Oppression Within Safe Spaces: Exploring Racial Microaggressions Within Domestic Violence Shelters

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Abstract

Racial microaggressions are often unintentional and subtle forms of racism that manifest in interpersonal communications, behaviors, or environments. The purpose of this study was to explore the presence of racial microaggressions within domestic violence shelters and to understand how women respond to them. Using a phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis, 14 Black women from 3 different shelters were interviewed. Twelve women reported experiencing at least one racial microaggression, although few identified the experience as racist. Additional themes were also examined to understand why women did not identify their experiences of racial microaggressions as racist. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Keywords

domestic violence, racial microaggressions, racism, shelter

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a widespread and devastating phenomenon. Approximately 25% of women will have experienced IPV during their lifetime (Black et al., 2011). In addition to physical violence, IPV can

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encompass emotional abuse (DeKeseredy, 2000), sexual abuse (Miller, 2006), and economic abuse (Adams, Sullivan, Bybee, & Greeson, 2008). Women experiencing IPV have poorer physical and mental health outcomes and are at higher risk for acute and chronic health conditions compared with women who have not experienced such abuse (Coker et al., 2002; Ellsberg, Jansen, Heise, Watts, & Garcia-Moreno, 2008).

Although some evidence suggests that Black women experience higher rates of IPV than do other racial groups (Peralta & Fleming, 2003), race differences often become nonsignificant when social class indicators (e.g., income, absence of health insurance) are controlled for (Cunradi, Caetano, Clark, & Schafer, 2000; Vest, Catlin, Chen, & Brownson, 2002). Given the high correlation in the United States between being Black and having lower income, many assertions about the relationships among race, class, and IPV rest on equivocal data. That notwithstanding, research has consistently found that Black women are 3 to 4 times more likely to be murdered by an intimate partner compared with women of other races (Bailey et al., 2007; J. C. Campbell et al., 2003). This staggering difference is not attributable to Black men being more violent than men of other racial groups, however, as race of perpetrator is not a statistically significant risk factor of IPV fatalities (J. C. Campbell et al., 2003). Instead, social conditions such as unemployment, presence of a gun in the home, and abuser drug use are statistically significant risk factors (Bailey et al., 1997; J. C. Campbell et al., 2003).

Racism as a Barrier Within Domestic Violence Shelters

Women experiencing severe or life-threatening IPV often turn to domestic violence shelter programs for immediate safety and assistance (Sullivan, 2010). Domestic violence shelters were created as places of refuge for women and offer services that can greatly increase survivors' safety and quality of life (Lyons, Lane, & Menard, 2008; Sullivan et al., 2008). While client satisfaction with shelters tends to be high in general, concern has been raised that some shelter programs are not as welcoming or relevant to Black survivors compared with White survivors (Donnelly, Cook, Ausdale, & Foley, 2005; Donnelly, Cook, & Wilson, 1999). For example, many shelters have White executive directors who hired a majority White staff, locate their programs in predominantly White neighborhoods, and do little outreach to communities of color (Donnelly et al., 1999; Donnelly et al., 2005). They also assert norms that favor and maintain Whiteness which are incongruent to culturally specific services that attend to Black women's needs.

Examples of the maintenance of Whiteness in some domestic violence shelters can be found in a qualitative study conducted by Donnelly and

colleagues (1999). These researchers interviewed 42 executive directors of domestic violence shelters and examined how their shelters addressed the needs of women of color. All but one of these directors was White. Some directors stated that they did little outreach to communities of color because there was no money for special programs. A follow-up study that used the same sample was conducted by Donnelly and colleagues (2005) to specifically examine White privilege within domestic violence shelters. Researchers found that shelter directors described the importance of maintaining a White shelter environment. For example, in one quote, an executive director described why a shelter had to be closed in the inner city.

> ". . . right now, we're about 50-50, thank goodness. If we could keep it at that, I would be so happy, because what happened in [city] was it [the shelter] became totally Black, and the White women would not go . . . we had to close the shelter and move it to another community [so White women would use it]" (Donnelly et al., 2005, p. 28).

Other shelter directors also used controlling stereotypes of Black women such as the Strong Black Women (Hill Collins, 2000) to describe why they chose not to do outreach to communities of color or design culturally specific programming within their shelter. Some shelter directors stated that Black women "were better able to withstand violence" (Donnelly et al., 2005, pp. 24-25). Overall, many shelter directors believed that Black women dealt with violence within their own communities and, therefore, needed fewer formal services. For example, one shelter director described formal domestic violence services as an option for Black women survivors rather than a necessity because the Black community "is close-knit" (Donnelly et al., 2005, p. 24).

The percentage of IPV survivors who choose to seek support from any formal helping source is low, and this percentage is significantly lower for Black survivors (Flicker et al., 2011; Hutchinson & Hirschel, 1998). Reports of discrimination, such as minimization of women's IPV experiences, lack of staff cultural competence, and exclusionary organizational practices could attribute to Black women's decreased usage of formal mainstream domestic violence services (Few, 2005; Gillum, 2008a, 2008b; Taylor, 2005).

The lack of cultural competence surrounding the needs of Black women is exemplified in survivors' reports of their experiences with mainstream domestic violence shelters. Black women interviewed during an examination of women's shelter experiences reported that the absence of Black staff felt isolating. Only 3 out of the 10 Black women interviewed in this sample knew that the shelter existed prior to reaching out for services (Few, 2005). In a separate study (Gillum, 2008a), Black women described being dissatisfied

with mainstream shelter services. They described an overall lack of cultural competence in the organization structure and during service delivery. For example, similar to Few's (2005) study, Black women noticed the lack of Black staff in the shelter and the unavailability of culturally specific products. Women also described that some White service providers held a general lack of sensitivity to their experiences as survivors. Specifically, Black women described carrying the burden of having to continuously prove their survivor status in order to get needed services (Gillum, 2008a). Taylor (2005) interviewed 21 Black survivors about their experiences seeking support while occupying two oppressed identities: Black and woman. Women discussed how they experienced racism and sexism during the process of reaching out, receiving referrals, and maintaining their space at a domestic violence shelter. For example, one woman discussed being offered a space in a shelter over the phone, but later being denied in person.

Racial Microaggressions

Subtle forms of racism that manifest at the individual, community, and societal levels—whether perpetrated intentionally or not—are called racial microaggressions (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). Types of racial microaggressions can be classified as microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007). *Microassaults* are "explicit racial derogations characterized primarily by a violent verbal, nonverbal, or environmental attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions" (Sue, 2010, p. 29). Microassaults may or may not be overt forms of racism such as making a racist joke. *Microinsults* are "communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity" (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007, p. 274). An example of a microinsult is when a White person says, "I don't mean to be racist, but I just think Black women have anger issues." *Microinvalidations* manifest in nonverbal and verbal communications that "exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thought, feeling, or experiential reality of a person of color" (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2007, p. 274). Any endorsement of a "post-racial" America, color-blindness, or denial of the differences among racial groups exemplifies this form of microaggression. When microassaults, microinsults, or microinvalidations manifest through the physical structure of an environment, it is called an *environmental microaggression*. For example, the lack of pictures reflecting women of color in an organization would be considered an environmental microaggression.

Racial minorities experience different types of microaggressions depending on how they are located within social structures. Numerous studies highlight these differences specifically with Asian Americans (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007), Black Americans (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008), and Latino Americans (Solorzano, 1998). For example, Asian Americans reported microaggressions that consisted of perpetrators questioning their nationality or ability to speak English (Sue, Bucceri, et al., 2007), while Black Americans described perpetrators often believing they were criminals or associating them with criminal behaviors (Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2008).

Given that racial discrimination has been typically seen as *overt*, it is easy to either dismiss microaggressions ("I'm probably being overly sensitive") or to attribute racial microaggressions to other causes ("I'm sure they didn't mean anything by that"; Constantine, Smith, Redington, & Owens, 2008). This can actually make the experience of such harmful actions even more devastating than the experience of overt racism, as the victim ends up questioning their own perceptions and reactions, and the perpetrator can easily dismiss accusations of racism. According to Sue (2010), microaggressions affect people on three different levels: cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally. On a cognitive level, people first wonder if they actually even experienced a microaggression. People of color spend considerable time questioning whether an incident they experienced was racist, and how they should respond to it. This focus can have detrimental effects on people's emotional and psychological well-being, as they question not only their perceptions but also the motives of the perpetrator toward them. Behaviorally, Sue (2010) explains that either people might choose to respond confrontationally or nonconfrontationally to microaggressions, depending on the incident itself, the relationship they have with the perpetrator, and their assessment of how effective different responses might be.

Criticisms about microaggressions stem from a lack of a critical sociohistorical analysis of racism as a system of oppression (Schacht, 2008; Thomas, 2008). Critics purport that microaggressions are nonsensical because any interpersonal interaction could have some degree of assault, insult, or invalidation (Thomas, 2008). These scholars also assert that these experiences do not automatically have to involve inherent racism by Whites (Schacht, 2008). These assertions would hold credence in a society whose social structures are not systematically organized to privilege some racial identities, and oppress others. However, this is not true for present day society. Microaggression scholars acknowledge that people of color are deeply embedded within these social systems. In turn, individual behaviors occurring within these systems privilege the dominant group and oppress the target group (Donovan, Galban,

Grace, Bennett, & Felicié, 2013; Mercer, Zeigler-Hill, Wallace, & Hayes, 2011; Schoulte, Schultz, & Altmaier, 2011; Sue, Capodilupo, et al., 2008).

Current Study

While microaggressions can and do occur across all formal help settings, it is especially important to examine them in settings that have specifically been designed to assist people through serious life crises. In many communities, the domestic violence shelter may be the only safe refuge for a woman being severely abused by a partner or ex-partner, so it is critical that such organizations provide the safety and assistance survivors need. Previous studies have provided evidence that women might be having these subtle experiences; this study adds to that growing field of knowledge by using racial microaggressions as an organizing framework, examining specific experiences that women have in shelter, and uncovering how women define and respond to these experiences when they occur.

Method

Participants

Women were eligible for this study if they were English speaking, identified as Black or African American, were 18 years of age or older, and had been at the domestic violence shelter for at least 5 days. The selected length of time in the shelter, which was determined collaboratively with shelter directors, allowed women enough time to experience numerous interactions with staff and residents, but was short enough to ensure we would not lose women who left shelter after only a few days. Interviewing Black women specifically was also a strategic choice because the experiences of racial microaggressions are qualitatively different for racial groups based on social position. The final sample consisted of 14 Black women across three shelters. Women's ages ranged from 18 to 49 years, with an average age of 31.2 years ($SD = 9.42$). Nine women were mothers, and five of those women had children at the shelter with them during the time of the interview. One woman had been at shelter for five days, eight women has been at shelter for three weeks or less, and five had been there for one month or longer. Six women had been to a domestic violence shelter prior to their current shelter stay, four of which were repeat stays at the shelter where they were interviewed.

Procedure

Three domestic violence shelters throughout a Midwestern state were purposively selected as recruitment sites for this research study. The shelters were chosen for their diverse geographic locations and program structures. The largest shelter, in the southeastern part of the state, was a 42-bed facility that offered various support services to women including counseling, legal advocacy, and support groups. The shelter director identified as a woman of color and the shelter staff were racially mixed. Pictures that were situated throughout the shelter included women and men of color. Women could cook and eat any food available in the refrigerator as long as they cooked it themselves. Outside organizations donated food to the shelter. Staff assigned women chores and every woman had to abide by a shelter curfew. There was a 30-day shelter stay limit, although extensions were possible.

The medium-sized shelter, located in the central part of the state, offered women a 30-bed emergency shelter stay, support groups, and counseling. The shelter director was not a woman of color and the staff, based on visual appearance, was racially diverse. There were limited pictures on the walls of the shelter and only one depicted a person of color. Residents could not bring food into the shelter and had specific meal times every day. Every resident had to complete chores and abide by a curfew. Women were allowed to stay at shelter for a maximum of 30 days but could request extensions.

The smallest shelter, located in the western part of the state, had two emergency shelters and various support services. There were 18 beds available at this shelter, and residents could stay as long as necessary to maintain safety. The shelter director at this location was a woman of color, although the majority of the shelter staff was White. Many brochures and magazines in the waiting area had faces of people of color. Kitchen staff cooked and served food daily to women, and residents abided by a curfew.

Recruitment flyers were posted in all the participating shelters. In addition, all visibly Black women were approached by the first-named author, who discussed study details and eligibility criteria. Participants were asked to share the information about the study with other Black women that they knew at shelter. Every eligible woman had the opportunity to participate in a one-time, individual interview on or off shelter premises.

The recruitment, interviewing, and primary data analysis were all conducted by the first author (NAN), who identifies as a Black woman. She has many years of experience working with survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking. The second author (CMS) is a White woman, a national expert in the field of violence against women and has been

working with domestic violence shelters for the past 30 years. Throughout the data analytic process, the second author and other experts on violence against women and racism corroborated the findings. As feminist, community-based researchers, we are cognizant of how power is organized in social and institutional hierarchies. We use an ecological approach to examine outcomes related to oppression and privilege and believe that Black women survivors, specifically, confront multiple oppressions related to their intersectional identities that impact their daily lived and shelter experiences.

In order to identify racial microaggressions described in the interviews, we carefully examined the literature on racial microaggressions and how it is conceptually distinct from other forms of covert racism. While the naming of subtle racism is not novel, the racial microaggression conceptual framework provides a mechanistic way to identify, quantify and classify the everyday discrimination that Black women experience during their stay at domestic violence shelters.

Theoretical saturation was reached after interviewing 12 women, with little new information gleaned from an additional two interviews. Theoretical saturation is commonly referred to as the point in data collection when no new concepts are being learned (Curry, Nembhard, & Bradley, 2009). All participants were compensated $20 for their participation. Interviews lasted for an average of 48 minutes (range = 30-74 minutes). This study was approved by the university's institutional review board.

Measures

The semistructured interview guide started with general questions about the shelter environment. For example: "Tell me what it is like being at this domestic violence shelter." The second section of the interview contained questions about women's experiences with overt and subtle racism at the shelter and their responses to it. The interviewer asked women if they had experienced unfair treatment or had been uncomfortable because of their race in the domestic violence shelter. Women were asked if they defined those specific experiences as racist, and were probed about the specific details of that experience. For example, "Overall, what specific challenges, if any, do you face as a Black woman at this agency pertaining to race and racism?" Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the term "racial microaggressions" was not defined to the participants prior to the start of their interview. Women were also asked about the general challenges that Black women faced at shelter, if any, and how they responded to them. The third section of the interview particularly focused on how their experiences impacted whether

they would return to or recommend the shelter. The interview guide ended with brief demographic questions.

Data Analysis

A phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis provides a way to examine the lived experiences among a collective group of people (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). This approach allowed us to gain an in-depth understanding of how Black women experienced racial microaggressions during their stay at shelter.

We used Moustakas's (1994) modified version of the Stevick–Colaizzi–Keen method as the phenomenological approach to data reduction and analysis. First, the researcher brackets their personal experiences, describing specifically how their social position could affect the findings. Next, we read each transcript and selected specific statements that related to the phenomenon of interest. Then, we created a formulated meaning for each significant statement. This process is defined as horizontalization. These formulated meanings were based on the interpretation of the participant's words, while still attempting to remain close to how participants defined their own experience. After that, we organized 441 significant statements and formulated meanings into themes. A textual and structural description emerged from the collected relevant themes In order to address potential bias, we corroborated findings with multiple coders.

Testing Assumptions. In order to explain unexpected findings in the data, we examined the patterns and relationships between themes using an Nvivo matrix query, context charts, and coding matrices. First, we ran a matrix query in Nvivo 8 (QSR International, 2010) with a variety of different themes and demographic variables to get a broad picture of themes that might have influenced how women defined and responded to microaggressions. This helped us refine some assumptions about what was influencing the unexpected findings and determine which were worthy of further examination. Next, we developed context charts to see if the hypothesized themes influenced appraisal of and response to microaggressions. Context charts are best used when a researcher would like to see how other environmental factors and various themes are influencing a participant (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The context charts revealed several patterns that we decided to test further by using a case-ordered meta-matrix and a variable-by-variable matrix. The case-ordered meta-matrix orders participants or cases based on one variable and then compares it with another variable (Miles & Huberman, 1994). It allowed us to look at patterns and themes across two major variables in the data by case. We used the

following tactics from Miles and Huberman (1994**)** to help us test assertions: (a) looking at contrasting cases, (b) identifying researcher bias, (c) creating if-then relationships, and (d) understanding outliers.

Finally, we integrated the textual and structural descriptions. Moustakas (1994) describes the textual description as the "what" of the experience, and the structural description provides the "how" of the experience. Once the structural description was written, it was combined with the textual description to create one composite description telling the essence of the phenomenon.

Results

A majority of the women felt that shelters were safe and equitable environments despite differential geographic and organizational demographics. Participants frequently described the shelters as a comfortable place to return if they needed to escape from an abusive partner. Each woman discussed how shelter provided them with needed and beneficial resources and emotional support. Provision of resources also made women feel that staff cared about them. Overall, shelters provided safe, comfortable environments where women could relax, share stories, and feel connected with staff and other residents. Women built connections with staff at their respective shelters, which influenced their future desire to return if necessary. The shelter environments provided women with a violence-free atmosphere and time to regain control of their lives. The shelter staff encouraged autonomy, offered helpful advice, and increased women's self-confidence.

Many of women's complaints about shelters were typically about communal living. For example, women described arguing over chores, sharing spaces, and generally having to get along with people who held different values. Despite this, all the women in the sample reported that they would return to their respective shelter if necessary.

Thirteen of the 14 participants felt that shelter staff were equitable in all aspects of their interactions with residents. Participants believed White staff members allowed equal access to the shelter, gave clients equal resources, and did not bend the rules at the shelter for any particular racial group. Despite these overall positive perceptions of the shelter environments and staff, women still experienced racial microaggressions. Interestingly, however, few identified their experiences as racist.

Microaggressions Experienced

Twelve participants reported an experience that could be classified as an environmental or nonenvironmental racial microaggression at some point during

their shelter stay, with environmental microaggressions being the most commonly reported. Environmental microaggressions are "demeaning and threatening social educational, political, or economic cues that are communicated individually, institutionally, or societally to marginalized groups" (Sue, 2010, p. 25). Women discussed three different types of environmental microaggressions: lack of culturally specific hair products (10 women), lack of culturally specific foods (5 women), and a homogeneous staff composition (3 women).

Some participants were either surprised or disappointed at the lack of Black hair products, while others did not expect the shelter to carry these items. One participant felt that the main purpose of the shelter was to provide a safe place for women; all other things, such as hair products, were considered extra or a bonus. Two shelters provided limited choices for Black women, but most products were targeted toward White women. A shelter counselor told one resident that the shelter did not have hair products for Black women: "Um, my counselor . . . She told me before that they don't have any [black hair products], anything like that so if I was to want somethin' like that I would have to get it" (Karen).

Participants did not believe that staff members were being intentionally exclusionary, yet the lack of hair care and food products revealed the White cultural norms embedded within the organization. Across all three shelters hair care products were primarily donated goods from mainstream stores or community members. Black residents viewed donations as a valid reason why shelters did not have adequate products for them, despite the fact that shelter staff could and did purchase food and personal needs items to supplement donations.

Along with environmental microaggressions, participants also experienced nonenvironmental microaggressions—two microassaults (intentional comments or actions), four microinsults (rude or insensitive comments or actions), and four microinvalidations (exclusionary or nullifying comments or actions). These incidents were infrequent and often perpetrated by other residents as opposed to staff. In the first microassault, a Black resident overheard her roommate use the n-word. Later on, the same Black resident describes how her roommate called someone a Black b*tch.

> She tried her best to explain it, but still the fact of the matter is . . . I mean, you know, I guess she called her a black b*tch because her head got this . . . doin' like this [moves head side to side]. You know, how some sisters can't, when they cussin' you out and . . . you know, get to shakin' they neck and um, I guess she called her a Black b*tch, "stop actin" like a "Black b*tch." (Arlene)

The perpetrator of both microassaults later explained to the Black resident that she did not intend to be offensive. Instead, the perpetrator discussed how

the Black woman she was referring to was engaged in stereotypical behavior that prompted her to commit a microassault.

Four different women reported experiencing a microinsult while staying at shelter. These demeaning microinsults were understood to be subtle reminders that participants occupied a devalued racial group. It also exemplified the fact that White residents held specific stereotypes about Black people. For example, one White female resident referred to a Black woman as "colored," which connotes a period when Blacks were seen as second-class citizens.

> Um, well, there is a resident here who address black people as colored people instead of addressin' us by our name. And we were told to just, to talk to her. Like, you know, "This is 2010." You know, "We don't call Black people colored people anymore and it's offensive to, you know, some people." (Amber)

In another example, almost every day a White resident asked a Black participant why she did not sound, talk, or act "more Black." The participant said, "It irks me as . . . when someone tells me um, "Why don't you act black? And I always say to them (laughs), 'What is acting black? I get that almost daily from one particular person.'" (Arlene). In this situation, the White woman held stereotypical beliefs about how Black women behave and (we presume) remained unaware that continually questioning the Black woman's cultural identity because it did not fit cultural stereotypes, was racist. Another participant described feeling annoyed that Black women at her shelter were seen as dangerous by staff and residents at shelter. She felt that this belief created a tension between staff and residents. For example, when a Black and White woman got into a verbal altercation, the participant felt that shelter residents perceived the Black woman as scarier even though she was engaging in the same behaviors as the White woman.

One Black woman discussed that she was denied access to medication because she was Black. This microinsult was the only staff-perpetrated racial microaggression identified in the sample. A White resident told a participant needing allergy relief that she had received medication from staff. However, when she herself approached staff, she was told she would need to go to a drugstore for medicine. The participant explained,

> She [the White woman] was like, "I took it. It helped, but it made me go to sleep." You know, so I know that she's went and got it before. And then I'm like, Well, when I go . . . and I, I mean, the only difference is color, you know. We're both here. We both have allergies. But I'm Black and she's White. You know? (Karen)

A few Black participants reported experiencing microinvalidations. One participant specifically discussed how her experience with a racist service provider was nullified by a group of White women. She described needing money to obtain a state identification card. While attempting to obtain charitable funds from a local organization, the participant found that she was dealing with a racist service provider. The entire experience left her feeling infuriated and in need of emotional support. She tried to seek support from a shelter staff member who had recommended the organization, but the staff member did not provide support beyond saying "I'm sorry." The participant then explained to a few White residents about her racist experience. When she finished explaining her story, all the women laughed. Even though she was sad about the response, the participant was not surprised the White women laughed. "And I'm like, 'Y'all is not gon believe this,' and I told 'em everything that happened, everything on the phone. Of course, they thought it was funny." (Dorothy). When they finished laughing, the White women continued to invalidate her experience. Dorothy explained, "And they laughed. And they was like, 'Well, it's no big deal. Hell, I'll give you $10 tomorrow to go get your ID.'" The White residents redefined her experience by telling her than the discrimination was "no big deal." They solidified the invalidation by giving her ten dollars to get her state identification card.

Other examples of microinvalidations occurred within interactions where race was the topic of conversation. White women discussed race in a way that perpetuated stereotypes, or made race salient in uncomfortable ways for Black women. For example, one woman experienced two microinvalidations on two different occasions. First, a White resident described her preference for White over Black men, which was followed by a litany of explanations to justify this preference. The same participant had another encounter when a White woman who described her family's involvement in White supremacy groups. The participant shared,

> Or then there was another lady, "Well, my dad and my grandfather were in the KKK. But, I like Black people." And that's just weird. (laughs) Like, they just made it known that, you know, their family did not accept Black people. (Cheryl)

A different participant brought up how a White woman stated that she had a lot of Black friends. The participant explained, "So (laughs) um, it . . . you know how they say, 'I got a lotta Black friends.' Now what did you say that for?" (Harriet). The participant described the disclosure as unprompted and unnecessary. It was also annoying because she had to figure out a way to respond.

Two women felt that certain White staff members used nonverbal expressions to let women know that they were not wanted at shelter. The participants did not really know *why* they felt this way, but believed that the nonverbal cues communicated to them were unwelcoming. Christina shared,

> It could just be an expression on a person's face. You be like, "Well, they look like they don't want me here," or somethin' like that. And I felt like that a couple times, but I don't look at it. I look over stuff like that.

Similar to microinsults, the perpetrators of microinvalidations were likely not aware that they made participants uncomfortable or uneasy. In turn, participants did not always know how or if to respond.

Responding to Microaggressions

Women's responses to nonenvironmental microaggressions were examined for commonalities and differences and were classified as either "nonconfrontational" or "confrontational" responses.

Nonconfrontational Responses to Microaggressions. Eight women responded nonconfrontationally to the racial microaggressions they had experienced. Nonconfrontational responses were defined as not directly reprimanding or responding to a perpetrator or attempting to change the structure of the environment. Each participant explicitly stated that the microaggression did not directly affect them, yet there was some evidence that they were shocked, disappointed, or annoyed with the perpetrator and chose to respond nonconfrontationally.

> I mean, it's like we will. . . we can be talking about something totally different. And I say things to myself like, "Why was this even brought up?" . . . Or most of the time I just will sit there or I will come back inside or go elsewhere. I usually do that, regardless of the conversation if I don't feel like talkin' about it. But some—. . . .I. . . . it's never really made me angry, but it just like, you know, it sticks me wrong. Like, why was that a big issue. (Cheryl)

This minimization of their own experiences could be related to what Sue (2010) identifies as "denial of the experiential reality" (p. 56), which is an individual's attempt to minimize the microaggression in order to avoid negative consequences.

One participant identified an uncomfortable interaction she had with a White woman who explained that her family was in the KKK (Ku Klux

Klan). The participant later discussed that she probably would not share this experience with staff nor talk about it with other residents. She stated that the situation had not affected her directly and, therefore, there was not a need to talk to staff. Her preference was to walk away and "go about her business" when residents said things that were offensive. In another example, when a White resident minimized Dorothy's experience with racism, Dorothy decided to take a similar approach of "brushing it off."

In order to deal with the lack of hair products, some women just bought things on their own. Other women requested hair care products from staff, while a few women pooled their money together to buy hair products to share among the group.

Confrontational Responses to Microaggressions. Three Black women experienced microassault and microinsults such as name-calling (e.g., overhearing someone say n***er, Black b*tch, or colored) and decided to respond confrontationally to the perpetrators. Arlene overheard her roommate call someone a Black b*tch and decided to educate the roommate immediately about her language. The goal of this confrontation was to educate and inform the perpetrator, whom she considered a friend. She continued this educative approach when the same perpetrator also used the n-word to describe a Black woman. Arlene explained the history of the racial slur and described why it was inappropriate to use the word today. She stated that her approach to the perpetrator was more compassionate compared with how other Black women might have responded.

Arlene also experienced a microinsult when a White woman asked her why she was not "acting" Black. She responded by directly asking, "What is acting Black?" She understood the stereotype underlying the White woman's comment. Yet, instead of berating the woman about the stereotypes associated with Black womanhood, Arlene chose to respond in a manner that forced the White woman to think more deeply about her own prejudice. Amber recalled a White woman in shelter referring to Black women as "colored." It is important to note that even though she responded confrontationally, Amber pitied the White woman. She stated that the White woman was probably not used to being around Black people, but still needed her behavior corrected. She and other Black women in shelter planned carefully what they wanted to say to the White woman. Before acting, the group asked shelter staff whether they could carry out the planned confrontation. Amber carefully emphasized that they did not want to intimidate the woman, but instead wanted to educate her using collective support.

Karen was insulted when a staff member refused to give her allergy medicine that they had earlier provided to a White resident.

> So I go in the office–right after she just came outta the office [white woman with similar allergies]–and I said, 'You guys got any allergy medicine?' She's like, "No, all we have is aspirin." And then the other lady (another staff member) who was sittin' in a chair was like, "Well, they're only $4.95 at Walmart." (Karen)

Unlike the previous two participants, Karen was not interested in educating staff members or pushing them to think about their prejudice, but rather she responded, "Well, why don't you go to Walmart and get some for me?"

Motivational Appraisals Behind Responses to Microaggressions

Women had different reasons why they decided to respond to racial microaggressions in particular ways. Overall, the data suggested that nonconfrontational strategies derived from women's motivational framing of the perpetrator's behavior. Examples in the data confirm some of the concepts that Sue (2010) introduced in his research: "healthy paranoia" and "rescuing the offender" (Sue, 2010, pp. 75-76). Healthy paranoia describes how people of color are often wary of their interactions with White people due to a long history of individual and systemic racism. For some Black women, the existence of racism within the shelter was not surprising and therefore did not require special attention. This desensitization to and minimization of microaggressions seemed to be the impetus for nonconfrontational responses. Harriett expressed her apathy.

> See, she didn't have to say that. Because that didn't sound right. But I didn't say any . . . it didn't anger me. I've heard it so much from different people when they talkin'. I just let 'em go ahead and talk.

Some participants also engaged in "rescuing the offender" by providing explanations or reasons why the racial microaggression occurred. This, in turn, removed responsibility from the perpetrator. It is possible that nonconfrontational responses did not necessarily indicate an acceptance of a microaggression, but in some cases were based on a conscious decision to de-escalate the negative emotions that arose when experiencing a microaggression.

Sometimes a racial experience was alarming enough to require more confrontational processing about how to respond. When Arlene experienced a microinsult, when she was told that she was not Black enough, she thought very deeply about her experience. During the interview, she asked the interviewer whether she thought the microinsult was racist and worthy of response.

By asking how the interviewer interpreted the event, Arlene was actually engaging in a "sanity check" (Sue, 2010, p. 74) to validate the feelings she had about the situation. The perpetrator's insulting comments initially caused her to question her cultural identity. She concluded to the interviewer that the White woman probably wanted to be Black. This conceptualization seemed to lessen the negative impact of the insulting comments, especially because Arlene initially saw the offending woman as young and well intentioned.

When Karen did not receive allergy medication from staff (that had earlier been given to a White resident), she initially responded to the microinsult with a combative comment, yet once she left the situation, she did not choose to speak to anyone further about getting the medication. She determined that any further efforts of confrontational response would be ineffective due to the power differential between shelter staff and her. Sue (2010) described this nonconfrontational response as "impotency of actions" (p. 56). It occurs when an individual has assessed the situation and decided that any action that they engage in will not result in the change that they desire.

Denial of Racism

The data were examined for any patterns that might explain why women either did not classify incidents as racist or minimized the severity of the incidents. Four themes emerged from the data. Specifically, 13 women believed potential perpetrators were just and fair, 9 women endorsed negative stereotypes about their racial and/or gender group (i.e., internalized oppression), 5 women thought that other residents were undeserving clients, and 5 women believed Black residents presented themselves poorly to staff.

View of Potential Perpetrators As Just and Fair. Overall, 13 of the 14 study participants viewed shelter staff as equitable in all aspects of their interactions with residents. They believed shelter workers were nonracist, and in turn, any incidents of racism reported by other women of color at the shelter were seen as misinterpretations of staff's behavior. Karen, who reported a staff-perpetrated microinsult, was the only woman who did not identify staff as fair and equitable. Participants believed White staff members allowed equal access to shelter, gave clients equal resources, and did not bend the rules at the shelter for any particular racial group. Amber stated that,

> Like, we all get the same treatment, that I've seen with my eyes. That we all have to do the same things. Like, we all have to do chores. We all, you know, have to be in at a certain time. There's no, like . . . we're all treated the same basically. There's no favoritism.

Women's Internalized Oppression. Internalized oppression was an emergent metatheme that arose out of two themes: "negative traits about Black women" and "negative traits of women." It also was a potential contributor to why women might not have identified racism in shelter. Nine women endorsed a mixture of racist, sexist, and classist stereotypes about women. This included the belief that Black women, specifically, were loud, illogical, aggressive, and instigators in confrontations. This endorsement of negative stereotypes about Black women might preclude a woman from acknowledging a racist incident as well. For example, Arlene described a racial microinsult that she had encountered by another resident. The perpetrator of this microinsult clearly held negative stereotypical views of Black women, yet Arlene rationalized the White perpetrator's racist behavior by explaining, "So I guess she expects for, truth be told, yes, a lotta Black folks . . . you know, I mean, come on now. A lot of us or . . . yeah, a lot of us, be actin' ignorant and stupid." Another Black woman explained her preference for being around White women. She felt that White women were less negative than Black women:

> Harriet: So, I don't like to be around a lot of 'em, I'm tellin' you . . . That's my experience.
> Interviewer: You don't like to be around other Black women?
> Harriet: Mmm, not in no, no. 'Cause it always somethin' goin' on . . . that's negative. I find myself more comfortable around White women.

Along with internalized racism, four participants discussed other women as being the impetus to problems. They believed that women started problems for residents in shelter and preferred not to form relationships with other clients.

> But even then I try to stay out of everybody's way. Because there's so many problems around, you know, as far as cleaning and "Who did this?" and "Somebody took this . . ." you know? Just like I try to avoid all'a that by kinda just stayin' in my own area. (Karen)

Arlene described not wanting to form close relationships with other women in shelter:

> Interviewer: How come you wouldn't want to get too comfortable?
> Arlene: Well, for one, it's in a houseful of women. Okay? Um…(laughs) And you know how devious we can be.

Some Women Are Undeserving Clients. Five participants discussed that some women were undeserving of shelter services. They felt that certain women

were just using the shelter as a homeless shelter, rather than as a place to get back on their feet, and, in turn, were not making the necessary changes in their life. This view of women as lazy people could have impacted whether they actually believed that a racist incident occurred. This was evident when Erica explained that misuse of the services would result in negative repercussions for residents. She explained, "This ain't no hotel. This ain't Holiday Inn. This is a domestic violence shelter. And if you don't respect it and treat it like the domestic violence shelter, it's gonna cost you." In this sense, women were viewed as responsible for their successes as well as failures. The women who endorsed this theme believed that shelter services were intended to be reciprocal, "I mean, it's like a give-and-take situation. You can't take, take, take and not give anything back" (Cheryl).

Bad Self-Presentation. The belief that shelter staff members were fair and that other residents could be devious, lazy, or untruthful could have made it difficult for participants to identify microaggressions either occurring within their own lives or the lives of other residents. This theme was evident in five participants' answers when the interviewer asked how they would respond to another resident who stated that she experienced a racist incident in shelter. Five women stated that they would not believe the resident because she probably approached the staff member with a bad attitude. Therefore, participants explained that the "racist" response from the staff member would have actually been due to the resident's inappropriate behavior rather than the staff member being racist. Harriett explained what she would say to a Black woman who might disclosed experiencing racism by staff member.

> That it's prob'ly not because you're Black. It's probably because of the way that you're going about things . . . to try to get whatever you're tryin' to accomplish. It's the way you goin' about it probably. I would say. And maybe you have to change the way you're, you're um, the way you're talkin'. You know? (laughs) It's the way you presentin' yourself.

Cheryl stated that claims of racism were actually an impetus to unnecessary stress. She believed unmotivated residents used racism as an excuse to become even more unmotivated. She suggested,

> I just . . . I don't know. Like, the peo-, the staff are more willing to help people that are willin' to help themselves. So I just feel like if you . . . if you feel that way [like staff are racist] now obviously you're putting a burden on yourself. So . . . and that'll make like . . . you putting a burden on yourself and then you don't want to do stuff because you feel like no one's gonna help you.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the presence of racial microaggressions against Black women within domestic violence shelters and to explore women's responses to them. Twelve of the 14 women in the sample reported experiencing at least one microaggression, the most common of which were environmental microinvalidations.

The environmental microaggressions suggested that Eurocentric norms were apparent in the shelter environment. For example, most women reported a lack of hair products for Black women. Not stocking such hair products reflects a perception on the part of White staff that Black women's hair care needs are deviant from "standard" (i.e., White) hair care products (which *were* available). This type of exclusionary practice created additional financial burdens for Black women, as they had to spend extra money or coordinate with other women to share supplies. Similar to participants in Gillum's (2008a) study, women did not have access to culturally specific foods, and had to coordinate with kitchen staff to have "special" nights when culturally specific food would be cooked.

Understanding Womens' Perceptions of Microaggressions

Despite 11 women describing an environmental microaggression and 9 women identifying a nonenvironmental microaggression, almost every respondent (13 of the 14) reported that racism did not exist in the shelter, stating that they had the same access to support and practical resources as did White women.

There are a number of explanations for why Black women in shelter may choose to overlook, minimize, or disregard microaggressions that they experience. Some microaggressions, for example, are subtle or ambiguous, and women may doubt their perceptions about the event as being racist. Prior research has noted that when people experience a racial microaggression within a context that they appraise as helpful, they consider a number of factors to help them determine if the event was indeed racist (Sue, 2010). They take into account their experiences or relationship with the perpetrator, and they consider the consequences to themselves of viewing the event negatively. In other words, they considered not only what is currently happening but also what has happened in the past, and how their appraisal might affect them in the future. Taking this into account, some women might not have labeled their experiences as racist because they felt staff provided them with emotional and practical support. Many participants described the shelters as comfortable, familiar, and consistent, and they valued these qualities in a

helping source after leaving an abusive relationship. Shelter staff kept women physically safe and attended to their basic needs.

When women deny a microaggression as being racist, they need some explanation to understand the experience. A common response is to negatively internalize the experience and blame themselves or others. In turn, women inevitably end up "denying their experiential reality" (Sue, 2010, p. 56). It is noteworthy that most microaggressions mentioned by the study participants were perpetrated by other shelter residents, and study participants held other residents in lower regard than they did staff. Two emergent themes included viewing other women as presenting themselves negatively and seeing other residents as being undeserving of help. The "bad self-presentation" theme described participants' beliefs that some women had bad attitudes and presented themselves in ways that were inappropriate to staff. Therefore, when asked hypothetically how they would respond to another resident who complained of staff being racist, participants stated that it was probably the woman's inappropriate behavior, not a staff member's racial bias, that prompted the bad interactions with staff.

The belief that some Black women were undeserving clients was the second theme that arose from the data. In this theme, women blamed other residents for not using shelter resources that could better their lives. They also mentioned their disappointment with residents who were using the resources when they did not "really need them." For example, some participants stated that women at shelter were undeserving because they were homeless and not actually domestic violence survivors.

Both themes insinuated that there are acceptable and unacceptable ways to behave as shelter residents. Shelter residents who were perceived as unfriendly, aggressive or manipulating the shelter resources were described in unfavorable ways. This belief in an "undeserving" client corroborates findings of VanNatta (2005), from a study that involved interviewing staff at a domestic violence shelter. Shelter workers believed that certain women manipulated and used domestic violence shelter resources, and they discussed being able to tell who actually deserved to be in shelter and who "just" was there for housing.

> A staff member will generally base her opinion of whether a resident is "really in need of safe housing" on how that resident interacts with shelter staff, how dedicated she appears to be to shelter meetings and programs, and how actively she appears to be searching for permanent housing (VanNatta, 2005, p. 425).

In addition to having negative thoughts about some residents specifically, many participants also endorsed negative stereotypes about Black women in

general. Findings showed that nine women in the current sample reported statements that were identified as indicating internalized oppression. Prilleltensky and Gonick (1996) argued that internalized oppression is a product of living in a society with dominating and oppressive forces against members of your own group. In the current study, women internalized both racist and sexist oppression. Many either endorsed negative stereotypes about Black women and/or endorsed negative stereotypes about women in general. The extent of internalized oppression was an unexpected finding in this study and may have been an influential contributor to the denial of racism at shelter.

The internalization of negative stereotypes by oppressed groups allows dominant groups to obtain psychological control and to perpetuate systems of oppression. The dominant group is able to define reality for those in target groups (Speight, 2007; Sue, 2010). In this sample, the endorsement of negative stereotypes by Black women proved to be the most alarming because they were reminiscent of the Sapphire stereotype. According to S. B. Campbell, Giannino, China, and Harris (2008), the Sapphire is "loud, overbearing, shrewd, and aggressive. She is ambitious, educated and seems to relish conflict" (p. 22). Consistent with this stereotype, participants in the sample stated that Black women were loud, aggressive, stubborn, and instigators of negative encounters. Some felt that Black women were generally negative and behaved in ways that made getting along with them difficult. A negative assessment *of* Black women *by* Black women could result in an inability to see how racism subtly manifests. However, this internalization could also serve a protective function for women and allow them to continue to use resources that have been beneficial in maintaining their safety.

Understanding Women's Responses to Microaggressions

This study examined not only how women interpreted experiences of microaggressions but also their response to them. Women's responses were categorized as either confrontational or nonconfrontational. Interestingly, few women reported using confrontational responses to microaggressions, which is likely due to the nature of the microaggressions experienced. Few women reported overt, easily interpretable microassaults. They were far more likely to report more ambiguous or covert incidents, which require significant cognitive processing to determine whether the events are actually racist.

Women who stated that they responded nonconfrontationally and/or did not address a racial microaggression, often minimized their experiences and the impact that it had on their lives. The reasons for this minimization could be attributed to a feeling of "immunity" to racism or not wanting to be labeled

as paranoid or oversensitive. Evidence of "immunity" from our findings arose when a few women stated that racist things did not bother them because they had been through similar situations so frequently in the past. Some studies have found that Blacks have learned that confronting racism—especially when it is subtle—can often make matters worse; research has shown that Blacks who confront even obvious racism are still seen as oversensitive and as complainers by many Whites (Kaiser & Miller, 2001). Black women might, therefore, choose not to say anything in order to protect themselves and avoid further scrutiny.

It is also important to consider the power dynamics between staff and residents, and its potential impact on residents' willingness to identify and respond to microaggressions. Since staff had authority, controlled needed resources, and provided free services to women who had recently been in severe crisis, this could have impacted women's ability or willingness to see any discriminatory or unfair behavior being perpetrated by them. Women could have also feared the repercussion of identifying racist events because of the limited access to domestic violence services within their communities. In sum, the nature of the relationship between the target and perpetrator may have influenced how people chose to identify and respond to racial microaggressions.

Increasing Cultural Competence in Domestic Violence Shelters

Microaggressions are derived from implicit, negative cultural stereotypes. If perpetrators even subconsciously endorse negative cultural stereotypes about Blacks, then these beliefs influence their interactions with Blacks. Sekaquaptewa, Espinoza, Thompson, Vargas, and von Hippel (2003) found that having implicit stereotypes about someone from a particular race predicted how a person would behave in interracial interactions. The experiences women identified in this study reflected a number of broad, negative cultural stereotypes about Black women. For example, the use of the word n***er and "colored," insinuating that a Black woman was being "oversensitive," and even the belief that a participant was not behaving "Black enough" were all rooted in stereotypical ideas about the roles and behaviors of Black women. These findings corroborate those from Sue, Nadal, et al. (2008) study of Black college students. Students reported experiencing a wide-range of racial microaggressions that were then classified into six themes "assumption of intellectual inferiority, second-class citizenship, assumption of criminality, assumption of inferior status, assumed universality of the Black American experience, and assumed superiority of white cultural values/communication styles" (p. 335). Based on these data, it seems that addressing

stereotypical thinking about various racial groups would be an important step to eradicating racial microaggressions.

On a practice level, those working within service and advocacy organizations can engage in a variety of practices to create antioppressive spaces. For example, it is important to integrate critical consciousness raising curriculum into training and policies, so that staff can become strong allies for all women. Staff should continuously plan how to deal with racial microaggressions as they see them manifest in the organization between clients, and they should have honest conversations about the way racism overtly and covertly influences the lives of women of color. Microaggressions will be continually perpetuated in environments where prejudice is not openly discussed and challenged. Women might not choose to share their experience of racism or racial microaggressions or, due to power differentials, might not identify a staff member as a perpetrator. Program executive directors should continue to work on hiring representative staff within the agency as well as purchasing or requesting personal care products and foods targeted toward women of color.

In order to counteract subtle discrimination during service provision experienced by Black women, domestic violence shelters could also integrate Afrocentric approaches into service provision and organizational practices (Bent-Goodley, 2005; Gillum, 2009; Vann, 2003). Bent-Goodley (2005) applied eight components of the African-centered cultural orientation to domestic violence practice and provided recommendations to practitioners based on this application. The first component, *fundamental goodness*, emphasizes that both the survivors and the abuser have the capacity to change. In turn, practitioners should always honor this capacity in their interpersonal work with survivors. *Self-knowledge*, the second component, asks that domestic violence professionals develop a critical awareness of their own thoughts and behaviors that contribute to the larger issue of domestic violence. Self-knowledge also emphasizes the value of providers who are also survivors, and states that provides should use these experiences to inform the work that they do with clients. *Communalism*, the third component, honors the collective nature of African peoples and emphasizes the need for domestic violence providers to use the family and community supports to enhance women's safety. Fourth, *interconnectedness*, states that all individuals involved in the survivor's process are connected. In turn, "the fate of the professional is linked to the success or failure of the client" (Bent-Goodley, 2005, p. 201). The importance of the connection between the spirit and the physical self highlights *spirituality* as the fifth component of African-centered orientation. The provider should be cognizant of their sense of spirituality and integrate aspects of spirituality into the survivor's healing. The sixth

component, *self-reliance*, emphasizes that Blacks are able to build community interventions to combat abuse based on their own worldviews and lived experiences in order to best fit the community's need. An understanding and appreciation of the language and rhythm of African peoples as a part of the *oral tradition* is the seventh component of an African-centered cultural orientation. The final component is *thought and practice*. Helping professionals need to act on their knowledge when they see oppressive behaviors and should actively confront injustices when they occur. Bent-Goodley (2005) asserts that "having knowledge of an injustice without engaging in planned change to eradicate the problem is antithetical to the African-centered paradigm" (p. 200).

Integrating African-positive concepts into shelter practice would provide White staff with the skills, not only to recognize and modify their own oppressive behavior toward survivors of color but also to intervene when residents engage in oppressive or offensive ways with each other. Shelters may now provide physical safety from abusive partners, but they need to provide psychological safety to all residents as well.

Study Limitations

There are a number of limitations to consider in this study. First, interviewing women during their stay at shelter about oppressive practices could have influenced what women chose to share. Even though women were informed that their answers would not impact their stay at shelter, it is possible that women shared less because they were still using shelter resources. Second, the sample was naturally self-selecting, meaning that women who may have felt that staff were racist had already quickly left shelter. Some participants in the sample alluded to a few Black women who left shelter after only a few days because they felt that shelter staff were unfair. Another participant mentioned that a few Black women had been asked to leave because they were not "cooperating" with staff. It would be illuminating for future studies to use sampling techniques that also include women who either quickly leave shelter or who were asked to leave. Third, this was a small, qualitative sample that based results on the perceptions of 14 Black women in one Midwestern state. The extent to which these findings are representative of Black women's experiences in other shelters in other locations is unknown and additional studies are needed.

Future research would also greatly benefit from the use of mixed methods. This would allow us to understand the large-scale prevalence and consequences of racial microaggressions in the lives of people of color, while also gaining in-depth, contextual information to help understand people's

experiences. Given the subtlety of racial microaggressions, and the varied motivations people have to ignore or minimize their existence when they occur, sensitive measures and interview protocols are needed to better elucidate this widespread but elusive phenomenon.

In conclusion, racial microaggressions are difficult to identify and appraise, but they do exist and have ramifications for those experiencing them. Both target and dominant groups should continue to make strides to build and maintain strong ties to end oppressive practices within domestic violence organizations as well as other formal helping organizations. However, subtle racism continues to pervade the lives and minds of Black women. While this study was conducted at domestic violence shelter programs, it is likely that similar findings would be unearthed at other human service organizations. Shelter programs, which are typically staffed by individuals who care deeply about social justice and women's safety, are ideal incubators for creating oppression-free spaces that enhance the safety and well-being of all women.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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