

Racial Microaggression Experiences and Coping Strategies of Black Women in Corporate Leadership

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The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of racial microaggressions in the workplace and coping strategies of Black women managers in corporate American positions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 Black women who had worked as senior-level corporate professionals, acknowledged that subtle racism exists in contemporary U.S. society, and had personal experiences of racism in the workplace. A phenomenological methodology was used to uncover the lived experiences of these women. Results yielded racial microaggression themes including environmental manifestations, stereotypes about Black women, assumed universality of the Black experience, invisibility and exclusion. Coping strategies included religion and spirituality, armoring, shifting, support networks, sponsorship and mentorship, and self-care. Directions for future research, clinical and theoretical implications of experiences of racial microaggressions, and coping strategies of professional Black women in corporate America are discussed.

Keywords: career development, coping, phenomenology, professional Black women, racial microaggressions

The increasing diversification of the global economy has resulted in unprecedented market growth and economic opportunity. Minority populations have made significant gains in the workplace since civil rights laws made segregation and discrimination illegal (Hewlett, Jackson, Cose, & Emerson, 2012). The rapid changes seen in the U.S. workforce have been described as the feminization of the workforce (Taylor & Kennedy, 2003) and the changing complexion of the workforce (Sue, Parham, & Santiago, 1998). According to the U.S. Depart-

ment of Labor (2009), women make up 46.5% of the total U.S. workforce and are expected to reach 47% by the year 2016. With regard to race and ethnicity, it is estimated that between 2030 and 2050, people of color will represent a numerical majority in the United States (Sue & Sue, 2008). According to Catalyst (2013), 59.8% of Black women participated in the labor force and projections indicate a 18.3% increase of Black women in the U.S. labor force between 2000 and 2020.

Despite the increasing diversification of the workplace, people of color are underrepresented at the executive levels in corporate America. This is particularly evident among professional Black women, who make up only one percent of U.S. corporate officers (Taylor & Nivens, 2011). African American women represent an important and growing source of talent for corporate America and have been fairly well represented in entry to middle level management. However, as Black women ascend the corporate ladder, they encounter serious challenges (Executive Leadership Council, 2008) that limit access to the C suite (a term used to refer to a corporation's senior executive levels) and their overall career advancement.

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Racism has been cited as a critical factor in explaining the underrepresentation of Black women in management in corporate America (Bell, 2004). Although racism has been part of the experience of Black Americans for hundreds of years, the face of contemporary or aversive racism is significantly different from blatant acts of hostility and discrimination. Modern racism is more likely to be expressed as covert, indirect, and more ambiguous, thus creating challenges in identifying and acknowledging its occurrence (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002), while still impacting and oppressing individuals in profound ways (Sue, Lin, & Rivera, 2009; Torres, Driscoll, & Burrow, 2010). A common and frequently expressed form of aversive racism is racial microaggressions—“brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group” (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007, p. 273). Racial microaggressions can have a deleterious and cumulative psychological impact over time (Franklin, 1999).

The success and economic viability of businesses will depend on their ability to effectively manage a diverse workforce that allows equal access and opportunity (Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). Black women represent the largest female minority group to receive educational degrees (Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, & Harrison, 2008). Since the mid-1970s, the number of Black women earning bachelor’s degrees has increased by 55%. The number of Black women earning master’s degrees increased 149.5% from 1991 to 2001—from 10,700 to 26,697—and earned professional and graduate degrees among Black women has soared 219% (Bagati, 2008). In addition to representing a critical source of talent for corporate America, Black women, by virtue of their biculturalism in being members of two identity groups, cultivate sophisticated adaptive skills (McGlowan-Fellows & Thomas, 2005) that have been proven to be a critical component of effective leadership. They bring rich perspectives that are vital to succeeding in complex global economic systems.

Yet, some companies are hesitant to appoint Black women to positions of prestige and high visibility, often because of the belief that they

lack the skills, leadership ability, savvy, and drive to successfully compete in the executive suite (Bell, 2004). With the intersections of their identities marginalized by race and gender, Black women risk experiencing deceleration in their career trajectories (Bagati, 2008). White women refer to a *glass ceiling* to describe barriers to career success whereas Black women encounter a *concrete ceiling*, whereby opportunities for career advancement are significantly reduced or nonexistent (Ray & Davis, 1988). The concrete ceiling is more challenging to penetrate as one cannot see through it (Catalyst, 1999).

The existence of race-based stereotypes in the workplace can adversely impact Black women’s careers and relationship with colleagues at work (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). With the intersection of race and gender, Black women have a history of negative stereotypes like Mammy, the self-sacrificing and supportive woman. Modern stereotypes, such as the superwoman or crazy woman with an attitude, also create barriers for Black women in the workplace (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). Although they may be viewed as competent, Black women may also be stereotyped as hostile and aggressive, which are not qualities that will lead them to the executive suite. Black women also experience the perception of being intellectually inferior, which can undermine their credibility. African Americans report having to constantly prove their ability and observe the surprise of managers and colleagues who may have had initial assumptions about their competence (Sue et al., 2009; Torres et al., 2010). These negative perceptions create a sense of invisibility and limit access to critical networks of influence in the workplace.

Being exposed to the daily assault of racial microaggressions has major psychological implications and consequences. In a study examining workplace harassment at five organizations, minority women were significantly more harassed in the workplace than minority men and majority men and women (Berdahl & Moore, 2006). Root (2003) identified 10 categories representing the most common symptoms likely to manifest in employees who experience chronic microaggressions—*anxiety, paranoia, depression, sleep difficulties, lack of confidence, worthlessness, intrusive cognitions, helplessness, loss of drive, and false positives*

(person overgeneralizes negative experiences with others due to persistent feelings of harassment). The range of these categories illustrates the serious implications racial microaggressions have on mental health.

Black women corporate leaders likely use coping strategies to protect themselves against the humiliation, marginalization, and frustration experienced with racial microaggressions. African Americans use informal internal and external networks of individuals who can validate the existence of racial discrimination and provide support in diminishing the adverse impact of these experiences to one's self-esteem (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000). These circles also provide a particular kind of acceptance and legitimacy. Self-empowerment is another adaptive behavior demonstrated by Black individuals in the workplace as a response to racial microaggressions. This involves rejecting and resisting the inherent messages and implications of stereotypes (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000) as well as locating blame and fault in the perpetrator rather than internalize negative messages. Having strong emotional capacity and empowerment are likely critical in sustaining a sense of worth and efficacy in the face of insidious discrimination experienced by many Black women in the workplace.

Sanity checks are also used to minimize the psychic impact of racial microaggressions. Sanity checks involve seeking out other African Americans to help validate the existence of racial microaggressions and to check perceptions of racist incidents. This strategy serves to bolster protective factors against racism and is critical in facilitating strong resilience and self-esteem and promoting healing.

The process of armoring is an adaptive coping mechanism in learning how to deal with critical racial oppression. "Armor is a form of socialization where a girl child learns the cultural attitudes, preferences, and socially legitimate behaviors for two cultural contexts" (Bell & Nkomo, 1998, p. 286). Armor helps Black girls develop and maintain a sense of worth, dignity, and beauty (Bell & Nkomo, 1998) in a society where Black women are often invisible and devalued because of their race and gender. Faulkner (1983) characterized the concept of armoring as "specific behavioral and cognitive skills used by Blacks and other people of color to promote self-caring during direct encounters

with racist experiences and/or racist ideologies" (p. 196). Faulkner believed that young women of color were taught ways to armor and protect themselves against racism at an early age.

To date, empirical studies have explored the experiences of racial microaggressions among Black individuals in counseling and academia (Constantine, 2007; Constantine et al., 2008; Sue et al., 2008). The current study aimed to uncover a deeper understanding of the experiences of racial microaggressions in the workplace and their psychological and career-related impact, along with coping strategies used by Black women corporate leaders who had broken through the concrete ceiling to career advancement. This select and underrepresented group of Black women has demonstrated powerful resilience in the face of significant barriers. This study used phenomenological qualitative methods anchored in the constructivist research paradigm with the goal of deriving an authentic and deeper understanding of experiences of racial microaggressions and coping strategies of senior level Black women in corporate American workplaces (Wertz, 2005).

Method

Participants

Participants were 10 Black women who worked as corporate senior level managers in the Northeastern U.S. Age ranges were 26 to 40 (two participants), 41 to 55 (six participants), and 56 and older (two participants). All self-identified as Black, born in the U.S., fluent in English, had current or prior experience working in corporate America in senior management roles (e.g., with titles of Managing Director, Vice President), acknowledged that subtle racism exists in contemporary U.S. society, and had personal experiences of racism in the workplace. Participants worked in the following industries: apparel, beauty, financial services, hospitality, media, pharmaceuticals, and publishing. All had at least a bachelor's degree; the highest degree earned was Juris Doctor.

Sources of Data

Participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire. A semi-structured interview protocol based on two research questions was devel-

oped to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences of racial microaggressions and coping strategies. Consistent with the discovery-oriented constructivist process, the protocol prompts were reshaped throughout the data collection process relevant to participants' responses.

Research Questions

1. What are participants' experiences of racial microaggressions in the workplace?
2. What coping strategies do they use to deal with experiences of racial microaggressions in the workplace?

Procedures

Purposeful and criterion-based sampling (Patton, 1990) was used in this study to identify and select Black women in corporate management who had experienced racial microaggressions in the workplace and could articulate their lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). Participants were recruited through e-mail distributions, social media tools, and word of mouth. Based on critical reflection of the quality of the data and value of preliminary findings with regard to the research questions (Wertz, 2005), recruitment was ended with 10 participants.

The study was conducted in compliance with IRB stipulations, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants, who did so voluntarily and without compensation. The primary investigator conducted in-person, audiotaped, semi-structured interviews in private rooms. Audiotapes were later transcribed by a transcription services company, and any identifying information regarding the participants was deleted to protect their anonymity.

Researchers' Background, Experiences, and Biases

The first author and principal investigator is a Black woman pursuing a doctoral degree in counseling psychology. She was also a Vice President at a financial services company located in the northeastern U.S. where she was employed for 13 years. She has coauthored published work on racial microaggressions and multicultural assessment and has experienced racial microaggressions through personal and professional interactions.

With regard to her biases, the principal investigator believed that the Black female participants would have a wide range of examples of racial microaggressions. She believed that the participants would cope with microaggressions in the workplace in various ways such as seeking support from other colleagues, avoiding interactions with racist colleagues, and demonstrating excellent work performance.

The investigator's research team comprised two professors of counseling psychology programs at a large private urban university in the Northeast (both of whom are coauthors). The second author has provided bias awareness and diversity training in a range of contexts, and she teaches and publishes in multicultural career development and vocational psychology training, practice, and supervision. She is a White American woman, married to a Black American man, who raised two biracial daughters. Personally and professionally, with her family and others, she has encountered racial and other microaggressions. Regarding her biases in this study, she expected that Black women professionals in corporate workplaces would frequently experience racial and gender microaggressions and would identify a range of constructive coping strategies, many strength-enhancing and others taking their toll.

The study's third author is a White male who has been working in the area of prejudice and racism for roughly 30 years. Among his areas of research are White racial identity, minority identity development models, and ethnic identity. He maintains a small independent practice focusing on the intersection of personal, family, and career issues in sociocultural context. In terms of biases, he expected that senior-level Black women in corporate America would face a variety of microaggressions but was unsure as to how these might be manifested or coped with in the world of work.

Data Analysis

Through an iterative phenomenological procedure analysis of the data, the transcripts were reviewed and analyzed after each interview in an effort to generate deeper insight and meaning (Moustakas, 1994). Invariant horizons of the experience were developed by identifying all significant, relevant, nonrepetitive, and non-overlapping statements about how the partici-

pants experienced the topic. These statements were clustered into themes, which were synthesized into a description of the textures of the experience to provide clear images of what participants experienced with racial microaggressions in the workplace and coping strategies. A structural description illustrated how the experience happened, which includes participants' reflections on the setting and context in which racial microaggressions and coping strategies were experienced (Creswell, 2007). Finally, a composite description incorporating both textual and structural descriptions was written to uncover the essence of the experiences. Long quotes and thick descriptions of results were presented as the *voice* of the participants (Ponterotto, 2006).

Results

A total of 176 nonrepetitive and nonoverlapping statements were identified and extracted from the transcripts. Arranging the formulated meanings into clusters resulted in five themes of racial microaggressions—environmental manifestations, stereotypes of Black women, assumed universality of the Black experience, invisibility, and exclusion—and six themes of coping strategies—religion and spirituality, armoring, shifting, support network, sponsorship and mentoring, and self care (noted in Table 1). Three themes emerged about the intermediary process between experiencing racial microaggressions and coping strategies used—perceptions, reactions, and consequences and impact of the racial microaggressions experienced. Figure 1 is an organizational framework to illustrate the connection between racial microaggressions, processes, and coping strategies. The elements noted in this framework are adapted from and consistent with components of the microaggressions process model developed by Sue (2010). Phase one includes verbal, nonverbal/behavioral, and environmental microaggressive incidents. The next phase involves the recipient determining whether an event is racially motivated. Phase three involves the immediate response to the incident followed by the recipient determining the meaning of the incident. The final phase involves the consequences of these incidents for the individual.

Racial Microaggression: Environmental Manifestations

A common environmental manifestation of racial microaggressions in the workplace was lack of representation of Black women and other minorities in senior level corporate roles in corporate organizations where participants were formerly or currently employed. Another example was when diversity was not an integral part of a company's brand and strategy or ethnic markets and products were given second-class status by an organization. Ghettoization was another type of environmental racial microaggression observed, where Black employees were tracked or positioned for certain roles in ethnic brands, support function (e.g., operations) areas and less desirable locations. Tokenism was noted as a type of racial microaggression where employers showcased few successful Black and other minority employees to illustrate the company's commitment to diversity. Following are illustrative quotes.

Here, there are two Black senior vice presidents that are women. There are maybe two Black women that are VPs. I think I'm the only senior director and there are a couple of directors and that's it out of a whole organization of 700 people. (Lack of representation)

There's always that one or two high-potential exceptions that tend to become the poster child for we do value diversity, but then there are so many other people who are trapped right at the line in trying to make a break into more exposed roles. (Tokenism)

Unfortunately, when I think of the most senior woman of color, she was the president of the ethnic brand and now she's the executive of diversity and inclusion. It's not like she's the president of a mass brand or the president of a luxury brand. It's an ethnic brand. (Ghettoization)

Racial Microaggression: Stereotypes of Black Women

Participants cited examples of racial microaggressions in the workplace related to stereotypes of Black women such as intellectual inferiority. Several participants received negative messages and expectations about their overall competence and intellect from interactions with colleagues in the workplace. Questioning the authority of Black women despite their holding of senior positions in their companies was another example.

Table 1
Racial Microaggression, Process, and Coping Theme Clusters and Their Associated Meaning

Themes	Formulated meanings
Racial microaggression: Environmental	Exclusion from representation Diversity not integrated into company strategy Second-class status of ethnic markets Ghettoization Tokenism
Racial microaggression: Stereotypes of Black women	Ascription of Intelligence Aggressive Black woman Criminality/Assumption of criminal status Mammy-caretaker
Racial microaggression: Assumed universality of the Black experience	Blacks as a monolithic group Black spokesperson Black women equal a limited experience
Racial microaggression: Invisibility	Ignored and dismissed Use of body language
Racial microaggression: Exclusion	Excluded from work and social meetings Exclusion from career opportunities
Perception of racial microaggressions	Hypothesis testing and questioning
Reactions to racial microaggressions	Direct and assertive Cognitive reframing Leverage support network Speaking up, naming it, and directly confronting Shifting blame Empowering and validating self Anger & frustration Feeling hurt
Consequences and impact of racial microaggressions	Pressure to not make mistakes Burden and responsibility to counter negative stereotypes Self blame and isolation Losing self confidence Suppressing and internalizing feelings Wishing at times to not be in a senior level role Changing persona Health implications Enhances strength and character Hyper-attention and access to senior executives Limiting interaction with perpetrators of racial microaggressions Not speaking up Impeding work performance and advancement Tuning out and focusing on work Teach and inform Not internalizing racial microaggressions Self-advocacy Developing constructive cognitive reframe Ability to identify and name racial microaggressions
Coping with racial microaggressions: Religion & spirituality	Deriving a sense of empowerment Relieves stress Staying grounded Promote understanding and forgiveness Gain strength and clarity Functions as a support network

(table continues)

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Table 1 (continued)

Themes	Formulated meanings
Coping with racial microaggressions: Armoring	Pride in self and culture Promote abilities and strengthen determination Personal excellence and validation Creating a work persona Meaning of career in life Accommodating others' ignorance Acquisition of knowledge Financial security
Coping with racial microaggressions: Shifting	De-emphasizing racial differences Withholding personal information Challenge stereotypes of Black women Role of excellence
Coping with racial microaggressions: Support network	Validate experiences of racial microaggressions Source of advice Avoid internalizing negative messages Gain access to resources
Coping with racial microaggressions: Sponsorship & mentorship	Feel empowered Receive coaching and advice
Coping with racial microaggressions: Self care	Psychotherapy Physical exercise Spa treatments Taking vacation Reading and writing

Participants shared always having to validate their decisions, experience, and expertise to gain credibility with clients and colleagues. They discussed the Mammy stereotype where Black women are expected to be nurturing and supportive. They were expected to advise and coach White colleagues on their personal issues and were seen as only a caretaker. Participants talked about the double standard in the perception of being too aggressive in the workplace.

I've had people talk to me on a phone call and it was clear when they registered who I was in person that they weren't expecting a Black woman. It doesn't seem to resonate with, synonymous with Black and even maybe Black female. (Ascription of Intelligence)

There's no other reason why she can be a bully and can be loud and can curse and it's okay because it's just her way. She's assertive. She's strong. She's passionate. If I was to be a fraction of that I would immediately be the angry Black girl with the attitude. (Aggressive Black Woman)

There is, interestingly to me, a tendency of people who are more junior, whether they're in your own department or in your client's departments (I'm a lawyer so everyone in the company is a client) to be less deferential, more questioning relative to the accuracy of the advice that you're giving or whether or not they even have to listen to or do what you're saying if it does not comport with what they want. (Ascription of Intelligence: Questioning Authority)

Racial Microaggressions: Assumed Universality of the Black Experience

Several participants shared experiences in which their colleagues assumed that Black people were a monolithic racial group who had the same experiences, opinions, and interests because they shared the same racial background.

I find it fascinating how limiting my blackness is supposed to be . . . I have a manager who every single day, I was a walking anomaly for her. I was Black, I was not poorly educated. I had a point of view that was valued, highly valued. My voice was more respected than hers in our client meetings . . . I defied all notions of blackness for her. (Limited Experience)

Their worldview is narrower than mine and their expectations of me are even less than that. (Limited Experience)

My new manager comes in and she says, "Well how is your relationship with [name deleted, represents a Black man] And I said, "I guess it's okay", And she said to me "Well you must get along with him I mean he's African American." (Monolithic racial group)

Racial Microaggression: Invisibility

Yet, participants revealed that despite being the most senior person in a group, they often

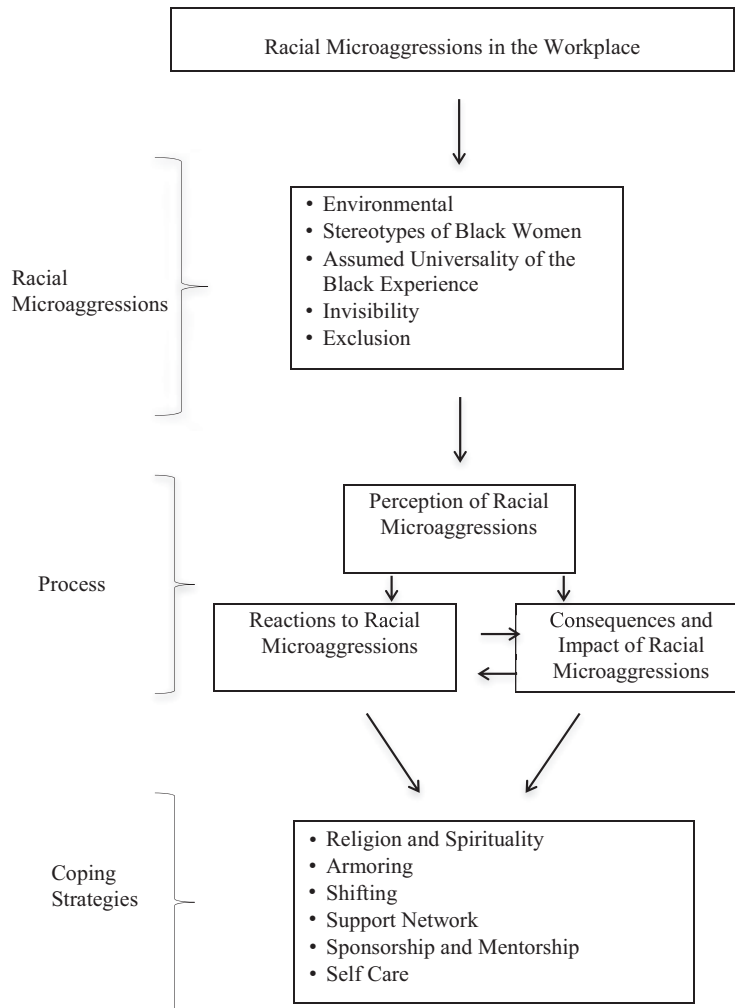


Figure 1. Organizational framework: Racial microaggressions, processes, and coping strategies.

experienced being invisible and ignored by colleagues. The use of body language was mentioned as a way to communicate invisibility in the workplace.

The body language, even in meetings, sometimes I will not even get eye contact. I've also noticed the dialogue between the two White men. They will face each other. When I'm talking, heads are down and people are writing. (Body Language)

"I didn't have a voice for many years. I remember trying to figure out what I said that was so different than the person who said it after me and made it credible." (Ignored and dismissed)

Racial Microaggression: Exclusion

Participants shared examples of exclusion in the workplace such as not being invited to social gatherings and work-related meetings thus not being afforded key career opportunities as others in the group.

One has to do with not being included at the table when your expertise would be relevant or when the subject matter is relevant to your own development. That you're not top of mind when a decision is made about who should participate. And therefore, you often join a discussion, a project, a situation in the middle and you're having to simultaneously catch up and

participate in the moment at the same time, which can affect your performance, which oddly enough, or interestingly enough, reinforces any sentiment that maybe you're not up to speed but it's not because of your own doing. (Exclusion from work meetings)

It's like boot camp in a way—publishing in general—and while I was there, there was a point where there were four assistants who really were at a point where they could have been promoted. And so they couldn't decide how to sort it out, so they decided to give a test to see how well people edited but they didn't include me. They didn't tell me about the test. I found out from somebody in the hallway. And so I raised a little stink about it you know; why cannot I do the test? (Exclusion from career opportunities)

Process: Perception of Racial Microaggressions

Participants reported engaging in a process of questioning their perceptions and hypothesis testing when faced with racial microaggression incidents in the workplace. An example is recalling a particular incident several times and engaging in a process of elimination to confirm the presence of any subtle racism.

I tend to play the scene over and over again, so before really coming to a conclusion you start to do the process of elimination. Is it that I'm new here? Is it that they're all friends? Is this something that was planned in advance? Then you start to really begin to isolate. Then once you get right down to it, this has to be an issue of race. (Hypothesis testing and questioning)

Process: Reactions to Racial Microaggressions

Cognitive reactions included addressing the perpetrator in an indirect manner in an attempt to convey awareness of the microaggressive slight while at the same time not being perceived as someone who complains or is aggressive. In addition, these women shared that they avoided responding to racial microaggressions from a racial perspective, because it created an opportunity for the perpetrator to deny the hidden message of the racial microaggression and the recipient's experiential reality, as well as suggested a level of paranoia on the part of the recipient. Another reaction to racial microaggressions was to leverage a support network of family members, friends, and trusted coworkers to verify the accuracy of one's perceptions of the presence of racial microaggressions. Several participants talked about feeling angry and frus-

trated in response to encountering racial microaggressions in the workplace.

Anger, being extremely frustrated with it because again it's not so blatant. . . . In the coaching that I received, no one said to confront it from a racial perspective. . . . because the incidents are subtle, it gives that person a chance to say, oh, well, I didn't include you because it slipped my mind or that's not what I meant. Then you become this paranoid person and you see race in everything. (Anger and frustration)

I remember being at a cocktail party with publishing execs and some people that I maybe should have wanted to impress because at that time I could have used a job. One had an ebonics joke and I was like, I cannot hear it. I cannot take it. It was a publishing exec and I killed the vibe at the party. You know, so I've done that, speaking up. (Speaking up)

Process: Consequences and Impact of Racial Microaggressions

Participants talked about shouldering enormous burden and pressure to be perfect and to not make mistakes at work in part to potentially counter stereotypes and ultimately change negative perceptions of Black women. Some experienced guilt, embarrassment, and loss of self-confidence as a result of racial microaggressions encountered at work. Others suppressed and internalized feelings in order to avoid showing emotion or giving perpetrators of racial microaggressions the satisfaction that such incidents affected them. Some participants talked about the "positive" consequences of racial microaggressions in making them stronger, tougher, and enhancing their character. Another consequence was not reaching out to colleagues who have committed racial microaggressions in the workplace, which can create limitations for Black women's career development given the importance of having strong professional relationships in corporate America. One woman talked about how the internalization of racial microaggressions can impede Black women's performance, resulting in not being considered for key opportunities. Another woman talked about the continuous cycle of negative impressions that can be detrimental to career advancement.

For a large majority of senior African American women, we're the breadwinner. And that's stress too, the fear of making a mistake, the fear of taking a risk. You're not the only one that goes down, your whole family goes down. Oftentimes extended family too. (Pressure to not make mistakes)

When I sit around a table and I'm the only one in the room or one of two in the room, I kind of feel responsible for the ones who aren't in the room. So I made it—if you want to use that as the term. It's kind of like, okay, it's up to me to make sure that their interactions with me change their perception of Black women. (Burden and responsibility)

I've seen the shift where I watched myself lose confidence and have to fight desperately to get it back. I never considered myself someone who would ever be in need of therapy, in need of that emotional support to remind me that I was right and whole in the world. (Losing self confidence)

Coping With Racial Microaggressions: Religion and Spirituality

Religion and spirituality were found to be core to the coping repertoire of the participants for dealing with racial microaggressions in the workplace. Prayer and meditation were noted as key practices. Religion and spirituality provided a sense of empowerment, protection, making sense of things, feeling grounded, forgiving perpetrators, and serving as a reminder that racial microaggressions and other matters in the workplace are trivial compared with other issues in life.

It definitely helps me to be a lot more understanding and forgiving because I mean you cannot be responsible for someone else's ignorance. (Promote understanding and forgiveness)

I am very aware of the Divinity in my life. I am very grateful for it. And to tell you how I cope in the workplace. In my calendar, every day, there is a mid-day prayer set to alarm anywhere I am. And I do stop at 11:55 a.m. on any day and I read a prayer. Most days, it resets my entire approach to the day. It is a moment for me to remember that there is something larger than me to be focused on. (Sense of empowerment)

Coping With Racial Microaggressions: Armoring

Participants shared examples of adaptive protective mechanisms used to deal with racial microaggressions in the workplace. Participants noted that having pride in self, family, and culture has been critical in being able to function in corporate America. Having a sense of internal excellence and validation was also a protective mechanism.

I constructed my own universe, quite honestly. That universe looks like I proved myself against me. I have a high standard. I have a higher than high standard.

And I know that if I meet my standard, I'll still be above theirs. That's how I measure myself all the time. The reality is that it keeps me separate and it keeps me whole. And it keeps me feeling good about myself. (Personal excellence and validation)

It's weird to me sometimes that I've been able to function so well in the corporate world; and I think that my confidence in myself and my culture have saved me; because people suffer. (Pride in self and culture)

Coping With Racial Microaggressions: Shifting

Shifting is an accommodating, yet strategic adaptive response to racial and gender discrimination; in cognitive, physical, and linguistic ways, Black women shift perspective, body, speech, and attire to counter images of inferiority and stereotypes in the workplace (Allison, 2010). One participant talked about strategically emphasizing common experiences and interests shared with her White colleagues and deemphasizing racial and ethnic differences as a way to avoid being viewed as the spokesperson for all Black women. Another woman described shifting as not revealing much about her life outside of work ensuring that her corporate and personal worlds do not intersect. Another participant used shifting as a way to challenge stereotypical notions of what it means to be Black and female by keeping colleagues guessing as to who she is as a person.

I would not share much about what my life is outside of corporate. It's not that I am doing two different things. I'm just not allowing the two to be interchanged. (Withholding personal information)

I'm going to challenge what you think you know every single day of your life because I can. Because I'm smart enough to. Because you haven't figured out that I am. It's giving them some other context, because I think at the end of the day what changes behavior, what shifts culture and what changes perception is giving people something other to consider. (Challenge stereotypes of Black women)

Coping With Racial Microaggressions: Support Network

In addition to validating experiences of racial microaggressions in the workplace, a support network operated as a source for advice. Participants talked about the value of having a circle of trusted advisors who could provide strategies and guidance for addressing racial microaggressions at work. With so few Black women in

senior level roles in corporate America, a network served as a way of finding other Black women and women of color who were also in management and executive level positions.

I think being able to build camaraderie with people who have experienced them with you and just talk it out because I think that the last thing anyone needs to do is internalize it. (Avoid internalizing negative messages)

You have to have other people help you and when you're in a situation and you feel like the fit is not the right situation for you, you need to be able to reach out to people who will help you create a new situation for yourself. (Gain access to resources)

Coping With Racial Microaggressions: Sponsorship and Mentoring

Participants shared how having sponsors and mentors helped them to feel empowered, and it validated their presence in the workplace as well as their feelings when they encountered racial microaggressions in the workplace. Mentorship provided an opportunity for emerging Black female leaders to get coaching from more senior Black women who gave advice on areas that could derail career advancement.

I had a Black woman who had actually turned around and said to me, "You're in the room for a reason. They didn't make a mistake when they chose you to be in this program. They didn't make a mistake when they kept you in the program. What makes you think it's a mistake that you're in the room? . . . And it was empowering to hear. (Empowering)

When a young woman comes in here and she's looking for coaching, if I see something that I think might hold her back, trust me, she's going to know before she walks out of the room. (Receive coaching and advice)

Coping With Racial Microaggressions: Self Care

Participants shared self-care strategies they used to cope with racial microaggressions in the workplace. Seeking therapy was noted as a last resort strategy for coping with racial microaggressions. Engaging in physical exercise, taking vacation, and spending time with family were noted as ways to decompress and alleviate stress.

I take a dance class three, four times a week, including at 6:30 tonight, like I'm going to church. You know I'd have to get that physically off of me and the only way I can get it out of my head is to do something like that. (Physical exercise)

There was a period in my life where I moved from reading novels, which I loved, to reading biographies and autobiographies of African American women. And I found that was really helpful to me to learn what other people had gone through, not simply what objective things happened but the subject of the emotional, psychological things that happened and how they hit bottom and worked their way up. (Reading)

Discussion

This study gives voice to the racial microaggression experiences of 10 Black corporate women leaders, high achievers in their career context against the odds, yet whose voices and access to professional development and achievement have nevertheless been repeatedly marginalized and limited. The lived experiences expressed through powerful participant quotes affirmed many racial microaggression themes found in previous research with Black women in professional contexts (Catalyst, 2004; Constantine et al., 2008). A critical finding is despite the career success and the senior level positions these women hold in corporate America, they were not immune to persistent experiences and consequences of racial microaggressions. These narratives extend our understanding of the impact of and responses to racial microaggressions in the workplace and refute the notion that these experiences are insignificant and inconsequential to Black women's career and psychological well-being.

The results revealed in the study are consistent with the microaggressions process model developed by Sue (2010). Participants shared various verbal, nonverbal/behavioral and environmental incidents that conveyed racial invalidations and indignities. A primary racial microaggression was related to the stereotype of being intellectually inferior, a common type of subtle bias African Americans encounter (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Despite holding senior level positions in corporate America, Black women's overall competence, intellect, and capabilities are often challenged and undermined in the workplace. This study's results also illustrate and give voice to findings from a previous study on career experiences of women of color in corporate management, where Black women experienced more frequent questioning of their credibility and authority (Catalyst, 2004). Another insulting manifestation of this racial mi-

croaggression theme is the metacommunication of disbelief and surprise at Black women's intellectual abilities and achievements particularly with regard to communicating—"you're so articulate." These perceptions not only contribute to creating negative work environments but can also adversely influence performance evaluation processes which drive promotion and compensation decisions. The paucity of Black women in senior level roles stands in contrast to many companies' stated commitment to diversity and inclusion. Several women in the study spoke about their frustrations and struggles with being the "only one" because of the underrepresentation of Black women in senior level positions in their respective companies. Although companies showcase a few successful examples of diversity, the majority of people of color do not break into critical roles that bring exposure and visibility. Moreover, there is a tendency for African American employees to be tracked and "ghettoized" (Sue, 2010) in support services, human resources, community relations, and "Black products" departments instead of revenue-generating key decision-making roles as was evident by the study's participants, all of whom were in non-revenue-generating roles. As illustrated by the experiences of this study's participants, other examples of racial discrimination in the workplace against professional Black women included limited mentoring and sponsorship opportunities and being ignored by colleagues and excluded from work and social meetings.

Given the ambiguous nature of racial microaggressions, Black women in senior professional positions discussed having to engage in hypothesis testing to determine whether an occurrence in the workplace was racially motivated, a process that is emotionally and psychologically taxing and depleting. These Black women described seeking both professional and personal safe spaces to test the accuracy of their perceptions of racial microaggressions. This sanity check helps to validate one's experiential reality and reduces one's level of isolation (Sue, 2010). Once determined to be racially motivated, participants responded to racial microaggressions by indirectly conveying awareness of a microaggressive slight to the perpetrator, avoiding responding to these incidents from a racial perspective, and leveraging support from family, friends, and trusted advisors.

Black women in this study used a number of adaptive coping strategies in an effort to alleviate the psychological stress and frustration associated with experiences of racial microaggressions in the workplace. For these professional Black women, they described power and healing in being able to name and label these experiences of racial microaggressions. Religion and spirituality served as primary mechanisms for buffering the impact of racial microaggressions by providing a sense of empowerment and facilitating understanding and forgiveness. Bacchus (2008) found that a majority of professional Black women used spirituality as a coping strategy to deal with work related stress. A support network was also critical in helping this study's women to feel less isolated and invalidated in the face of racial microaggressions. Having pride in one's self and one's cultural ancestry was also valuable in coping with racial microaggressions. The role of sponsors and mentors in coping with racial microaggressions in the workplace cannot be underestimated in terms of providing Black women with strategic career advice, key assignments, and "air cover" or protection. These senior corporate Black women also engaged in "shifting" behaviors such as monitoring their speech and deemphasizing racial and ethnic differences with White colleagues to combat negative stereotypes and limit the likelihood of being perceived as outsiders in the workplace.

Despite the use of these adaptive coping strategies, experiences of racial microaggressions created harmful consequences for these accomplished professional Black women. Underrepresentation of senior level Black women creates a feeling of "hypervisibility" where their behavior is scrutinized and intensely monitored. Many women talked about the pressure of feeling they could never make mistakes and having to be not just good but exceptional at all times in part because of the burden to represent one's group well. They engaged in the "proving process" (Griffin, Pifer, Humphrey, & Hazelwood, 2011) of working twice as hard to disprove negative stereotypes and assert their place as corporate leaders. Participants described the pain of internalizing racial microaggressions, which at times diminished their self-confidence and work performance. Cultural mistrust in the workplace of White colleagues is another unfortunate outcome of racial microaggressions.

The findings of this study have implications for corporate organizations. Given the increasing competition and changes occurring in global markets, it is an economic imperative for companies to attract and retain top talent. Black women represent an important and growing source of talent for corporate organizations. Corporate leadership plays a critical role in shaping the culture of their institutions that will ultimately allow Black women and other employees to realize their potential. Senior management and human resources managers must recognize that experiences of racial microaggressions can exist and that they take a significant toll on Black women. They need to pay attention to such negative interactions (Catalyst, 2011). Several participants expressed frustration about the lack of recognition about the existence of racial microaggressions in the workplace and the adverse impact these experiences have on career success. Managers should be proactive in having an open dialogue with their Black female and other diverse female direct reports on the challenges they may be facing in the workplace with regard to inequality and discrimination (Catalyst, 2011). In addition, companies can be proactive in identifying exclusionary practices in their organization and hold employees accountable for discriminatory behavior.

Accountability is a key factor in creating inclusive organizational cultures. Managing diversity should be one of the core competencies used to assess management's performance and inform promotion and compensation decisions. Companies need to reinforce that effectively managing and developing a workforce is an integral part of leadership. The strategy to managing diversity and changing the culture of an organization is not to set quotas but to expect managers to know the people in their divisions and have concrete plans for developing talent. It is important to have transparency, objectivity, and accountability in tracking how employees gain access to key assignments and leadership development opportunities, both of which are critical for career advancement. These efforts can help organizations develop sustainable talent pipelines and succession plans that include diverse talent and ultimately contribute in increasing representation of Black women and other professionals of color in senior level roles.

Participants discussed being excluded from formal and informal networks in the workplace which represents a key barrier to career advancement for professional Black women and other people of color. Access to influential networks provides insights on informal and unwritten rules and values of an organization. These networks also lead to high visibility assignments that help employees cultivate key skills and increase exposure to key decision makers. Research has consistently shown that individuals tend to interact with members of their social group (e.g., race, gender, social status, etc.) more than they do members belonging to other social groups, resulting in interactions that can have organizational consequences (James, 2000) for marginalized populations in corporate institutions. In becoming more aware of the unique challenges of professional Black women, managers can take the initiative to reach out to talented and high potential Black women and connect them to key networks of influence and facilitate introductions to influential stakeholders and sponsors.

Participants discussed ways in which diversity is treated as a low or marginal priority in their corporate organizations. The number of diversity initiatives developed by organizations as evidence of their commitment to diversity is important but not sufficient. Strong performance on diversity should be viewed as strategically as a core operating business with a clear vision of what success looks like, defined metrics to track progress, and increased investments toward initiatives that produce results (Rice, 2012). The integration of diversity into business strategy represents the foundation for identifying competencies and critical development experiences needed for succession (Greer & Virrick, 2008) and can improve representation of Black women and other people of color in senior management.

Organizations have an opportunity and responsibility to create formal training opportunities to inform and educate management and staff about racial microaggressions and the distinctive experiences and resilient strengths of Black women and other women of color. Equally important is the opportunity for employees to examine their unconscious and conscious biases and understand how they can result in exclusionary practices in the workplace. All together, these enriching experiences can

contribute in creating cultures of meritocracy and inclusion.

This phenomenological qualitative study provided some insight into insidious forms of oppression that professional Black women face that can create hostile and invalidating work environments and experiences. Given the intersecting identities of race and gender, Black women are particularly vulnerable to workplace discrimination that can result in unrealized potential in their careers and in their contributions to global business productivity and the bottom line. The research findings of this study are important in contributing to the expansion of the scholarship on racial microaggressions by examining these experiences from the perspective of race and gender within the context of business. It also provides further analysis of how race and gender identity membership can influence the occurrence of stressful events and the appraisal of coping resources and options, as well as the use of coping strategies.

The findings of this study have significant implications for practitioners in their work with professional Black women. A critical goal of counseling and psychotherapy is the development of a deep personal relationship between a helping professional and client that involves appropriate interpersonal interactions (Sue et al., 2008). Decades of research have revealed that the therapeutic alliance is a key predictor of outcome in psychotherapy, irrespective of treatment modality (Horvath, Del Re, Fluckiger, & Symonds, 2011). When clients feel connected and validated, it contributes to creating that alliance and a positive relationship. The process of a Black woman taking the step to seek counseling is one that should be appreciated given that many Black women typically seek psychological support from their family and community agencies like the church. It is important for practitioners to acknowledge barriers Black women face in the workplace and the deleterious physical and psychological impact of these barriers. The study's findings also emphasize how vital it is for helping professionals to be culturally competent and assume responsibility to serve as social justice allies in promoting diversity and inclusion to ensure that all individuals feel included and have equal opportunities to succeed.

Black women must be armed with tools to effectively counter and manage experiences of

racial microaggressions. Excellent work performance is a foundational strategy for combating racial microaggressions. Black women must position themselves as solution providers armed with the right tools to effectively address current and future business challenges and opportunities. Another way to protect Black women against daily racial microaggressions in the workplace is through sponsorship—a professional relationship that goes beyond the scope of mentoring which tends to focus on giving feedback and advice (Ibarra, Carter, & Silva, 2010). It provides access to power and influence in organizations. Sponsors can influence the degree to which Black women are perceived as competent, which is subjective depending on the perceiver and is particularly important for Black women considering the pervasive stereotype of their inferior intelligence.

Another strategy for Black women to combat racial microaggressions in the workplace is to enhance and leverage their decision-making and judgment capabilities as a way to be highly skilled in determining whether a racial microaggression has occurred and ways to respond. Given the ambiguous, complex, and pervasive nature of racial microaggressions, it is important for professional Black women to be savvy in gathering cues from their environment and paying attention to interpersonal dynamics in the workplace. The ability to diagnose and process experiences of racial microaggressions can protect Black women from internalizing the negative impact of these incidents. It also presents opportunities to flex and strengthen their strategic and decision-making skills in the workplace and opportunities to enhance their self-awareness abilities and overall emotional intelligence, which are critical elements of global leadership. There is a missed opportunity for many companies to leverage the savvy leadership, decision making, and strategic thinking skills that many Black women in corporate America have acquired not only from their academic and professional training but also from their unique experiences of racial microaggressions.

A limitation of the study was the use of purposive criterion procedures that could have resulted in a highly select group that might represent some, but not all, senior level Black women working in corporate America. The demographic imbalance with regard to geographic

location and role of nationality may have also affected our findings. Although generalizations from this study should be approached with caution, it has given voice to marginalized individuals in the corporate world and achieved a deeper and more authentic understanding of their lived experiences in coping with racial microaggressions in the workplace.

Future research is needed to further examine the complexities of experiences of racial microaggressions and coping strategies of professional Black women. For example, within-group differences might be examined regarding the experiences of racial microaggressions and coping strategies in U.S. corporate workplaces among Black women managers who are immigrants, for example, born in Africa or the Caribbean. Developmentally, such investigations are needed with early career Black women; for example, from relational career development perspectives integrating home and community roles (Richardson, 2012). In addition, multidimensional quantitative measures (e.g., Torres-Harding, Andrade, & Romero Diaz, 2012) could be used to learn more about racial microaggressions in corporate workplaces. Finally, next steps in research on racial microaggressions are needed to identify, develop and promote not only effective coping strategies (e.g., Nadal, 2011) but also to better understand mental health from a more systemic and environmental perspective, and help address forms of oppression that impact psychological health and development (Arredondo & Perez, 2003; Vera & Speight, 2003).

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