

‘Death by a thousand cuts’: Visibly and culturally diverse women’s experiences of racial microaggressions in STEMM organisations

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Abstract

In this paper, we use an intersectional framework to explore how gender interacts with other aspects of identity, such as race, ethnicity and/or culture, to structure the microaggressions experienced by visibly and culturally diverse women in academia, industry and government. We focus on these women’s experiences to disrupt the normative erasure of race from the workplace diversity context. We conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with women in science, technology, engineering, maths and medicine (STEMM) organisations who self-identify as women of colour and/or women from culturally diverse backgrounds (henceforth women of colour). While women of colour share many experiences with white women, their challenges cannot simply be subsumed under gender. Rather, race and gender intersect to create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination and disadvantage. Racial microaggressions can have a devastating impact yet may be invisible to members of the dominant racial group – those most likely to be women of colour’s peers and managers. White managers and peers can act as allies to women of colour by respecting and amplifying women’s concerns.

Keywords

STEMM, women of colour, cultural diversity, whiteness, microaggression

Introduction

In this paper, we use an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1989) to explore the racial microaggressions experienced by women of colour in STEMM organisations. Racial microaggressions are ‘brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group’ (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). The cumulative effects of these seemingly minor events have a devastating impact – ‘death by a thousand cuts’ in the words of one of our research participants.

Microaggressions may be experienced based on any non-normative aspect of identity such as gender, sexuality and disability. We focus on racial microaggressions to disrupt the tendency of research on women in STEMM to focus exclusively on middle-class, heterosexual, white women (Ong, 2005). This focus constructs a ‘social imaginary of a universal woman’ within the sciences (Torres, 2012, p. 38), which neglects the complexity of women’s lived experiences and erases the experiences of women of colour, among others.

Women of colour face challenges that cannot simply be subsumed under gender. For example, Clancy et al.'s (2017) survey of women in astronomy and planetary science found that women of colour reported the highest rates of negative workplace experiences and are at greater risk of both gendered and racial harassment. US empirical research reveals that identifying as a woman of colour and a scientist often involves creative and painful practices of gender and racial passing (Ong, 2005). Ironically, progress made by women of colour in STEMM is decreasing as an unintended consequence of 'women in STEMM' programs and policy initiatives which disproportionately benefit white women (Armstrong & Jovanovic, 2015). To explore these issues, we asked:

- How do visibly and culturally diverse women negotiate their professional identities in STEMM organisations?

Methods

This paper examines the experiences of 30 women of colour working in academia, industry and government in STEMM organisations in Australia. Fifty-four women volunteered to participate in our study. We used a sampling matrix based on age, employment status/career point, geographic location and organisational type to purposively select participants. Women who agreed to participate submitted consent forms. We conducted one semi-structured interview of up to one hour with each participant (n = 30 interviews) by Skype in 2019.

All interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. Data was analysed thematically. First, each transcript was reviewed for meaningfulness in relation to the research question. Data was then clustered into themes based on shared ideas. Once themes were created, the data was re-read to refocus the analysis on the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study was approved by the University of Tasmania Human Research Ethics Committee. Data have been de-identified and pseudonyms are used throughout this paper.

Demographic information was collected in a voluntary questionnaire prior to the interviews. Participants in this study are aged between 22 and 60 years, with a mean age of 38. Women in the study come from 17 different countries, with only three being born in Australia and a further four in other countries in the Anglosphere (NZ, UK, USA). Most women work in full-time, paid employment in skilled roles, positioning them occupationally as middle class.

Both authors are white women. During each phase of this research project, we met to discuss the implications of our racial identity. We are acutely aware of Kincheloe and McLaren's (2002, p. 105) caution that 'research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression'. Indeed, our previous research on women in STEMM demonstrates this (see Nash and Moore, 2019). Due to factors beyond our control, our previous sample consisted of white women, thereby perpetuating the erasure of women of colour's experiences from our findings. We aspire to be allies to women of colour, while recognising that the designation of ally is not ours to make (Brookfield, 2014). Drawing on Patton and Bondi (2015), we regularly reflect on our role in this space as we endeavour to support social justice without perpetuating inequity.

Findings

Many women in our study felt that gender and race acted in tandem to structure their experiences. For example, Chantal (age 52, born in UK) said that ‘they don’t seem to listen or believe what I say as much as maybe if I looked different, as it were ... it could be the colour thing, or it could be because I’m a woman’. Some participants described experiences of being invisible and having to prove themselves that are likely to resonate with many white women, such as having to work hard to overcome preconceptions:

They just underestimate you ... you have to prove yourself before somebody actually believes what you are saying (Brigitte, age 32, born in Columbia)

Getting to the same table takes so much effort (Shankari, age 53, born in India)

However, women of colour also face microaggressions based on their racial or cultural background:

Like eastern women are supposed to be submissive or stay at home, they don’t expect them to take on leadership positions like your western woman ... there’s already a pre-conceived notion about what I should be doing and no one expect me to go outside it (Danika, age 25, born in India)

I felt that personally I wasn’t taken seriously because A: I was female and B: because I was brown (Meera, age 33, born in India)

There tends to be this perception that, particularly in Asian women, you’re not supposed to speak back or question anything (Meilin, age 35, born in China)

You have to walk a really fine line and, in a way, I feel as a woman you have to better than your male counterparts and as a woman of colour you have to be even better than your white female counterparts (Gabbie, age 44, UK)

Sometimes she confuses our names in talking to them ... we're seen as, oh, that's those Asian women (Adelita, age 60, born in India)

In an environment where their confidence is undermined, women of colour perform the emotional labour of managing their colleagues to affect change in a non-threatening manner:

You know, you can really start to feel like you’re not valued somewhere because ... it’s the tenth time your manager said, “Oh don’t worry about it, you’re stressing out too much” ... And it makes you hone in on yourself as if there’s something wrong with you and you almost start – I don’t know – like gaslighting yourself (Astrid, age 28, born in Australia)

It’s like a constant managing up ... just fitting in and not being difficult, quietly getting your point across, slowly over time (Kelly, age 35, born in South Africa)

If we get angry, sometimes they might get a bit too threatened. So, doing things with a smile, and being pleasant, and being not overly kind of threatening (Chantal, age 52, born in UK)

Implications

Microaggression are subtle and often unintended, rendering them difficult to recognise and confront. People of colour may describe a vague feeling that 'something is not right' (Sue et al., 2007, p. 277). In contrast, white people often sincerely believe they have acted with good faith, leading them to perceive non-white peoples as over-sensitive. As such, identifying and responding to racial microaggressions is fraught. Despite their devastating impact, women of colour may hesitate to tackle microaggressions due to the likelihood of their claims being doubted and their response being perceived as too emotional, both of which undermine their credibility as scientists. Socialisation in STEM fields encourages belief in science as objective, which render questions of different lived experiences unintelligible. In a similar way to unexamined heteronormative assumptions silencing conversations about gender and sexuality in STEM workplaces (Mattheis et al., 2019), unexamined whiteness silences conversations about race.

White men hold the vast bulk of leadership positions in STEM fields. Yet, this group, who are powerfully positioned to effect change, are the least likely to recognise microaggressions. Understanding this 'clash of racial realities' (Sue et al., 2007, p. 277) can assist white people to learn to recognise racial microaggressions. A key attribute in this regard is an ability to withstand the discomfort of questioning long held (and self-serving) beliefs, such as the myth of meritocracy. Recognising how social and institutional structures have shaped their worldview and experiences is crucial for white people to act as allies to women of colour.

Allies can be instrumental in amplifying the concerns of women of colour. Allies are seen as more credible by other dominant group members because they are not considered to be acting out of self-interest. Moreover, the costs of confronting racial microaggressions are fewer for allies (Rasinski and Czopp, 2010). An important caveat in this regard is to work alongside women of colour rather than taking over (Drury and Kaiser, 2014). Allies occupy positions of social dominance and need to consistently reflect on their/our positionality to avoid unintentionally perpetuating racial inequity.

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