understanding contemporary manifestations of discrimination against women at work is essential because a large body of research reveals its harmful effects on job-related, psychological, and physical well-being (Chan, Lam, Chow, & Cheung, 2008; Foley et al., 2005; Herrbach & Mignonac, 2012).

Contemporary Discrimination

Though overt sexism against women within organizations may be starting to decline (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995), many scholars fear that discrimination is not disappearing but rather has become more subtle in nature (Campbell, Schellenberg, & Senn, 1997; Dipboye & Colella, 2005). Understanding how today's working women are affected by sexism—often in a more subtle way than in the past—is critical for gender discrimination to be effectively identified, targeted, and addressed.

Researchers studying these contemporary manifestations of prejudice and discrimination against women draw from several similar constructs in the literature. For instance,

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Swim, Aikin, Hall, and Hunter's (1995) discussion of modern sexism describes how, in rejecting old-fashioned discrimination, some have come to perceive that discrimination against women is a mere relic of the past. Consequently, Swim et al. (1995) note that modern sexism can manifest through resentment toward women receiving "special favors," such as policies designed to support the advancement of women in academics and work. In addition, Benokraitis (1997) highlights many forms of subtly sexist behaviors that may seem friendly on the surface but which can have pernicious consequences. Swim, Hyers, Cohen, and Ferguson (2001) also examine everyday sexism, the daily experiences of interpersonal discrimination embedded in people's lives, which often encompass subtle manifestations of modern sexist beliefs. Similarly, the concept of neosexism notes that although sexism persists, it may reveal itself in more covert forms due to contemporary societal egalitarian values (Tougas, Brown, Beaton, & St-Pierre, 1999). Becker and Swim (2011, p. 227) argue that reducing sexist beliefs requires that perceivers become more aware of subtle discrimination and be able to "see the unseen."

Although researchers describing subtle discrimination may draw upon different constructs and frequently use different terminology, all recognize its insidious nature and negative impact. Subtle discrimination causes uncertainty regarding the accuracy of perceptions of prejudice (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008), creating the kind of ambiguity that has been associated with anxiety and depression (Banks, Kohn-Wood, & Spencer, 2006; Noh, Kaspar, & Wickrama, 2007).

The construct of microaggressions offers a new window into the harmful manifestations and effects of contemporary gender discrimination. Although concurring with scholarship on modern sexism (Swim et al., 1995), everyday sexism (Swim et al., 2001), and neosexism (Tougas et al., 1999) in recognizing the often subtle forms of contemporary discrimination against women, the microaggression construct also retains focus on the ongoing blatant expressions of sexism. As discussed below, it offers a taxonomy of discrimination to capture and assess the wide range of discriminations facing working women today.

Gender Microaggressions

Sue and his colleagues (2007, p. 271) define microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color." Although this construct has most often been assessed qualitatively to explore racial discrimination, Sue (2010) suggests its application to other forms of discrimination, including gender discrimination. Extending work on microaggressions beyond the domain of race, scholars have recently begun to explore the impact of microaggressions targeted against women (Nadal, Hamit, Lyons, Weinberg, & Corman, 2013; Nadal & Haynes, 2011). In our research, we examine the microaggression taxonomy in the context of workplace gender discrimination, defining *gender microaggressions* as intentional or unintentional actions or behaviors that exclude, demean, insult, oppress, or otherwise express hostility or indifference toward women.

Unlike other research into subtle discrimination, such as incivilities (Cortina, 2008) or microinequities (Rowe, 1990) that focus on a single level of explicitness, the construct of microaggressions presents discrimination in terms of a range from subtle to overt. This taxonomy captures the varied forms of discrimination confronting working women and permits examination of how blatant incidents must be before they are perceived as discriminatory. In Sue et al.'s (2007) model, microaggressions span from ambiguous microinvalidations to slightly more overt microinsults to explicit microassaults. *Microinvalidations* encompass "actions that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiences of people of color" (Sue et al., 2008, p. 331); *microinsults* involve "actions . . . that convey insensitivity, are rude, or directly demean a person's racial identity or heritage" (p. 331); and *microassaults* include expressions similar to old-fashioned racism that are "most often deliberate on the part of the microaggressor, whose intent is to hurt, oppress, or discriminate . . . " (pp. 330–331).

When applied to gender, this taxonomy offers great potential to explore the breadth of discrimination facing women in the workplace. Examining workplace gender discrimination through the lens of microaggressions affords the opportunity to assess the broad subtle-to-overt range of sexist experiences, broadening the scope of most other frameworks. This insight is valuable because today's manifestations of gender discrimination vary widely at work, from obvious attacks to more subtle forms (e.g., being excluded from key conversations; Suskind, 2011). Prejudicial beliefs may lead some to deny working women's ongoing challenges, potentially causing women to feel their struggles are invalidated. Discrimination may also manifest as insensitive microinsults that put down working women or even as blatantly sexist microassaults. Studying gender discrimination in all its forms, from the subtle to the explicit, offers the potential to fully address the ongoing challenges of today's working women.

Our investigation is necessary to better understand perceptions and consequences of the range of contemporary manifestations of gender discrimination. It also offers the opportunity to empirically examine how third-party observers react to subtle forms of gender workplace microaggressions, something that to our knowledge has yet to undergo quantitative study. Examining how witnesses view discriminatory interactions against women at work is essential because their reactions can impact an organization's climate of inclusiveness. Observers who do not perceive interactions as discriminatory or who deny the negative impact of slights and offenses may doubt the target's claims and fail to offer support. In contrast, those who recognize discrimination in even its subtle forms can speak up on the target's behalf and encourage the target to come forward to make the organization more equitable for all. Also, because research has found witnessing both sexual and ethnic harassment to be associated with negative consequences for observers as well as targets (Glomb et al., 1997; Low, Radhakrishnan, Schneider, & Rounds, 2007; Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2004), the present investigation offers value in identifying individuals who may be especially attuned to subtle gender discrimination and at risk for detrimental effects as consequence.

Thus, our research provides a valuable study of observations of workplace gender microaggression against women. Although numerous factors may impact perceptions of gender discrimination against working women, our investigation first focuses on two of the most potentially important variables: explicitness of the incident and the gender of the observer.

Observations of workplace gender discrimination likely vary according to the explicitness of microaggressions. Although not all witnesses may recognize discrimination in its most subtle forms, denial presumably becomes more difficult as explicitness increases. Whereas microinvalidations, when perceived, may be viewed as largely unintentional, blatant microassaults should be much harder to overlook. Thus, we first check to see whether observers will perceive greater amounts of gender microaggression as explicitness increases, from microinvalidations to microinsults to microassaults.

When gender microaggressions are perceived, observers will likely expect the victim to be negatively predict impacted. Witnesses of gender microaggressions might predict the target to experience declines in satisfaction, motivation, retention intentions, and even job performance. Supporting this logic, prior research has shown that experiences of gender discrimination negatively impact work-related outcomes, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intentions to leave (Foley et al., 2005). Further, perceptions of racial microaggressions have been found to affect projected work outcomes, with higher perceptions of racial microaggressions associated with poorer projected work outcomes (Offermann, Basford, De Graaf, Graebner, & Jaffer, 2013). Although one might argue that more subtle forms of microaggression may actually be harder for victims to deal with because they involve guesswork and uncertainty (Sue et al., 2008), we do not believe that most observers consider ambiguity to be as detrimental as blatant hostility when forming judgments about the effects of observed microaggressions. Rather, we expect observers to predict poorer outcomes for the victims of explicit microaggressions that are readily deemed discriminatory. Thus, we propose that observers will expect the negative work outcomes for victims of gender microaggression to increase as explicitness increases (Hypothesis 1).

Differences in the Perception

Due to their often subtle and ambiguous nature, people may perceive microaggressions differently depending on the characteristics of the target. Though researchers have yet to empirically explore systematic variation in perceptions of gender workplace microaggressions, existing work suggests that women, more so than men, may notice microaggressions against other women. Kobrynowicz and Branscombe's (1997) research indicates that women may simply be more aware of societal discrimination against women than men. In the area of harassment, federal courts may use a "reasonable woman" rather than a "reasonable man" standard to determine whether hostile environment harassment has occurred due to concerns that men may under-recognize harassment compared to women (Perry, Kulik, & Bourhis, 2004). Also, Ryan, Haslam, and Postmes' (2007, p. 182) qualitative work found women were more apt to recognize the existence, prevalence, and risk of the glass cliff, whereby "women are more likely than men to be placed in precarious leadership positions," whereas men more often doubted and minimized the threat.

We predict a similar trend in perceptions and expected effects of gender workplace microaggression. Research showing that women, as compared to their male counterparts, appear more attuned to societal discrimination against other women (Kobrynowicz & Branscombe, 1997; Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007) may extend to perceptions of gender microaggressions in the workforce. Because women are more likely to have personally experienced gender discrimination, they may be especially apt to perceive gender microaggressions targeting women in even their most subtle manifestations. Thus, we hypothesize that women will be more prone than men to detect gender microaggressions against women, especially at more ambiguous levels (Hypothesis 2).

In addition to being more likely to perceive gender microaggressions targeting women, women may also associate microaggressions with more negative outcomes. Research examining the impact of experiencing gender microaggression from the point of view of the target indicates that women who perceived high levels of discrimination reported lower organizational commitment than men who experienced similar amounts of discrimination (Foley et al., 2005). These findings may extend to gender differences in the expected impact on the target of gender microaggressions. More often the targets of gender microaggressions, women may more readily empathize with other targets and recognize how these offenses can negatively impact them at work, whereas men might be more apt to simply "shrug off" the effects of microaggressions. Therefore, we expect that women, more than men, will expect female microaggression targets to experience more negative projected work outcomes (Hypothesis 3).

Method

Participants

Our sample consisted of 150 students participating in an undergraduate subject pool at a mid-size, Mid-Atlantic U.S.

university. Participants included 70 (46.7%) women and 80 (53.3%) men. Participant ethnicity was assessed as follows: 96 (64.0%) White/non-Hispanic, 11 (7.3%) Asian/Pacific Islander, 11 (7.3%) Hispanic/Latino/Latina, 9 (6.0%) Black/African origin, and 23 (15.3%) other. A χ^2goodness-of-fit test demonstrated that there were no meaningful differences in the distribution of ethnicity by gender, $\chi^2(5) = 9.78$, $p = .08$.

Procedure and Materials

Participants were informed that they were to read a set of scenarios depicting interactions between female employees and their male supervisors at a fictitious organization. Using a within-subject design, each participant read a series of eight vignettes (see Appendix) presented in randomized order and with each describing a different interaction between a male supervisor and female subordinate at work. There were two vignettes for each form of microaggression (i.e., microinvalidation, microinsult, and microassault) as well as two no-microaggression/control vignettes in which discrimination was not present. These 8 vignettes were selected from an original set of 24 vignettes developed by four subject-matter experts after thorough review of the microaggression and discrimination literature. This original set of 24 vignettes, including 6 vignettes at each proposed level of microaggression and 6 no-microaggression/control vignettes, was narrowed to a smaller subset through extensive pilot testing with different undergraduate samples in order to reduce the likelihood of poor responses due to participant fatigue. Vignettes that were selected all pertained to the evaluation of the target's performance, either in a formal review setting or where there was clear reference to performance assessment, to minimize confounding variables. After reading each vignette, participants responded to both the perceived microaggression and projected negative work outcomes scales.

Perceived microaggression. Perceived microaggression was measured on a 13-item scale, with a 5-point Likert response choice ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*; Graebner, Basu, Jaffer, Offermann, & Basford, 2009). Items were averaged to compute a perceived microaggression score, with higher scores indicating a greater perception of microaggression for each vignette. Items were originally developed to assess the degree to which observers perceive supervisors to be intentionally discriminatory and aware of the racial undertones of their actions, reflecting the construct definition of racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). Prior research using the perceived racial microaggressions scale in an undergraduate student sample indicates that it relates to projected work outcomes as expected (Offermann et al., 2013). For the purposes of the present study, items in the racial microaggressions scale that referred to race were adapted to pertain to gender (e.g., "racially insensitive manner" was modified to "gender-insensitive manner"). Sample items include "The manager's actions were discriminatory," "The supervisor meant to behave in a gender-insensitive manner," "The actions of the manager were based on the manager's prejudice," and "The manager's actions were just" (reverse coded). The perceived racial microaggression scale showed consistently strong reliability (α = .79–.91; Offermann et al., 2013); our gender microaggression measure demonstrated adequate reliability (α = .68–.89 depending on the vignette used), with the lowest reliability reported for a no-microaggression/control vignette where respondents may have found it more difficult to assess supervisor microaggression intent.

Projected negative work outcomes. Negative work outcomes were projected using a 7-item scale measuring the degree to which observers perceived that the victim would experience lower levels of positive work outcomes as a result of the interaction (Offermann et al., 2013). Participants responded on the same 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In keeping with Harrison, Newman, and Roth's (2006) suggestion to conceptualize behavior resulting from job attitudes at a high level of abstraction indicating a general tendency of employees to contribute positive work inputs rather than measuring indicators such as satisfaction or commitment separately, items were averaged together to compute an overall projected negative work outcomes score, such that higher scores indicate greater projected negative work outcomes. Previous research on racial discrimination provides validity evidence for this scale, with projected work outcomes predictably affected by racial microaggressions (Offermann et al., 2013). In the present study, items were amended only slightly to account for gender (e.g., "his job" was changed to "her job"). Example items include "This interaction will have no negative consequences on [Subordinate X's] work performance" (reverse coded), "[Subordinate X's] future performance in her job will be negatively impacted by this interaction," "This exchange will impact [Subordinate X's] satisfaction with her job," and "Because of this conversation, [Subordinate X] will be less motivated in her work." As found in prior research on the reliability of this scale (α = .80–.92; Offermann et al., 2013), the measure was found to show strong reliability in the present study (α = .71–.84 depending on the vignette).

Results

Analysis Plan

A repeated measures analysis of variance was used for all analyses. Repeated measures analyses can take either a multivariate or univariate approach; in the current article, we used the univariate approach. Microaggression condition (i.e., microassault, microinsult, microinvalidation, and no-microaggression/control) was treated as a within-subject independent variable, gender as a between-subject independent variable, and perceived microaggressions and projected negative work outcomes as separate dependent variables. Because Mauchly's test indicated that the sphericity

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Study Variables ($N = 150$).

Measure Vignette condition	M^{a}	SD	Perceived Microaggression Aslt	 Inslt	 Invd	 No	Projected Outcomes Aslt	 Inslt	 Invd
Perceived microaggression									
Microassault (Aslt)	3.44^{a}	.42	—						
Microinsult (Inslt)	3.33^{a}	.46	.285**	—					
Microinvalidation (Invd)	2.86^{b}	.45	.344**	.297**	—				
No-microaggression (No)	2.23^{c}	.36	−.057	−.106	.263**	—			
Projected negative work outcomes									
Microassault (Aslt)	3.65^{a}	.46	.236**	.160*	−.041	−.096	—		
Microinsult (Inslt)	3.55^{a}	.55	.093	.495**	.022	−.093	.517**	—	
Microinvalidation (Invd)	3.22^{b}	.45	.147	.101	.437**	.080	.339**	.304**	—
No-microaggression (No)	2.19^{c}	.53	−.083	−.160	.102	.613**	−.061	−.074	.156

Note. Different subscripts across vignette conditions within each measure indicate significant mean differences.
[a] Means for each vignette condition are the average across the two designated vignettes.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

assumption had been violated for both perceived microaggressions, $\chi^2(5) = 12.49$, $p = .03$, and projected negative work outcomes, $\chi^2(5) = 51.31$, $p < .001$, the Greenhouse–Geisser correction was employed. This correction adjusts the degrees of freedom for within-subjects F ratios such that they may have decimal values. Further reducing the chance of Type I error, Bonferroni-adjusted significance values, multiplying observed p-values by number of pairwise comparisons, were used for all subsequent analyses.

Preliminary Analyses

The explicitness of microaggression condition significantly impacted perceived microaggressions, $F(2.83, 419.34) = 304.66$, $p < .001$, $\eta_{\rho}^{2} = .67$. As displayed in Table 1, all means differed in the predicted direction. All pairwise comparisons were significant at the $p < .001$ level with the exception of the mean difference in perceived microaggresssion between the microassault and microinsult conditions that did not achieve significance ($p = .12$).

Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1, which predicted that observers would expect negative work outcomes for victims of gender microaggression increase as explicitness increases, was largely supported. Microaggression condition explicitness significantly impacted projected work outcomes, $F(2.40, 354.92) = 323.92$, $p < .001$, $\eta_{\rho}^{2} = .69$. As shown in Table 1, all means differed in the predicted direction. All pairwise comparisons were significant at the $p < .001$ level, with the exception of the mean difference in projected negative work outcomes between the microassault and microinsult conditions which was not significant ($p = .12$).

Hypothesis 2, predicting that women would perceive greater microaggression than men, was mostly supported. Averaging across vignettes, women (mean [M] = 3.05, standard deviation [SD] = .26) perceived more overall microaggression than men ($M = 2.89$, $SD = .25$), $F(1, 148) = 13.59$, $p < .001$, $\eta_{\rho}^{2} = .08$. Although the overall interaction between gender and vignette type was not significant, $F(2.83, 354.92) = .65$, $p = .42$, $\eta_{\rho}^{2} = .04$, we did explore specific contrasts of interest to examine whether gender differences emerged for some conditions. Post hoc Bonferroni-corrected t tests revealed that women ($M = 3.42$, $SD = .43$) perceived greater microaggression in the microinsult condition compared to men ($M = 3.26$, $SD = .48$), $t(148) = -2.06$, $p = .02$, $d = -.34$. Additionally, women ($M = 2.98$, $SD = .45$) perceived greater microaggression in the microinvalidation condition compared to men ($M = 2.76$, $SD = .43$), $t(148) = -3.11$, $p < .001$, $d = -.51$. Other male/female mean differences were not significant.

Hypothesis 3, predicting that women would project greater negative work outcomes than men for the target women, was not supported. Averaging across vignettes, women ($M = 3.18$, $SD = .34$) perceived similar negative work outcomes as men ($M = 3.12$, $SD = .28$) $F(1, 148) = 1.23$, $p = .27$. There was also a nonsignificant gender by microaggression interaction, $F(2.39, 354.92) = .32$, $p = .42$, $\eta_{\rho}^{2} = .00$. Post hoc Bonferroni-corrected t-tests revealed that means did not differ significantly for any of the four conditions.

Discussion

Despite progress in reducing the acceptability of blatant gender discrimination, women continue to face subtle, ambiguous manifestations of prejudice (Dipboye & Colella, 2005). As scholarship on modern sexism (Swim et al., 1995), everyday sexism (Swim et al., 2001), and neosexism (Tougas et al., 1999) suggests, today's working women often experience more covert discrimination than in the past. However, because explicit sexism still exists as well, applying the construct of gender microaggressions—examining discrimination from its most subtle to most overt manifestations—is necessary to understand the full range and effects of sexism that are currently confronting women.

The present research provides the first known empirical quantitative investigation into third-party observations of workplace gender microaggressions, offering insight into challenges facing today's working women and providing an important initial controlled investigation into a largely unexplored domain. Validating Sue's (2010) contention that the construct of microaggression is not limited to race, our work shows that the graduated taxonomy of microaggression explicitness also applies to incidents based on target gender.

Findings suggest that observers, regardless of gender, perceive greater microaggression against women as the explicitness of discrimination increases. Further, witnesses expect female targets to experience poorer work outcomes following more blatant microaggressions. Thus, both women and men can detect nuances in the explicit nature of gender microaggressions targeted against women in observed interactions, and both react by predicting more negative impacts for female targets of more explicit discrimination. These findings showed medium-to-large effect sizes, giving confidence in the results.

Despite finding that both men and women perceive microaggressions directed against women and expect them to generate negative outcomes, gender differences emerged. Overall, women were significantly more likely to perceive workplace gender microaggressions than men, findings which were small in effect size. Follow-up analyses revealed that these gender differences emerged at the two lowest levels of explicitness, suggesting that women are more attuned to subtle forms of discrimination than men. Only in the no-microaggression/control condition and at the most blatant level of gender microaggression were gender differences not significant. These findings with microaggressions parallel those of Rotundo, Nguyen, and Sackett's (2001) meta-analysis on perceived sexual harassment, which showed that women are more likely than men to perceive a broader range of behaviors as sexual harassment and that this difference tends to be larger for more ambiguous behaviors.

These results indicate that interpretation of gender discrimination may vary according to the gender of the observer. As previously noted, one possible mechanism underlying these findings may be a difference in prior personal experiences with gender discrimination. Women's greater sensitivity to gender microaggressions may stem from personal experiences with sexism, either actions directed at them or at their female colleagues. As more frequent targets or potential targets of sexism, women may be especially aware of subtle gender discrimination and more apt to identify with victims. In contrast, men's more infrequent personal encounters with sexism may lead them to be less attuned to subtle expressions of discrimination against women. This discrepancy may hinder efforts to achieve inclusive workplaces because what men may consider fair could be seen by women as disenfranchising. Also, if women view men as less likely to acknowledge subtle discrimination, they may avoid reporting such incidents to male supervisors.

Limitations

As an initial inquiry into the construct of gender microaggressions, our study examined reactions of undergraduate men and women to incidents of gender microaggression, finding that these respondents recognize microaggressions directed toward women at varying levels of explicitness and that female participants appear especially attuned to perceiving gender microaggressions. Though research supports the use of student samples so long as they are well designed and assess the phenomena of interest (Dipboye & Flanagan, 1979; Locke, 1986), the demographic makeup of this sample may limit the generalizability of findings. Although participants were fairly evenly distributed in terms of gender and roughly aligned with the non-Hispanic White U.S. population percentage, other characteristics appear less representative of the U.S. workforce. These characteristics, such as the distribution of other race/ethnicity categories, age, socioeconomic status, and education level, must be recognized and addressed in future research.

Our sample also did not allow for the examination of a number of factors that might exacerbate or mitigate microaggression perceptions. Specifically, likely restriction on variance in age and work experience constrained our ability to assess the effects of these variables on perceptions of gender microaggressions. It is possible that older women with longer work histories may be even more attuned to gender inequities, making our results a potentially conservative estimate of workplace gender microaggression perceptions. However, the significant effects found with our predominantly young adult sample suggest that microaggressions can be detected even among those without a lengthy employment history. Along with age and tenure, other variables potentially impacting these perceptions, such as sexual orientation and socioeconomic status, deserve attention in future research as well.

Also, as relatively nascent scales, the measures used in this study require additional psychometric investigation. Potential influences on the reliability of the scales should be explored. The α of .68 found for one of the vignettes is slightly below the typically accepted threshold of .70. Given our repeated measures design, short measures were essential to avoid participant fatigue, and fortunately this brevity did not affect our ability to find significant relationships. However, future research may adopt a longer measure to increase reliability. Further research that combines study of these scales in conjunction with other measures is critical to provide additional validity evidence for the scales, demonstrating the extent to which they converge with measures of similar constructs, diverge from measures of different constructs, and relate to other expected outcomes.

Practice Implications

Our investigation indicates that both male and female observers can detect nuances in microaggressions targeted against women in the workplace and that they project more negative work outcomes for targets as microaggression explicitness increases. These are important findings because simple awareness of gender discrimination in all its forms is the first step to promoting inclusive workplaces and changing sexist behaviors. By educating employees about manifestations of contemporary workplace gender discrimination—from the subtle to overt—and providing clear guidance about how they should respond when they detect it, employees will be better positioned to recognize microaggressions and equipped to offer appropriate support to victims. Also, in raising consciousness about microaggressions—be it through formal training, awareness campaigns, affinity/employee resource groups, and other programs—employees may become more attentive to their own behavior, an element necessary for unfreezing old patterns and promoting lasting behavioral change (Lewin, 1951).

Although both men and women can detect microaggressions against women, practitioners should be aware that women appear especially attuned to perceiving these exchanges. Women's greater sensitivity to gender microaggressions may be a double-edged sword. On one hand, this sensitivity may help women notice discrimination and, consequently, respond more effectively when targeted and provide appropriate support to victims. On the other, this heightened awareness poses a risk because witnesses of discrimination may themselves experience harmful effects as a result of perceiving the injustice (Low et al., 2007; Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2004), and women who are aware of a negative organizational climate may suffer declines in well-being (Miner-Rubino, Settles, & Stewart, 2009) that could potentially affect their performance and even desire to stay in the organization.

Thus, organizations seeking to promote climates of inclusion may find merit in paying attention to more than just the victims of discrimination. Employees who report observed instances of microaggression should also be provided necessary support, even if not the actual targets of discrimination themselves. Practitioners may find that their discrimination support programs and resources may need to be enhanced to address the concerns of those who observe discriminatory exchanges as well as those directly targeted. Through demonstrating organizational awareness of gender microaggressions, communicating intentions to address these issues, and developing relevant interventions for both victims and witnesses, companies have essential roles to play in reducing contemporary discrimination.

Future Research Directions

In addition to offering important findings and implications for practice, the present investigation also opens new directions for future research. Because we sought to explore a construct that had yet to undergo empirical scrutiny, the controlled laboratory setting provided a necessary environment to examine female and male perceptions of gender microaggressions in the workplace as well as their expected outcomes. Our vignettes, based on reported real-world experiences, speak to a few of the many ways in which the contributions of working women may be minimized and a climate of perceived inequality created. However, to better assess generalizability of findings, future studies conducted in the field are recommended to explore the extent and breadth of gender microaggressions at work and their long-term impact on women in the workplace. These field studies might also assess manifestations of gender discrimination not captured in our investigation, including subtle nonverbal cues such as derogatory facial expressions and inattention.

Also, having found evidence of gender differences in the perceptions of microaggressions against women at work, researchers should next ask *Why?* Further study is needed to explain why women tend to perceive more microaggression than men. As previously suggested, observers' prior experience with discrimination may be a mediating variable and could be further investigated. Other possible mediators, such as empathy, could also be examined to better explain the mechanisms underlying gender differences. Exploration into such factors that may contribute to male and female differential assessments of microaggressions is necessary to improve our understanding of this phenomena and, ultimately, to help develop relevant organizational interventions.

To further expand understanding of gender microaggressions, future investigation must also examine additional personal and contextual factors that may impact these perceptions. Prior research has uncovered a number of variables affecting perceptions of prejudice—such as mood (Sechrist, Swim, & Mark, 2003), self-presentation concerns and the need for control (Sechrist, Swim, & Stangor, 2004), and intent and harm (Swim, Scott, Sechrist, Campbell, & Stangor, 2003)—which may also influence microaggression perceptions and bear further investigation. Also, as noted earlier, examining gender microaggressions in a workplace sample would allow for greater study into how personal factors such as age, socioeconomic status, tenure, occupation, and workplace gender composition contribute to appraisals of gender microaggression, adding refinement to present knowledge of the construct.

The findings presented here on gender discrimination, and elsewhere on race (Sue, 2010), suggest that the microaggression taxonomy may prove useful in understanding the challenges experienced by members of various other potentially disenfranchised identity groups. Future research could examine this possibility, extending the microaggression taxonomy to investigate prejudice against working mothers; employees of different age groups; members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer community; people with disabilities; individuals suffering from various medical issues; and members of numerous other frequently oppressed groups.

Additional exploration of microaggressions is necessary to improve our understanding of these phenomena and ultimately develop relevant organizational interventions to counter subtle discrimination. For instance, our study's finding of the greater propensity for women to perceive microaggressions, particularly at lower levels of explicitness, suggests that organizations must better consider women's perspectives in assessments of workplace equality and inclusiveness, as they often do in cases of sexual harassment (Perry et al., 2004). Thus, through this research and the continued study of workplace microaggressions, greater insight can be gleaned into the mechanisms of contemporary organizational discrimination. Understanding these mechanisms is an important step in order to better develop effective organizational programs that successfully promote fair and equitable workplaces.

Appendix

Microaggression Vignettes by Explicitness Level

Microassault. Janice works as a client sales representative. During her performance evaluation, her manager, David brings up this issue: "Janice, you're doing a great job here at our firm, but I wanted to talk to you about something. You see, some of our clients have expressed concern about your appearance . . . more particularly your clothing style, and how it might not convey the right message of professionalism that this firm stands for." Janice says, "I don't understand. I am not wearing anything inappropriate, they're just fashionable skirt suits . . . " David replies, "Well, that's just it, it's a little too . . . feminine." (perceived microaggression: $\alpha = .87$; projected negative outcomes: $\alpha = .73$).

Bill is a supervisor in the investment research department. He storms into a meeting with his team to discuss a critical project that has been ongoing for the past 3 months. Jane has been the primary lead on this project and due to unforeseen circumstances is not present at this meeting. Bill says, "Listen, since Jane's not here, I'm going to be frank. Our team is in a lot of trouble. Jane has dropped the ball on the project and unfortunately, we will not meet our financial objectives for the quarter. You can thank her for not getting a bonus this year." Bill, still visibly upset, storms out of the room muttering a sexist remark. (perceived microaggression: $\alpha = .81$; projected negative outcomes: $\alpha = .71$)

Microinsult. Jessica, an associate within the finance department, is discussing her performance appraisal ratings with her boss, John. During the meeting, Jessica was reporting back on her accomplishments for the quarter. They discuss a formal presentation that Jessica had single-handedly developed and delivered to a group of key potential clients. After Jessica briefs John on the outcome of this presentation, John asks, "So, who helped you with your presentation?" (perceived microaggression: $\alpha = .89$; projected negative outcomes: $\alpha = .84$)

George manages the emerging markets department at Pendlebrook. He is getting ready to present his entire team with their annual performance review. As his team files into the conference room, George says, "The team as a whole received positive ratings, however, we struggle with being innovative in the way we do business." Jennifer, a senior research associate, offers some insight and suggestions based on her experience at her previous firm on how to address some of the roadblocks the team faces. Following Jennifer, several other people offer their thoughts as well. Finally, Peter provides exactly the same idea as Jennifer originally did. George thanks Peter for sharing his ideas and asks him to draft further details on the suggestion to pass along to senior management. (perceived microaggression: $\alpha = .89$; projected negative outcomes: $\alpha = .78$)

Microinvalidation. Mary is an HR associate at Pendlebrook, waiting to meet with her boss, Stephen. Mary is eager to discuss her work on a recent presentation about the "State of the Company," meant for a senior-level audience at the firm (including the CEO). When her boss looks at the first few slides of Mary's presentation, he notices a great deal of focus on the statistics associated with women advancing in corporate America. Stephen says, "I'm not sure we need to focus on this aspect. I don't see how it's a problem. Let's just take these slides out." (perceived microaggression: $\alpha = .89$; projected negative outcomes: $\alpha = .82$)

Amy works at Pendlebrook as a program analyst. During her performance review, Amy is eager to talk to her boss, Dave. Amy tells Dave that she overheard her colleague Matthew talking about the new project Amy was leading. Matthew expressed some doubts about Amy's ability to lead the project, and Amy says she believes it's because she is a woman. Dave says, "Amy, I think you're overreacting. Matt wouldn't believe something like that." (perceived microaggression: $\alpha = .84$; projected negative outcomes: $\alpha = .84$)

No-microaggression/control. Sue is a financial analyst in the Risk Assessment Division. She is currently undergoing her biannual performance evaluation with her manager, Chad. Chad says, "Sue, I have reviewed your progress and there seems to be a slight drop in your performance toward the end of the second quarter. Was there any reason why this happened? I hope we can talk about that and ways to set and achieve performance goals." (perceived microaggression: $\alpha = .68$; projected negative outcomes: $\alpha = .74$)

Emily is a first-year associate at Pendlebrook, working in the human resources department. She has gained a great deal of experience so far at the firm. Emily's boss, Brian, is about to give Emily her first performance review. The boss starts off the meeting, "Emily, we're really happy to have you on our team. In order to help you move along in the company, I'd like to offer you additional opportunities for training. I know you've learned a lot from your colleagues, but we all have some room for improvement." (perceived microaggression: $\alpha = .82$; projected negative outcomes: $\alpha = .82$)

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