Effects Of Racial Microaggressions On Black Women's Work Performance As Government Workers

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EFFECTS OF RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS ON BLACK WOMEN’S WORK PERFORMANCE AS GOVERNMENT WORKERS

By

Samantha-Rae Dickenson

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EFFECTS OF RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS ON BLACK WOMEN’S WORK PERFORMANCE AS GOVERNMENT WORKERS

Abstract

This study explored the connection between society’s perception of Black women and their experiences of racial microaggressions in a work environment, and further understand the effect these experiences have on their work performance. Despite federal regulations to eliminate workplace discrimination, there are still racially neutral workplace policies and a lack of inclusion in work environments. Work environments that do not actively account for diversity in formal policies can promote the occurrence of racial microaggressions. Black women’s unique experiences with racial microaggressions may affect their job performance. This study used Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality Theory, and Black Feminist Theory as a theoretical framework to illustrate the occurrence of racial microaggressions that Black women face in the government sector. The researcher used a phenomenological methodology, including an online questionnaire, structured interviews, and an asynchronous online focus group to explore the experiences of 18 Black women who presently work in the government sector, and acknowledge that racial microaggressions can occur in work settings. According to the results of this study, societal standards can influence the behavior of Black women in a work setting and increase the occurrence of racial microaggressions which negatively affect their emotional views about themselves and their jobs, regardless of her level of education, age, socioeconomic status, type of job. Results also illustrated that educating employees by holding all employees accountable for
inappropriate actions and mentorship are effective methods that can help to reduce the occurrence of racial microaggressions in the workplace.

*Keywords*: racial microaggressions, critical race theory, Black feminist theory, intersectionality
University of New England

Doctor of Education
Educational Leadership

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Pierce (1974) first proposed the term *racial microaggression* and described it as subtle or aversive racism where racist intentions are covert. Dovidio and Gaertner (2000) further developed the term *aversive racism*, which signifies that some White people, though well-intentioned, believe and declare that all people are equal while at the same time unconsciously acting in a racist manner. Sue et al. (2007) further expanded on this theory and defined racial microaggressions as short and subtle interactions that demean people of color because of their minority status; these interactions could include dismissive remarks, gestures or tones.

Stereotypes and racial microaggressions are subsets of systemic oppression that have been built up in society through decades of racism, unconsciously or consciously, and affect the opportunities available to people of color (Decuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016). Despite strides in decreasing discrimination, marked by the election of a Black President in the United States for example, racial minorities still experience racial microaggressions throughout their everyday lives, at school and at work (Wong et al., 2014; Offerman et al., 2014). Minorities are sometimes victims of racist actions that hinder their ability to participate, and advance in, the workforce because of systematic oppression that occurs at structural levels (Osanloo, Boske, & Newcomb, 2016). Before the term racial microaggressions was coined in the 1970s, as it relates to work environments, the main focus was eliminating hiring discrimination in the height of the civil rights movement (EEOC, 2016; Sue, et al., 2007).

President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (CRA) into law to circumvent segregation in public places, and employment discrimination against an individual because of
race, color, religion, national origin, or sex (EEOC, 2016). The Civil Rights Act prohibits the retaliation against an individual filing a discrimination lawsuit (EEOC, 2016). Congress passed Title VII of the CRA and created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to enforce Title VII of the CRA, in addition to other federal laws prohibiting employment discrimination based on age, disability, genetic information or family medical history in the private, public, and federal sectors (National Archives, 1964). The Title VII of the CRA stipulates that it is unlawful for employers to engage in hiring discrimination with respect to compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin; or to limit, segregate, or classify employees in any way which would deprive any individual of employment opportunities due to race, color, religion, sex, or national origin (EEOC, 2018). The EEOC engages in educating the public, investigating charges, mediation, conciliation, litigation, and federal sector hearings, appeals, training and technical assistance to mitigate all types of employment discrimination including systemic discrimination (Berrien, 2014).

Since the signing of Title VII of the CRA, employment rates for Black Americans have steadily increased (EEOC, 2015). The most recent national employment data provided by the Bureau of Labor statistics indicates that the workforce consisted of 12% Black workers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). When looking at employment rates by race and gender within each sector, employment rates in the government sector have steadily increased for minorities, specifically Black Americans and Black American women (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2018). Black women represent approximately 58% of Black workers in the labor force (Toossi & Joyner, 2018). Black women contribute to the economy substantially and comprise a large component of the workforce, yet are still experiencing racial microaggressions
in the workplace, preventing them from advancing in their careers (DuMonthier, Childers, & Milli, 2017).

Employment rates for Black Americans have increased over the past 20 years, but the number of racial discriminatory cases that the EEOC received has not decreased (EEOC, 2017); which brings attention to a major gap in this law, the need to promote a culture of inclusion. There was a total of 80,680 charges filed in 1997; 29,199 of those charges were race-based and 25,605 were gender-based (EEOC, 2018). There was a total of 84,254 charges filed in 2017; of those charges, 28,528 (33.9%) were race-based and 26,934 were gender-based (EEOC, 2018). Over the past two decades, the percentage of race-based charges filed with the EEOC has slightly decreased by two percent, and gender-based charges have remained the same (EEOC, 2018). Although the actual number of cases are similar to the number of cases filed over 20 years ago, there has been very little change in workplace discrimination (EEOC, 2018).

According to the most recent Title VII data, 35% of charges filed under Title VII were for race discrimination in fiscal year 2014 (EEOC, 2015); of those charges, Black employees filed 25,482 charges with the most frequent reason being for discharge, terms and conditions of employment, and harassment (EEOC, 2015). The EEOC resolved 30,429 employment racial discrimination charges and recovered nearly $75 million from lawsuits for individuals along with enacting substantial changes to employer policies to remedy violations (EEOC, 2015). The EEOC resolved approximately 26,000 charges of gender-based employment discrimination and recovered $106.5 million for individuals (EEOC, 2015). Although Title VII prohibits discrimination during the hiring process (National Archives, 1964), this law does not explicitly speak to organizations creating and maintaining a work culture that supports and promotes
diversity and inclusion. The increase in the number of race-related discriminatory charges filed with the EEOC supports this reality.

Although EEOC charges have decreased by 7,249 from 2016 to 2017 (EEOC, 2018), employers are still dealing with what experts have identified as the ‘Trump Effect’ in the workplace since President Trump took office (White, 2017). The ‘Trump Effect’ is defined as President Trump's highly charged and offensive behavior invoking negative changes in interactions among people in the United States (Todres, 2018). President Trump has made the problem of workplace bullying and offensive behavior in the workplace an important topic due to his position as the president of the United States; however, workplace bullying and offensive behavior in the workplace has been studied since the early 1990s (Akella, 2016). Akella (2016) defined workplace bullying as negative actions that are persistent resulting in the creation of a hostile working environment. Racial microaggressions are a type of workplace bullying (Okechukwu, Souza, Davis, & de Castro, 2014), affecting Black women because members of minority groups (e.g. Black women) are more likely to be victims of workplace bullying and suffer more adverse outcomes compared to members of majority groups (Okechukwu, Souza, Davis, & de Castro, 2014).

Since the 2016 election, the Southern Poverty Law Center reported more than 400 verified hateful harassment and intimidation incidents a week after the election and over 1,000 bias-related incidents in the following month (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016a, 2016b). A new study found that, due to President Trump’s campaign rhetoric, there was a significant increase in the social acceptability of prejudice toward the groups that Trump targeted (Crandall, Miller, & White, 2018). One of the targeted groups has been women in general and Black women inadvertently (Timmons, 2017). From the public humiliation of Myeshia Johnson, the
pregnant widow of an Army Sergeant killed in Niger, to the suspension of ESPN anchor Jemele Hill, and calling White House senior staffer Omarosa Manigault Newman a ‘dog’ and a ‘low-life’, President Trump has publicly humiliated and perpetuated a negative image of Black women (Stracqualursi, 2018; Timmons, 2017). The public ridicule of Black women by President Trump, along with the ‘Trump Effect’ in the workplace may affect Black female government workers because they work directly under the Trump administration, and the majority of Black female workers in the US (11% in the government compared to six percent in private sectors) work in the government sector (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2018).

Based on the reports from the Southern Poverty Law Center (2016a; 2016b), there is reason to believe that President Trump and his viewpoints have a significant effect on interactions amongst those living in the United States, more specifically incidents that are tied to racial and gender differences (Crandall, Miller & White, 2018). Given President Trump’s public ridicule of Black women recently, it is important to explore the possible effects of a racial microaggressive climate on Black women’s performance as government workers. The influence of President Trump on workplace climate along with the number of EEOC cases filed for racial and gender-based discrimination in 2017, and the fact that a large percentage of Black female workers are employed by the government (U.S. Office of Personnel Management, 2018), also highlights the importance of exploring how experiencing racial microaggressions may affect Black women’s performance as government workers.

**Statement of Problem**

Studies that explored the topic of microaggressions in a work setting have been conducted in academic work environments—colleges and universities, across the United States (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016; Morales, 2014). Most of the studies
about racial microaggressions did not stratify the sample population by race or gender and assessed minority employees, grouping all minorities together (Doyin & Singh, 2010; Huber & Solórzano, 2014). Studies that stratified the sample population, or sought to assess Black employees, examined employees’ experiences with microaggressions in an academic setting, or throughout their everyday life, not as government workers (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; West, 2015). Numerous studies have explored Black employees’ experiences with racial microaggressions and their effect on mental health and well-being across different fields in the workforce (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, Louis, et al., 2016; Doyin & Singh, 2010; Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015; Pittman, 2012; McCabe, 2009; Smith & Joseph, 2010; Wells, 2013). There is a gap in the literature, however, of research focusing specifically on Black women outside of academia, due to their unique experiences because of intersectionality of race and gender, along with other theories explained further in this study.

Black women are simultaneously a part of at least two minority groups subjected to racism and sexism, and can be subjected to social classism (Stanley, 2009). Experiencing concurrent oppression promotes a multiplier effect; meaning racism is multiplied by sexism, which is then multiplied by social classism (Stanley, 2009). Black women in predominantly White organizations experience concurrent oppression in ways that cannot be understood from the experiences of other groups in these settings (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Thus, the problem that was studied is the racial microaggressions that Black women face as government workers that may affect their job performance, and the need for the implementation of workplace policies and processes that account for racial differences. There is a need to explore how Black women’s unique experiences with racial microaggressions as government workers affect their performance and use this information to develop more enlightened processes to promote a culture of inclusion.
in the workplace. These findings, along with the many EEOC lawsuits filed for racial/gender discrimination, compel creating a culture of inclusion to support diverse groups of employees (Gephardt, Grassi, McCormick, & Shelton, 2016).

**Purpose of Study**

Stratifying by race and gender to distinguish Black women specifically from men and from other racial groups is important because Black women face unique discrimination and racial microaggressions compared to other women and Black men (Lewis & Neville, 2015). This unique discrimination stems from their fight against Euro-American beauty standards (Awad, et al., 2015; Mathews & Johnson, 2015; Randle, 2015), which when coupled with racial microaggressions, lowers self-confidence, work ethic, and morale causing a reduction in productivity (Awad, et al., 2015; Del Carmen Triana, Jayasinghe, & Pieper, 2015). Reduction in productivity and a decrease in work performance can increase the risk of termination, potentially leading to a domino effect of negative outcomes in the lives of Black women (Del Carmen Triana, Jayasinghe, & Pieper, 2015).

Exploring the specific experiences and perceptions of Black female government workers can potentially fill the gap in literature related to stratification of race and gender, along with the change in the study setting. Focusing on Black women in the government is pivotal because the majority of Black women who are employed, work in the government sector (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). The Department of Labor disclosed that in 2015 Black women were six percent of private-sector workers, compared to comprising almost 10% of government workers (U.S. Department of Labor, 2016). Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the connection between society’s perception of Black women and their unique experiences of racial microaggressions across the government sector, and to explore the effect these experiences have
on their work performance (upward mobility, promotion, raises, and positive performance evaluations, for example.). The results from this study could help people to see their biases and reduce racial microaggressive behavior.

**Research Questions**

1) How do Black female government workers perceive the connection between society’s perception of them as being Black women, and the occurrence of racial microaggressions?

2) How does experiencing racial microaggressions affect the performance of Black female government workers?

**Conceptual Framework**

Racial microaggressions are unique and different for Black women compared to any other racial group because of intersectionality (Lewis & Neville, 2015). It is important to understand what Black women face because of their race and gender (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Critical Race Theory (CRT), a theory that focuses on institutional racism and its effect on the policies of the United States, Black Feminist Theory and Intersectionality Theory, served as theoretical frameworks for this study.

CRT is a theory that considers how laws and institutional structures can contribute to inequalities and considers race and racism to be engrained in the fibers of U.S. society (Bell, 1992). CRT provides an understanding of the underpinnings of racial tension and systemic discrimination in this country (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and may explain the nuances of racial microaggressions in the government sector. The five tenets of the CRT include:

1) Permanence of racism: Race is central and permanent in defining prejudice in the United States; 2) Challenge to dominant ideology: Rejects colorblindness and equal opportunity;
3) Commitment to social justice: Working towards the empowerment of people of color by analyzing historical structures (laws, policies etc.); 4) Centrality of experiential knowledge: Acknowledgment that the lived experiences of people of color are valuable and vital to any movement that focuses on the emancipation of subjugated groups; 5) Transdisciplinary perspective or intersectionality (García, 2015; Harper, Smith, & Davis, 2016; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Solórzano, 1998; Yosso et al., 2004;). This study drew from the permanence of racism, rejection of colorblindness and experiential knowledge tenets (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016; Sleeter, 2016) to understand the negative effects of racial microaggressions on Black women and their performance in the government sector.

Permanence of racism stipulates that racism saturates every aspect of life within America through socialization via laws and media (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Critical race theorists give prominence to the premise of racism, which is that one racial group holds more power and privilege over another racial group; namely, White individuals have historically been the empowered race and continue to hold power and privilege over racial and ethnic minority groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Colorblindness occurs when a White person declares that the color of a person’s skin, or a person’s perceived race, is not a basis for judgement of that individual (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Sue, et al., 2007). Critical race theorists note that those who invoke colorblindness as a method of promoting equality and reducing racism, in fact encourage the lack of acknowledgement of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Gotanda, 1991, Sleeter, 2016). It inadvertently ignores the marginalization of ethnic minorities and makes it difficult to address and create meaningful social change (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Experiential knowledge is defined as the assumption that the experts on racism are those who routinely experience it (Sleeter, 2016). This study used the tenet of experiential knowledge coupled with Black Feminist
Theory and Intersectionality Theory to explore Black women’s experiences with racial microaggressions in the government sector, in relation to their race, gender identities and societal beauty standards.

Black Feminist Theory provides a voice for Black women independent of collective issues faced by the women in general (Hall, 2016) and illustrates how Black women and their experiences differ from White and other minority women because of marginalization (Collins, 1998; Hall, 2016). Black women have had to face unequal discriminatory treatment brought on by White supremacy and male superiority simultaneously (Cannon, 1985; Hall, 2016). One facet of White supremacy is White privilege (benefits and protections afforded to Whites based upon skin color and the socially constructed dominance associated with being White) (Bonds & Inwood, 2016), a privilege that White women benefit from (Cannon, 1985; Hall, 2016). The facet of male superiority that works against Black women is gender privilege (benefits and protections afforded to men and the socially constructed dominance of the male gender), a privilege that Black men and White men benefit from (Cannon, 1985; Hall, 2016). Using these assumptions as a lens for this study helped the researcher to focus on the nuances of microaggressions potentially related to societal beauty standards, physical attributes and other biases that plague Black women, and examine the need for policies and processes to counteract those discriminatory behaviors.

Intersectionality then is an umbrella that houses Black feminist theory and aligns with CRT to illustrate how race and gender interact and is useful in better understanding the multi-dimensional experiences Black women face in the workplace (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Intersectionality considers that social constructs such as class, race, sexual orientation, age, disability and gender, do not exist separately from each other but are complexly interwoven
(Crenshaw, 1989; Carastathis, 2014). Because this study focused on Black women’s experiences, the Intersectionality Theory acknowledges that Black women experience gendered and classed forms of racism that are due to the stereotypes of Black womanhood (Essed, 1991; Hall, 2016). This theory captured the unique dynamics of being a Black female government employee and illustrates how these experiences are different from that of White women or Black men (Hall, 2016; Lewis & Neville, 2015). Intersectionality and Black Feminist Theory coupled together illustrate how Black female government workers’ experiences with racial and gender-based microaggressions affect them in a unique way compared to other women. Using these three theories together helped ensure that the methodological process captured data relevant to society’s perceptions of Black women and how they may influence their unique experiences with racial microaggressions.

**Assumptions, Limitations, Scope**

The researcher’s personal experiences coupled with interactions with other Black women in work settings, and the apparent gap in the literature, have highlighted the need to further explore Black women’s experiences with racial microaggressions in a work environment. The increased occurrences of racially charged hate crimes across the country since the 2016 election (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016), effects of workplace bullying on Black women, and the number of racial discrimination cases filed with the EEOC (EEOC, 2018), bring attention to the need to explore the effect of racial microaggressions on Black women’s work performance as government workers. The researcher used the lens of the Critical Race Theory, Black Feminist Theory and Intersectionality Theory to frame the methodology of this study, and to develop interview and focus group questions.
Participants in this study included a broad sample of Black women who work within the government sector across the U.S., who have been employed at their job for at least a year, are between the ages of 25-65, and have obtained at least a bachelor’s degree. These inclusion criteria were created to increase the generalizability of the study (Lewis and Neville, 2015). The researcher assumed that participants were truthful about their identity as it aligned with the inclusion criteria, and about their desire to participate in the study because they want to share their experiences and contribute to this research.

One limitation to this study could have been a lack of a homogeneous study sample. It was imperative to ensure that the age, educational background, work experience and leadership level did not vary drastically among participants to increase the likelihood of representation (Palinkas, et al., 2015). This study was limited by time, place, and the type of participants included in this study. Due to the short timeframe to recruit participants and the method of recruitment, the researcher did not have the opportunity to recruit a large sample size and only had a relatively short time to learn about their experiences. However, the researcher combatted the potential limit of recruiting a large sample by conducting an asynchronous online focus group. The researcher assumed that this methodology provided information power, which as defined by Malterud, Siersma, & Dorrit, (2016) indicates that the more information the sample holds, relevant for the actual study, the lower number of participants that are needed (Moore, McKee, & McLoughlin, 2015).

**Significance**

Research on Black women is often combined and generalized with research on women in general (Stanley, 2009), which contributes to the lack of understanding about the intersectionality of race and gender microaggressions that Black women face in the government
sector (Gephardt, Grassi, McCormick, & Shelton, 2016). Understanding the effects of racial microaggressions on Black women in the government sector specifically is important because, from an organizational development and ethical perspective, it is imperative to ensure that leaders are creating a truly inclusive culture for all employees (Gephardt, Grassi, McCormick, & Shelton, 2016). According to the Deloitte University Leadership Center for Inclusion, 79% of Black employees and 66% of women of color feel the need to downplay their identities at work for fear of drawing unwanted attention or making their coworkers uncomfortable due to their differences (Clark & Smith, 2014). An inclusive culture allows individuals to be themselves at work, which encourages employee engagement and enhances job performance and satisfaction (Gephardt, Grassi, McCormick, & Shelton, 2016). Results from the Harvard Business Review survey showed that 40% of African Americans and people of color in general (30%) have experienced a variety of microaggressions that caused them to feel like outsiders at work, compared to 26% of Whites (Hewlett, 2012). Some underrepresented groups even report discrimination or a hostile work environment, which is a distraction from goals and tasks (Hewlett, Marshall, & Sherbin, 2013). Harvard Business Review reports that, in the absence of diverse leadership, women, people of color, and LGBTQ colleagues are, on average, 22% less likely than straight, White men to win endorsement of their ideas (Hewlett, Marshall, & Sherbin, 2013).

Individuals in work environments hold multiple identities, which can create multiple connections in the workplace (Byrd, 2014). The diversity of employees includes their talents which, when coupled together, can benefit the bottom line of the organizations in which they work (Gephardt, Grassi, McCormick, & Shelton, 2016). McKinsey and Company, a consulting firm, found that companies that are gender, racially and ethnically diverse are 35% more likely to
outperform less-diverse companies (Hunt, Layton, & Prince, 2015). Employees who work on diverse teams have greater opportunity for professional development because they are exposed to different viewpoints, learn more, and make better decisions (Gephardt, Grassi, McCormick, & Shelton, 2016).

When stratifying minority groups by race and gender, leaders must understand the nuances and experiences of each group to effectively create a culture of inclusivity for all employees (Gephardt, Grassi, McCormick, & Shelton, 2016). It is important to create a culture of inclusivity within the workplace and to consciously combat microaggressive behavior by first identifying implicit biases (Holroyd, Scaife, & Stafford, 2017). Implicit bias is defined as attitudes or stereotypes that effect understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner (Holroyd, Scaife, & Stafford, 2017). These biases reside deep within the subconscious, and include favorable and unfavorable assessments, which are activated involuntarily and without an individual’s awareness or intentional control (Holroyd, Scaife, & Stafford, 2017). Implicit biases are created and perpetuated by the media, and are woven throughout society (Myers, 2014). As such, everyone has implicit biases, which can be displayed as microaggressive behavior (Holroyd, Scaife, & Stafford, 2017).

The intersectionality of being a Black woman encompasses multifaceted biases and stereotypes that stem from difference in physical appearance, difference in hair styles and texture, unique names, socioeconomic status, educational experience and many more factors (Awad, et al., 2015). Grouping all minorities together makes it is impossible to ensure that the work environment is truly inclusive, and because minority group experiences vary, their needs vary (Awad, et al., 2015; Ford, 1997; Gephardt, Grassi, McCormick, & Shelton, 2016; Lewis & Neville, 2015). Understanding Black women’s experiences could allow leaders in the
government sector to better understand their employees and be positioned to create a culture of inclusion and avoid racial microaggressions in the workplace. Such an employer stance is more inclusive than providing training for Black women to cope with racial microaggressions. This approach to diversity could in turn boost employee morale, which then may enhance performance and increase productivity, serving as a major financial benefit for corporations and profitable return on their investments. According to research from McKinsey and Company, when employees feel involved, respected and connected, they are more likely to provide richer ideas and invoke problem-solving approaches (Hunt, Layton, & Prince, 2015). High employee morale promotes team collaboration, increases productivity, and helps companies to recruit and retain productive employees. Companies are also able to be more in tune with the needs of their customers, and deliver sustainable growth (Hunt, Layton, & Prince, 2015).

**Definition of Terms**

*Academic Work Environment:* Companies and corporations that are operated by the government are part of the public sector; this includes schools and universities (Rouse, 2013).

*Aversive Racism:* Having a conscious belief in equality, but unconsciously acting in a racist manner, particularly in ambiguous situations (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000).

*Black Feminist Theory:* A theory that illustrates how Black women and their experiences differ from White and other minority women because of marginalization (Collins, 1998; Hall, 2016).

*Critical Race Theory:* A theory that considers how laws and institutional structures can contribute to inequalities and considers race and racism to be engrained in the fibers of U.S. society (Bell, 1992)
Discrimination: The practice of unfairly treating a person or group of people differently from other people or groups of people (EEOC, 2018).

Intersectionality: A theory that stipulates that Black women experience gendered and classed forms of racism due to the stereotypes of Black womanhood (Essed, 1991; Hall, 2016).

Multiplier Effect: Racism is multiplied by sexism which is then multiplied by social classism (Stanley, 2009).

People of Color: Encompasses all minority groups from different racial and/or ethnic backgrounds. This categorization does not account for the unique types of discrimination and stereotypes each racial/ethnic group experiences and assumes that all racial and ethnic minorities have the same life experiences (Malesky, 2014).

Professional Development: The continuous process of acquiring new knowledge and skills that relate to one's profession, job responsibilities, or work environment (Harris & Ramos, 2013).

Racial Microaggressions: Brief, everyday exchanges (subtle snubs or dismissive looks, gestures, and tones) that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group (Sue, et al., 2007).

Systemic Discrimination: A pattern or practice, policy, or class case where the alleged discrimination has a broad impact on an industry, profession, company or geographic area (EEOC, 2017).

Trump Effect: President Trump's highly charged and offensive language spurring negative changes in interactions among people in the United States (Todres, 2018).
Workplace Bullying: Negative actions that are persistent resulting in the creation of a hostile working environment (Akella, 2016).

Conclusion

The implementation of the EEOC and the signing of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 have resulted in a drastic increase of employment of Black Americans, specifically Black women (EEOC, 2015; Toossi & Joyner, 2018). However, there are still incidents of racial microaggressions and discrimination in the workplace (Osanloo, Boske, & Newcomb, 2016; Miller 2012). It is important to understand how these experiences may affect Black women’s performance in the workplace (Awad, et al., 2015; Ford, 1997; Gephardt, Grassi, McCormick, & Shelton, 2016; Lewis & Neville, 2015).

This study explored the connection between society’s perception of Black women and their experiences with racial microaggressions, and the effect that those experiences had on their work performance as government workers. This study also explored the possible processes organizations could implement that consider racial and cultural differences specific to Black women, and in turn potentially decreases the occurrence of racial microaggressions. Many studies have examined the effects of racial microaggressions on people of color in educational settings both from the student and faculty member viewpoint (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016; Pittman, 2012). Other studies have explored the role of policies and diversity trainings in reducing the occurrences of racial microaggressions in the workplace (Bezrukova, et al., 2012; Skrentny, 2014; Sue, et al., 2007). Studies which examined the topic of racial microaggression in the last decade, explored the effects on males and females of color, varying in age, socio-economic status, and geographic location, in an educational environment (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby 2016; Louis, et al., 2016; McCabe 2009; Morales, 2014; Pittman, 2012). The researcher
synthesized this research by reviewing literature relating to racial microaggressions and discussed the following topics in Chapter 2: how society’s perception of Black women contributes to the occurrence of racial microaggressions, and the perception and effects of racial microaggressions on people of color. Chapter 3, the methods section, discusses the research design along with the methodology of the study.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Although the EEOC has made strides to decrease workplace discrimination (EEOC, 2017), Black women still experience racial microaggressions. Employers have not successfully and consistently cultivated the culture of equity and inclusion in the workforce for Black women to actively reduce the occurrences of racial microaggressive behavior (EEOC, 2017). Using the lens of Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality Theory, and Black Feminist Theory, this study addresses a gap in the field, by first providing a foundational understanding of what it means to be a minority in the United States (CRT), then providing an understanding of what it means to be both a gendered and racial minority (Intersectionality Theory and Black Feminist Theory) while living in the United States. Namely, this literature review helps to lay the foundation of understanding Black women and people of color’s experiences of racial microaggressions both in an educational and non-academic work setting and throughout their everyday lives. This chapter illustrates how experiences with racial microaggressions against Black women are predicated on America’s beauty standards and perceptions about them. The complexity of racial microaggressions, and the different types or racial microaggressions Black women and people of color experience highlighted in this chapter provide a further understanding of racial microaggressions. Examples of diversity trainings are included to identify solutions and areas of improvements in professional development trainings. This understanding may support more effective professional development efforts that teach employees and administrators how to avoid engaging in microaggressive behavior. It is necessary to first understand how the theoretical framework shapes the view of racial microaggressions that Black women face. Then it is critical
to explore societal beauty standards and the role they may play in racial microaggressions before exploring the uniqueness of Black women’s experiences compared to other people of color.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Critical Race Theory**

Delgado (1995) explained that CRT stemmed from early works about racial reform in the US from Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, and Critical Legal Studies (CLS) legislative reform pioneered by many other legal scholars. CLS challenged traditional legislation and attempted to cultivate law that accounted for individuals and the variety of their cultural and social backgrounds (Gordon, 1990). CRT considers how laws and institutional structures contribute to inequalities and considers race and racism to be engrained in the fibers of U.S. society (Bell, 1992; Gordon, 1990; Delgado 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). There are five tenets that comprise the CRT including: 1) Permanence of racism; 2) Challenge to dominant ideology of objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity; 3) Commitment to social justice; 4) Experiential knowledge; and 5) Transdisciplinary perspective (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 2010; Pittman, 2012). This study drew from the permanence of racism, rejection of colorblindness and experiential knowledge tenets (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016; Sleeter, 2016) to understand the negative effects of racial microaggressions on Black women and their performance as government workers.

According to Bell, (1992) permanence of racism stipulates that racism is interwoven throughout the fibers of society and is an imperishable component. This aligns with the notion of institutionalized and systemic racism thus suggesting the connection between individuals’ innate and unrecognized ideas and beliefs about race (Millner, 2017). Unawareness of the underpinnings of racism in society can lead to racial microaggressions on a micro scale, and the
overall perpetuation of White superiority and the devaluing of those who are not White, the very definition of colorblindness (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Colorblindness contributes to this cycle when a person of racial privilege assumes that race is not an factor (Bonilla-Silva, 2009) and deliberately suppresses racial considerations (Gotanda, 1991). The process of denying race requires that an individual first acknowledge racial differences before ignoring them (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Gotanda, 1991; Sleeter, 2016). Therefore, people who claim to be color-blind notice that there are racial differences and then pretend to ignore them (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016). This way of thinking hinders equitable progress because it assumes that race is meaningless and the racial and cultural differences among individuals should not ‘matter’ when in fact they do (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Gotanda, 1991; Sleeter, 2016).

Experiential knowledge is defined as the assumption that the experts on racism are those who routinely experience it (Sleeter, 2016). This study used the tenet of experiential knowledge to explore experiences of Black female government workers by conducting focus groups and key informant interviews. Key informant interviews are interviews conducted with non-random individuals who are most knowledgeable about the specific topic which the researcher is studying (Lavrakas, 2008).

These aspects of CRT may help to identify key elements of racial microaggressions as they relate to ignoring the marginalization of Black women. Identifying how colorblindness may occur via racial microaggressive behavior may provide information to cultivate professional development activities and trainings to combat these elements and reduce the occurrence of racial microaggressions in the government sector. It is important to first understand the
alignment of Intersectionality Theory and Black Feminist Theory to fully grasp how CRT applies specifically to Black women.

**Intersectionality**

Findings from previous research (Carastathis, 2014; Essed, 1991; Hall, 2016; Sue, et al., 2007; Sue, et al., 2008) suggest that people of color experience common types of racial microaggressions; however, some experiences with racial microaggressions differ based on racial group. Sue et al. (2007) found that Asian American students and working professionals felt like aliens in their own land (Sue, et al., 2007), whereas other research found that African Americans are more likely to be perceived as being intellectually inferior or as criminals (Sue, et al., 2008). Essed (1991) developed the framework of gender-related racism to explain how the oppression experienced by Black women were predicated on racist perceptions of gender roles. It became apparent that Black women’s experiences of racism and discrimination occurred and continued due to the disregarding of those experiences, containment of their reactions to oppression, and the justification of the oppression they faced (Essed, 1991). Essed (1991) also highlights that Black women experience gendered and classed forms of racism due to the stereotypes of Black womanhood. Researchers have developed Intersectionality Theory to explore intersectionality of race and gender as related to Black women’s experiences with oppression.

Lewis and Neville (2015) discovered four common intersectional approaches through previous research, to describe Black women’s experiences throughout their everyday lives:
1) Black women experience racism and sexism similarly to Black men and White women (Louis, et al., 2016); 2) Black women experience double oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2008); 3) Black women experience the interaction of race and gender
oppression (Moradi & Subich, 2003); and 4) Black women experience specific oppression that is unique to Black women on the basis of the intersection of their race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989; Thomas et al., 2008). The fourth approach describes the intersectionality of race and gender and how it serves to interlock the identity and experiences of oppressions that simultaneously influence Black women (Cole, 2009), and aligns more closely with this study to accurately capture the complexities of Black women’s lived experiences. Stanley (2009) defined intersectionality as related to Black women by stating that the lived experiences of African American women cannot be viewed separately as racially charged experiences, or gender-based experiences, or experiences based on their social class (Stanley, 2009). Rather, these experiences “intersect and shape social realities that are not captured within traditional feminist discourse” (Stanley, 2009, p. 552). This theory closely aligns with the underpinnings of Black Feminist Theory, which provides a pathway to call out the unique differences in experience that Black women face compared to their non-Black counterparts (Hall, 2016).

**Black feminist theory**

The term Black Feminism emerged due to the increased occurrences of racism and exclusion within the feminist movement in the late 70s and 80s (Ringrose, 2007). Collins (1998), a leading theorist who pioneered Black Feminism defined intersectionality as exploratory method that highlights the connectedness of the social constructs race, class, and gender. Collins (1998) also explained that the phenomenon of intersectionality could be used to explore organizational and social structure, and social practices (Collins, 1998). Collins (1998) noted that Black women for example, occupy a distinctive social location within power relations of intersectionality. Black Feminist Theory can be viewed as an extension of intersectionality, which provides Black women the opportunity to speak from an experience that is unique and
varied from those of any other racial groups of women (Collins, 1991). Black Feminist Theory illustrates the difference in experiences of power, growth, and development that Black women have (Collins, 1991; Hall, 2016). According to a report published by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, Black women continue to experience structural barriers to progress and often have limited opportunities to advance in the labor market due to systemic racial and gender discrimination (DuMonthier, Childers, & Milli, 2017). Black women’s lived experiences differ from those who have a degree of privilege because they experience aspects of each type of systematic oppression (Hall, 2016; Hooks, 1984). A basic principle of Black Feminist Theory is that African American women cannot be fully empowered unless intersecting oppressions such as racism, sexism and classism are eliminated (Collins, 1991). Considering this, research on African American women’s performance in government work environments as it relates to their experiences with racial microaggressions has been incorporated with research in educational work settings or studies that assess Black men and women collectively. It is important to understand socialization of Black women to fully understand how this theoretical framework lays the groundwork for the occurrence of racial microaggressions.

**Society’s Perception of Black Women**

Goldman and Waymer (2014) categorized beauty as a social construct which women can achieve by buying products to enhance their physical appearance to assimilate with the ideal standard. Beauty standards defined by skin color, physical appearance and hair affects the lives of Black women in many ways (Robinson-Moore, 2008), but most important to this study is the effect that these standards have on socialization and interactions, which prompts racial microaggressions in work environments and in general everyday life (Robinson-Moore, 2008; Awad, et al., 2015).
For Black people in the United States, distinction between skin color evolved out of the institution of slavery in which Africans, having dark skin were deemed inferior, enslaved and exploited because of their darker skin (Robinson-Moore, 2008). One’s skin color then functions as both a physical characteristic, and a rank in society, placing those with lighter skin far ahead of those with dark skin (Robinson-Moore, 2008). One study found that possessing a dark complexion for African American women has less favorable perceptions, based on society’s Euro-American beauty standard (Mathews & Johnson, 2015), including the perception that lighter-skinned Black women are more confident due to the belief that women with light skin are privileged (Mathews and Johnson, 2015). This perpetuates some of the microaggressions Black women face in areas such as being incompetent and less-than (Awad, et al., 2015). Ford (1997) used the activation-recency hypothesis to test whether stereotypic portrayals of African Americans increase the likelihood that White Americans made negative social judgments of an African American person (Ford, 1997). Most Black women feel like they are under constant assault (blatant and latent) for their perceived “ugliness” by media, peers and even family (Awad, et al., 2015). Factors such as skin color and hair are key factors related to body image and are unique to African American women (Awad, et al., 2015). Awad et al. (2015) sought to examine the issues that arise pertaining to African American women’s conception of beauty and body image; identify the frequency of specific beauty and body image themes; and identify the sources of the messages they received and internalized regarding their body image (Awad, et al., 2015). Although women with dark complexions tended to agree that society devalues their skin tone, they indicated that if given the option to change their complexion they would remain as is (Mathews & Johnson, 2015).
Similar to skin complexion, another aspect of beauty that differs for Black women when compared to their counterparts, is their hair. Randle (2015) explained that in her personal experiences, women described her hair as unruly and unprofessional, and discussed an incident of a Black woman who was fired from her job because she wore braids (Randle, 2015). The expectation of Black women needing to assimilate to European beauty standards is present through the interconnectivity of both their personal and professional lives (Johnson, Godsil, McFarlane, Tropp, & Goff, 2017). The Perception Institute is a consortium of researchers, advocates, and strategists who translate research on race, gender, ethnic, and other identities into actionable methods to promote inclusion and reduce bias and discrimination. The Perception Institute conducted a study in 2016 with 4,163 participants (20% Black men, 25% Black women, 25% White men, 30% White women) and 688 naturalista women (women who wear their hair in its naturally curly state) (68% Black, 32% White). Results of the study indicated that more than 4,000 people who participated in the study demonstrated an implicit bias against Black women’s naturally textured hair, rating it less professional than smoother hair; one in five Black women feel the need to straighten their hair to wear to work to assimilate to society’s beauty standards (Johnson, Godsil, McFarlane, Tropp, & Goff, 2017). The study found that though all women are concerned about how their hair is perceived Black women are much more likely to feel anxiety over the hair style decisions than White women (Johnson, Godsil, McFarlane, Tropp, & Goff, 2017).

Beyond physical attributes, Black female college students have reported being reduced to the way in which they speak, specifically referring to African American vernacular English (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Black people are often assumed to be loud or to speak using Ebonics or slang (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Having these stereotypes about the way Black women look and
speak inadvertently creates preconcieved biases which can be communicated as racial microaggressions (Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2007). The communication style of White employees for example, may be seen as more polite, cooperative, decisive, articulate, and less emotional, than the communication style of Black employees which can hinder the opportunities presented to Black employees because of these assumptions (Carlson & Crawford, 2012). The foundational information about society’s perception of Black women serves as a connection in aligning these studies with those that explore Black women’s and people of color’s experiences with racial microaggression in an educational environment.

**Experiences with Racial Microaggression in the Workplace**

Exploring the occurrence of racial microaggressions among Black women and people of color in educational settings is heavily studied (Carlson & Crawford, 2012; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Doyin & Singh, 2010; Lewis & Neville, 2015; McCabe, 2009; Smith & Joseph, 2010; Wong, Derthick, David, Saw, & Okazaki, 2014), thus providing a substantial foundation to further understand the occurrence of racial microaggressions in a non-academic work setting. Although people of color have been participating in American higher education for more than a century, they continue to be severely underrepresented among students, faculty, staff, and campus administrators (West, 2015; Louis, et al., 2016). As of 2015, 14% of students enrolled in a degree-granting institution were Black compared to 58% who were White; of all full-time faculty only, six percent were Black while 77% were White (Snyder, De Brey, & Dillow, 2018). Studies have shown that Black faculty members in educational institutions experience racial microaggressions from their White counterparts and from White students (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby 2016; Pittman, 2012). Some Black faculty members explained that they avoided interaction with their colleagues, did not feel comfortable approaching their aggressors,
experienced stress, and lost faith in their peers and administration (Louis, et al., 2016; Pittman, 2012).

McCabe (2009) examined racial and gender patterns in microaggressions and covert insults towards subordinated groups, that Black, Latino and White women and men experienced on a predominantly-White campus. Four racial microaggressive themes emerged: (a) views of Black men as threatening, (b) views of Latinas as sexually available and exotic, (c) the classroom as a setting for microaggressions experienced by Black women, and, (d) male-dominated academic majors, resulting in the occurrence of microaggressions against White women (McCabe, 2009). Results from this study indicated that Black women frequently experience microaggressions in the classroom, and White women experience microaggressions in male dominated settings (McCabe, 2009). These microaggressions have an impact on students’ self-esteem and sense of belonging at the university; students on the receiving end perceive that others hold negative views of them and that they are "outsiders" on their own campus and in their own classrooms (McCabe, 2009). Morales (2014) had similar findings and noted that Black students were perceived as being exotic, hypersexual and aggressive compared to non-Black students on campus. These racial microaggressions tie to racialized, gendered and classed ideas of low-income Black male and female bodies (Morales, 2014). Black students experience racial microaggressions through their gender and a perceived class status as low-income, regardless of their actual class background (Morales, 2014).

Like Black people working in an academic setting, Black people in a corporate work environment felt that race and gender had an impact on their workplace experiences, and being a minority was a barrier (Smith & Joseph, 2010). Smith and Joseph (2010) found that collectively, White participants attributed their negative performances to organizational dynamics or culture
and attributed their success to their abilities; they never identified their race and/or gender when encountering organizational setbacks (Smith & Joseph, 2010). Contrarily, Black participants always considered race and gender to have the most impact on their workplace experiences and often viewed these identifiers as barriers because of their minority status within organizations (Smith & Joseph, 2010).

Black Women’s Experience with Racial Microaggressions in the Workplace

Researchers have focused on the intersectionality that plays a role in Black employees’ experiences with racial microaggressions in corporate work environments by comparing women with male peers (Doyin & Singh, 2010). Results from their study indicated that ethnicity, gender and their intersection play important roles in identity construction of Black UK professionals, who frequently encounter identity-challenging situations as they interact with explicit and implicit models of race and stereotyping (Doyin & Singh, 2010). Black males use agentic strategies to further their careers, drawing strength from Black male identities (Doyin & Singh, 2010). Doyin and Singh (2010) realized that the female participants were less agentic, reframing challenging episodes to protect and restore their identity. This study explored how aspects of the racial identity of being Black provided a resource that supported participants’ career progress.

Minority groups had different workplace experiences and adopted different strategies, by using aspects of the generic Black identity (Doyin & Singh, 2010). This study further highlighted the uniqueness of Black women’s experiences and the need to explore those experiences separate from their White female and Black male counterparts.

Davis and Maldonado (2015) explored specific nuances that contribute to the occurrence of microaggressions specific to Black women in academia, and how these experiences affected their professional development and advancement to leadership positions, by assessing Black
women in an academic work environment. They identified five themes related to how these African American women developed as leaders: 1) predestined for success, 2) sponsorship from the unexpected, 3) double jeopardy of race and gender, 4) learn how to play the game, and 5) pay it forward. Results from their study indicated that race and gender informed Black women’s development as leaders in academia (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Most participants of the study felt the impact of both race and gender discrimination in their careers and believed that the combination of race and gender still hinders the potential for their ascension to senior-level positions (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Even through adversity, participants expressed that they could carry out their responsibilities but often in an atmosphere where they constantly must prove themselves (Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

Despite career success and senior level positions, Black women in corporate America also experienced racial microaggressions similar to Black women in academia (Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015). While many women experience difficulties in acceptance, inclusion, and objective career success attributed to the glass ceiling, some Black participants perceive it as a ceiling that is more difficult to penetrate than glass. They noted difficulties when striving to move up the corporate ladder within their organizations; Black women had to defend their competencies and qualifications in their roles (Smith & Joseph, 2010). Black women in managerial positions in corporate work environments also invoked coping methods to deal with the psychological stress of experiencing racial microaggressions (Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015). Some methods included using religion and spirituality, which provide a sense of empowerment, understanding and forgiveness (Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015). Black women also developed a high level of pride in themselves and their cultural ancestry which allowed them to deal with racial microaggressions and refute what was said to them (Holder,
Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015). They relied heavily on mentors who provided strategic career advice, key assignments, and protection (Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015). These senior corporate Black women also monitored their communication style and deemphasized racial and ethnic differences with White colleagues to combat negative stereotypes and limit the likelihood of being perceived as outsiders in the workplace (Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015). Black educators who experience racial microaggression also invoke coping mechanisms such as detaching from their environment to cope with the lack of inclusion within their work culture. The act of detaching forces African Americans to ignore race in the workplace, which could inadvertently negatively affect their performance in the workplace (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016).

Although there are more studies on Black educators compared to workers in the government and private sectors, these referenced studies provided a clearer understanding of the different circumstances in which Black women and people of color experience while bringing attention to the need for further research that uses intersectionality as a framework to assess racial microaggressions in the government sector. Given information about Black women and people of color’s experiences with microaggressions in both an academic and non-academic work environment, it is important to understand the psychological effects that experiencing microaggressions may have on Black people.

**Psychological Effects of Microaggressive Experiences**

Microaggressions are constant and continual, and can be harmful to the victims (Berk, 2017). They have consequences that may impact the victim’s psychological health at the moment they experience microaggressions and even long after the incident has occurred (Wells, 2013). Delving further into the mental effects of microaggressions can garner insight and may serve as a
bridge to understanding the effects of experiencing racial microaggressions in life outside of work on performance and morale in a work environment. Microaggressions can affect more than just career opportunities for people of color; they can also cause a feeling of being an outsider in society that can affect self-esteem and self-worth (Hall & Fields, 2015; Osanloo, Boske, & Newcomb, 2016).

Researchers sought to understand how microaggressions affected mental health by examining the shared experiences of African Americans and their experiences (Torres & Driscoll, 2010). Torres and Driscoll (2010) found that African Americans who successfully entered or completed graduate studies endured a variety of race-related barriers including being treated like a criminal or a second-class citizen, having one’s personal ability underestimated or ignored, and feelings of isolation. Similarly, Sue et al. (2008) found that Black Americans experienced six different microaggressions:

1) *Assumption of Intellectual Inferiority*: Microaggressions that assume Black Americans to be intellectually inferior, inarticulate, or lacking common sense.

2) *Second-Class Citizenship*: Being perceived and treated as a lesser being.

3) *Assumption of Criminality*: A belief that Black Americans are potential criminals and prone to antisocial or violent behaviors.

4) *Assumption of Inferior Status*: Believing that Black individuals are inferior in status and credentials.

5) *Assumed Universality of the Black American Experience*: Black Americans being asked to speak for all members of their race.
6) Assumed Superiority of White Cultural Values/Communication Styles: Black cultural values and communication styles were devalued and deemed inferior while the superiority of White values and ways of communicating were upheld.

Microaggressions have a harmful and lasting psychological impact that may endure over prolonged periods of time (Sue, et al., 2008). Participants of this study reported feelings of anger, frustration, doubt, guilt, or sadness when they experience microaggressions and explained further that the emotional turmoil stayed with them as they tried to make sense of each incident (Sue, et al., 2008). Researchers concluded that racial microaggressions lead to psychological distress in Black Americans, and that race-related stress occurs in response to more indirect and subtle forms of racism (Sue, et al., 2008). Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit, and Rasmus (2014) noted that experiencing racial microaggressions in the workplace is likely to produce negative mental health symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, and lack of behavioral control. Results from this study also indicated that there may be subscale differences in mental health outcomes between racial groups, and that some racial groups may experience certain types of microaggressions more than others. Black and Latina/o participants may experience more microaggressions related to being viewed as inferior compared to Asian participants (Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit, & Rasmus, 2014). Understanding the psychological toll racial microaggressions take on Black educators may provide insight into work ethic, morale and overall performance at work and in life. The findings from the more recent study (Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit, & Rasmus, 2014) highlighted the need to assess racial microaggressions based on minority (ie. Black women) versus collectively categorizing groups together (ie. Women in general or people of color). When looking at mental health outcomes for Black women specifically as it relates to gendered and racial microaggressions, gendered racial microaggressions significantly predicted health
outcomes. Black women who had more experiences with gendered racial microaggressions have significantly more negative mental health outcomes (Lewis, Williams, Peppers, & Gadson, 2017). Experiencing microaggressions also lowers work productivity and problem-solving abilities (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007); and subjects the individual to biased and unfair reviews for performance (Davis, Reynolds, & Jones, 2011; Fernandez, 2013; Monforti, 2012; Niemann, 2012).

This review has focused on the occurrences of racial microaggressions within the context of everyday life, academic settings, and non-academic work environments. These studies also explored these experiences to better understand the psychological and mental health effects that racial microaggressions may have on people of color and Black women. Using past studies and the information gathered may be helpful in developing diversity trainings to raise awareness about and to combat microaggressive behavior.

**Diversity Trainings and Interventions**

Exploring how policy may be influenced by racial microaggressions can provide a foundational understanding before exploring different types of diversity trainings and professional development resources. Findings from a recent study indicated that racial and gender microaggressions are not taken into account when evaluating and developing workplace policies and the economic circumstances of women in general (Cassese, Barnes, & Branton, 2015). Results also showed that although Black and Hispanic women experienced greater economic disparities, the economic disparities they faced did not garner greater policy support among many White Americans (Cassese, Barnes, & Branton, 2015). Instead, liberals were less likely to support policy associated with the wage gap Black women face; inclusion of Hispanic women in regard to policy, reduced support among White liberals; and racial biases took
precedent in determining policies rather than an objective need for said policies (Cassese, Barnes, & Branton, 2015). Skrentny (2014) explored diversity trainings rather than the actual policies and coined the term racial realism. Racial realism is defined as an employer’s perceptions that workers vary by race in their ability to do certain jobs, which contribute to organizational effectiveness, and the kinds of signals their racial backgrounds send to customers and citizens (Skrentny, 2014). Skrentny (2014) noted that most people are aware that racial realism benefits Whites; however, employers do not knowingly manage the workplace in a way that leverages Whiteness. Given this foundational understanding of how racial microaggressions and biases may influence policies, specifically related to employment it is important to explore some of the diversity training resources that have been developed to combat these discrepancies in employment policies.

Bezrukova, Jehn, and Spell (2012) assessed diversity training programs in academic work settings and in corporate work settings and found that an integrated diversity training approach (leaders conduct training as part of a systematic and planned organizational development effort), has been less prevalent yet viewed more favorably in the literature than standalone training. This was the case for diversity training programs with an inclusive focus (focusing together on the experiences of African Americans, women, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender, persons with disabilities, etc.) versus those that focused on only one group (Bezrukova, Jehn, & Spell, 2012). Researchers also realized that diversity training programs designed to increase both diversity awareness and skills, and those that employed many instructional methods (e.g., lectures, exercises, group activities and discussions, etc.) were most common (Bezrukova, Jehn, & Spell, 2012).
Sue et al. (2007) offered a perspective through the lens of organizational culture and performance. Researchers analyzed how microaggressions affect the ability of therapists to offer their services in an unbiased way. The research team proposed a taxonomy of racial microaggressions with potential implications for practice, education and training, and research; and used the counseling/therapy process to illustrate how racial microaggressions can impair the therapeutic alliance. Different individuals’ experiences with microaggressions were categorized by themes and researchers found issues (dilemmas) within each type of microaggression, which include:

1) Dilemma 1: Clash of Racial Realities  
2) Dilemma 2: The Invisibility of Unintentional Expressions of Bias  
3) Dilemma 3: Perceived Minimal Harm of Racial Microaggressions  
4) Dilemma 4: The Catch-22 of Responding to Microaggressions. (Sue, et al., 2007)

Dilemma 1 explored the difference in perceptions of racial realities amongst White and Black people. Researchers noted that most White Americans tend to believe that racism and discrimination no longer exists, and that minorities are doing well (Sue, et al., 2007). Furthermore, some minorities believe that White people are racially insensitive, selfish, and feel the need to control everything (Sue, et al., 2007). Dilemma 2 occurs when those of privilege behave in a discriminatory way without noticing it, and those who are underprivileged who call out that behavior are accused of being overly critical (Sue, et al., 2007). Dilemma 3 occurs when those who are privileged disregard or minimize the harm that their microaggressive behavior has caused by telling those affected to ‘get over it’ or stating that ‘it wasn’t that big of a deal’ (Sue, et al., 2007). Lastly, Dilemma 4 occurs when both the person exhibiting microaggressive behavior and the person on the receiving end are trying to deescalate the situation and determine the best way to move forward; the challenge is first identifying that microaggressive behavior
has occurred and then dealing with the awkwardness that may ensue after that realization (Sue, et al., 2007). Researchers concluded that when there are relationships between people of different races, there is an increased chance of microaggressions occurring (Sue, et al., 2007). They suggest that diversity trainings should include education about microaggressions and allow for therapists to have more conversations about racism to tackle the issue (Sue, et al., 2007).

Using the CRT, Intersectionality Theory and Black Feminist Theory as a framework helped to conceptualize how society’s perception of Black women aligns with their experiences with racial microaggressions and the psychological effects of those experiences. Conceptualizing this framework was helpful in exploring the effects that racial microaggressions have on performance in the workplace and how that information can be used to develop effective professional development processes to combat these negative effects.

**Conclusion**

The overall theme presented throughout these studies is that Black women and people of color experience racial microaggressions in their personal and professional lives, and these experiences have a negative effect on them psychologically which can affect other areas of their lives (Berk, 2017; Fernandez, 2013; Lewis, Williams, Peppers, & Gadson, 2017; Monforti, 2012; Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit, & Rasmus, 2014; Niemann, 2012; Osanloo, Boske, & Newcomb, 2016). Most previous research assesses participants in an academic work environment, either from a teaching perspective or student perspective in higher education. The most recent study evaluated job satisfaction in an academic setting (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016). This study is most closely related to the topic of interest, in that it assesses job satisfaction which plays a role in performance in the workplace. The level of satisfaction is related to staff morale and the amount of effort employees contribute to their role and the organization (Gephardt, Grassi,
McCormick, & Shelton, 2016). It has been shown that experiencing racial microaggressions at work lowers productivity because Black female employees do not feel included (Davis, Reynolds, & Jones, 2011; Fernandez, 2013; Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015; Monforti, 2012; Niemann, 2012). Lowered productivity subjects these employees to biased and unfair reviews for performance (Davis, Reynolds, & Jones, 2011; Fernandez, 2013; Monforti, 2012; Niemann, 2012).

Overall these studies lay a solid foundation in understanding what microaggressions are, the types of microaggressions, the effect that microaggressions have on the mental health of Black women and people of color, and the relationship between societal beauty standards of Black women and their experiences with microaggressions. Studies about personal experiences outside of work and the mental effects of racial microaggressions can garner insight and may serve as bridge to understanding the connection between the effects of experiencing racial microaggressions on performance and morale in a government work environment. Most articles in this review examined all people of color collectively, rather than examining Black employees alone. Those that assessed Black employees did stratify by gender; however, Black women were examined in an academic work setting, or their experiences throughout life in general were examined. Black women face unique discrimination compared to other women, due to their fight against Euro-American beauty standards, which when coupled with racial microaggressions, lowers self-confidence, work ethic and morale.

Therefore, there is a need for educational trainings about racial microaggressions to promote cultures of inclusion and avoidance of racial microaggressions in the workplace, as opposed to training Black women how to cope with racial microaggressions and promoting assimilation. Using CRT’s tenets of permanence of racism and colorblindness as a framework for
analysis may help readers view the study through the lens of institutional racism which suggests that microaggressions are innate and engrained within society (Bell, 1992; Delgado, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Lewis & Neville 2015). Using Intersectionality Theory and Black Feminist Theory along with CRT highlighted the complexity of Black women’s experiences with racial microaggressions in government work environments, compared to their racial and gender counterparts as they are predicated on institutional racism along with gender and racial biases (Collins, 1991; Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1989; Essed, 1991; Hall, 2016). Understanding microaggressions that Black women face in the government sector, and their effect on Black women’s performance is important in implementing professional development efforts that teach workers and leadership how to recognize and avoid engaging in microaggressive behavior. Creating a culture of inclusion may not only benefit minority employees but may also benefit the organization through an increase in the quality of work performance (Miller, 2012) and workplace climate.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODS

Little research has been done to understand Black women’s experiences with racial microaggressions specifically as government workers. Using a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological research method, the researcher sought to answer the following questions:

1) How do Black female government workers perceive the connection between society’s perception of them as being Black women, and the occurrence of racial microaggressions?

2) How does experiencing racial microaggressions affect the performance of Black female government workers?

Phenomenology is a method of qualitative research that allows researchers to examine participants' lived experiences without any assumptions or preconceived notions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). This allows researchers to rely solely on the responses of the study participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). For this study the researcher used Creswell’s (2015) process of data analysis along with Moustakas’ (1994) process for conducting transcendental phenomenological research. Creswell’s (2015) process for data analysis includes coding the data by “reducing text to descriptions and themes of people, places, or events” (p. 261), and then developing descriptions and themes that “present a broader abstraction than codes” (p. 261). Creswell (2015) also mentioned that themes can be layered to highlight the complexity of the phenomenon.

Moustakas (1994) explained the four aspects of transcendental phenomenology which are similar to Creswell’s (2015) processes with the main difference being Epoché/bracketing.
Epoché requires the researcher to invoke an open way of thinking about the phenomenon which allows the researcher to listen to participants describe their experience while understanding the phenomenon without any preconceived thoughts or biased perspectives (Moustakas, 1994).

The other steps of the transcendental process include, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and essence (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation require that the researcher think about the phenomenon in its pure form by describing it in textural language (Moustakas, 1994). Textural language includes description of what is observed and what each participant has experienced; these descriptions can be separated into different horizons or categories (Moustakas, 1994). This is similar to Creswell’s process of creating themes and sub-themes, and layering themes to highlight the complexity of the phenomenon. Lastly, essence is described as the synthesis of meanings. This is when the researcher integrates the descriptions and themes to define the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

This type of phenomenological research design was most appropriate for this study because it allowed the researcher to understand each participant’s experiences and the meaning they attach to their experiences, from their own perspective (Groenewald, 2004; Robinson-Wood, et al., 2015). The researcher was also able to incorporate her experiences and explore similarities between her and the participants. This research design helped the researcher to identify the ways in which participants’ perceptions of societal beauty standards and racial microaggressions towards Black women affects them (Robinson-Wood, et al., 2015), which assisted in identifying any perceived change in work performance.
Study Sample

The researcher conducted purposive sampling to recruit participants from various geographical regions across the United States (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Purposive sampling is used when a researcher seeks to explore and gain insight about a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Thus, the researcher selects a sample based on the participant’s alignment to the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher recruited participants by posting a recruitment message in two LinkedIn groups (Lewis & Neville, 2015) and emailing the members of the Blacks In Government (BIG) organization. The LinkedIn groups included: the Black Professionals Worldwide group, and a Black Career Women’s Network group, each with over 3,000 members. The BIG organization is a non-profit organization incorporated in 1976 with the mission to enable all present and future Black workers in local, state, and federal governments to have the ability to maximize their career opportunities and provide a mechanism for inclusion, growth and advocacy (Blacks in the Government, 2018). The researcher was not granted permission to post the message in the Black Professionals Worldwide group but did send an email to the group’s owner asking him to send the recruitment message to the group’s members. The group’s owner did not respond to the email nor did he post the recruitment message in the LinkedIn group.

The inclusion criteria for this study was Black women who work in the state and federal government sector in any region of the United States (Northeast, Midwest, South, West) (United States Census Bureau, 2015), who have been employed at their job for at least a year between the ages of 25-65 with at least a bachelor’s degree. The researcher chose these criteria with the idea that participants who meet these requirements would have had exposure to the working world, experience in the government sector (Torpey, 2013) and time to become accustomed to their
place of employment (Wagner, 2017). The researcher attempted to recruit a broad sample of women working across the United States to ensure that the questions, and thus the results, would be generalizable to a range of Black women in terms of age, socioeconomic background, educational background, and occupational status (Lewis & Neville, 2015). The researcher accepted as many responses to the questionnaire as possible during the month of July, 2018.

**Study Setting**

The phenomenon racial microaggressions, viewed through the lens of CRT, was the determining factor when deciding the inclusion criteria, and methods for collecting data (Hycner, 1999). There were three phases of the study: the questionnaire phase (phase one) which included a general questionnaire about racial microaggressions, electronically administered to members of LinkedIn groups, and to the members of the Blacks in Government (BIG) organization. Phase two was the key informant interviews, and the online focus group was phase three. Focus groups are beneficial to garner rich data when time is limited, but the interviewees are similar to each other (Creswell, 2015). Asynchronous online focus groups allowed participants to join the discussion from their home and at a time that is convenient to them while allowing them to provide rich data (Vicsek, 2016). Participants also perceive the increased anonymity in online discussions as an opportunity to speak more freely and provide more honest answers (Zwaanswijk & van Dulmen, 2014). The researcher triangulated the methodological process to enhance the accuracy and credibility of the study (Creswell, 2015). Triangulation is the process of using three different data collection methodologies to develop descriptions and themes during qualitative research (Creswell, 2015). Collecting information from multiple sources helps to ensure that the report is both credible and accurate (Creswell, 2015).
The researcher began collecting data in July 2018 by posting the recruitment message (Appendix A) including a link to the Google questionnaire (Appendix B) in the LinkedIn groups and emailing members of the BIG organization. Follow-up messages were sent once a week for a month (Lewis & Neville, 2015). The online questionnaire via Google Forms was available for a month. The researcher then conducted interviews via GoTo Meeting in August, 2018 based on the participants’ availability for phase two of the study. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes to an hour at most. The researcher verbally asked each participant for permission to record the interview before starting. The researcher followed a semi-structured interview format, which offers a focused structure for the discussion during the interviews but was not followed strictly (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Docent, 2016). The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to capture each participant’s experience with racial microaggressions in a conversation-like manner (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). The researcher used similar questions that were used by Lewis, Mendenhall, Harwood, and Hunt (2016). After conducting all interviews, the researcher asked each participant to conduct member checking (participants double checked their responses to the questionnaire and reviewed the transcripts from the interviews after the researcher transcribed them) to confirm the accuracy of the data collected and to ensure validity (Davis & Maldonado, 2015), before starting phase three.

The eight asynchronous online focus group questions (Appendix D) were divided into two groups, ‘treatment at work’ and ‘experiences with microaggressions at work’ and posted on the online platform FocusGroupIt. The researcher then emailed all participants who responded to the questionnaire in phase one of the study to participate in the focus group. Participants were able to answer the questions at a time that was convenient to them and had the opportunity to take breaks and log back in to finish up their responses if needed. Participants also had the
opportunity to make their responses private. The questions were made available for one week. This forum-like space allowed the researcher to have immediate access to participants’ responses, which decreased costs and time needed for data entry and analysis (Vicsek, 2016; Zwaanswijk & van Dulmen, 2014). The focus group also gave voice to Black women regarding the phenomenon of racial microaggressions (Stanley, 2009), and it allowed for group-based points of view which stimulated discussions among some of the participants (Moore, McKee, & McLoughlin, 2015).

Data

The questionnaire collected general data about participants’ experiences with racial microaggressions, along with demographic data including: age; country of origin, position within the organization (entry-level, mid-level, senior-level, director); years at their place of employment; number of promotions/raises; socioeconomic status; educational history; marital status; and number of children. Additional questions addressed the characteristics of the workplace, including the location and the racial and gender composition of the workplace. Two of 28 responses to the demographic and racial microaggressions questionnaire in phase one of the study were not included in the data because respondents did not have at least a bachelor’s degree, and both worked for local government versus working in the state or federal government. Three additional participants were removed because they did not work for either state or federal government; they worked for the local government. Four additional participants had to be removed because they were newly hired for their position and had not been in their position for at least a year. A total of 18 participants remained.

The researcher recruited participants for the key informant interviews by randomly selecting every second participant from each region (there were only two regions, the East and
the South) of the U.S. from phase one, until there were at least five participants per region. A total of seven respondents from phase one were emailed and asked to participate in the key informant interviews. Five people responded. Phase two participants were further divided into Group A (four participants), women who indicated on the questionnaire that they have experienced racial microaggressions while working in the government sector, and Group B (one participant) women who did not experience racial microaggressions. Group A and Group B (Appendix C) had questions that were functionally equivalent to assess both groups’ experiences and feelings about racial microaggressions. Functional equivalence refers to constructs or questions, for the purpose of this study, that explore the same phenomenon and concepts across both groups (Harachi, Choi, Abbott, Catalano, & Bliesner, 2006). The researcher explored the connection between societal perceptions of Black women and their behavior, performance, and experiences with racial microaggressions at work. Functional equivalence was achieved by ensuring that the research questions are tailored to the unique context of each group (Group A has experienced racial microaggressions at their current place of employment, while Group B has not) (Williams & Vogt, 2011). Ensuring similarity among the questions allowed the researcher to accurately compare the results of Group A and Group B (Creswell, 2015).

All participants from phase one were invited to participate in the online asynchronous focus group. A total of 18 responses from 10 participants (multiple responses to questions based on other participants’ answers) were analyzed. Both the interview and focus group questions were designed based on the three tenets of CRT, permanence of racism, colorblindness, and experiential knowledge along with Intersectionality Theory and Black Feminist Theory, to gain a better understanding of Black women’s experiences with racial microaggressions in the government sector. The researcher developed a comprehensive Excel document, which included
the data from phase one of the study, and codes, themes, observations and general comments for phases two and three.

**Data Analysis**

The researcher engaged in a period of reflection after the completion of interviews, to produce an initial phenomenological account (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016; Moustakas, 1994; Groenewald, 2004; Robinson-Wood, et al., 2015). Using the theoretical framework of CRT, Intersectionality Theory, and Black Feminist Theory, the researcher reflected on her own experiences with racial microaggressions at her previous place of employment and explored how those experiences stemmed from society’s perception of Black women and the racial and gender-based marginalization that Black women face. These experiences helped the researcher to generate themes that associated with emotions she felt, her actions after experiencing racial microaggressions, and management’s actions to stop the occurrence of racial microaggressions. The researcher also explored how her experiences may have affected her performance as it related to her work responsibilities and examined the similarities and differences between her experiences and the participants’ experiences.

The researcher presented the data from phase one in bar graphs to show the demographics of the participants. The researcher categorized data from phase one into two groups: Black women who experienced racial microaggressions and those who did not. The bar graphs in chapter 4 show the demographics of the women who experienced racial microaggressions because only one participant did not experience racial microaggressions and another participant was not sure.

After analyzing the data from phase one, the researcher conducted preliminary exploratory analysis for the data from phase two and three (Creswell, 2015), and each interview
transcript along with focus group responses were reviewed for general understanding with summarized notes for each question/response pair written in the margins. Then after reviewing the data a second time, the researcher identified codes, or labels/adjectives used to describe segments of the text (Creswell, 2015), and highlighted them in different colors. The researcher also bolded and underlined significant quotes from each participant and identified themes in comment bubbles. This step is also considered to be horizontalization according to Moustakas (1994). The researcher provided descriptions that relate to the common behaviors of participants while at work. All codes were related to each participant’s work environment, their length of time at their place of employment and if they experienced racial microaggressions. Experiences related to racial attributes (hair, skin complexion, communication style, cultural differences, style of dress) were grouped together and either categorized based on their alignment to the three tenets of CRT (permanence of racism, colorblindness and experiential knowledge), or Intersectionality/Black Feminist Theory. Experiences that were categorized under permanence of racism were experiences that occurred based on stereotypes of being Black or a Black woman. Experiences that aligned with experiential knowledge were those in which people expected participants to be the expert on Black culture. Colorblindness experiences were experiences that occurred due to people ‘not seeing race’. Experiences that aligned with intersectionality were experiences that occurred due to participants being Black and a woman. Black Feminist Theory were experiences that only occurred specifically to Black women.

After this process, the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994) was written to highlight the alignment between the researcher’s personal experiences with the phenomenon of racial microaggressions in the workplace and those of the participants. The essence of the phenomenon also included descriptions of the emerging themes in the data analysis as they relate
to the conceptual framework and research questions. After analysis, the researcher pinpointed
descriptions of each participants’ experience, along with a description of her personal
experiences, to illustrate an overall understanding of the phenomenon (Bloomberg and Volpe,
2016). The researcher developed a comprehensive Excel document which included the data from
phase one of the study, and codes, themes, observations and general comments for phases two
and three.

**Participant Rights**

The interviewer requested and was granted IRB approval from the University of New
England’s IRB prior to data collection for this study. Participation in this study was voluntary,
and each participant was required to electronically consent to participating in this study before
phase one and three and provide verbal consent before phase two. Both verbal and electronic
consent included notification of rights and privacy protections in which each participant
acknowledged and agreed to. Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time
throughout the duration of the study with no penalty. Participants had the option of withdrawing
by informing the researcher of their desire to withdraw via email. No harm was done to any
participants throughout the duration or after the study. The researcher recorded participants’
questionnaire responses using the pseudonym ‘participant’ + the letter in which they submitted
their questionnaire (e.g. Participant A).

Though the researcher initially wrote in the IRB application that participants’
pseudonyms would be numbers, they had to be changed to letters to avoid any confusion during
pivot table analysis. The researcher recorded each participant’s response to the key informant
interview using pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and to protect the participant's identity and
the identity of coworkers (Creswell, 2015; Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Participants’ focus group
responses without their names, were transferred from FocusGroupIt and recorded in a word document on a password-protected laptop. Participants were not named in the study. Names of individuals mentioned once or only occasionally in passing during interviews or focus groups, were redacted from transcripts.

The recordings and all data are kept on a password-protected laptop in a Google Drive account and will be kept for a minimum of three years (Coulehan & Wells, 2006). After the completion of the questionnaire, key informant interviews and online focus group, only the researcher and the researcher’s dissertation advisors had access to the password-protected data. Original recordings of the interviews were destroyed after transcription and participant review to protect the privacy and confidentiality of individuals discussed during those meetings. A copy of the completed study will be provided to participants at their request.

**Limitations**

Because the researcher is a Black female who has experienced racial microaggressions, there were limitations such as researcher bias. However, the researcher invoked epoché/ bracketing during development of questions for the study and during analysis of the data (Moustakas, 1994). The interview questions were reviewed by the dissertation committee and a friend of the researcher; she is a Black government worker with a bachelor’s degree. Thus, the questionnaire, interviews, and focus group questions were as bias-free as possible. The researcher made a conscious effort not to react in a suggestive manner to the answers that participants provided during the interviews and attempted to remain objective (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). The researcher used member checking (having participants double check their responses to the questionnaire and review the transcripts from the interviews after the researcher has transcribed them) to confirm the accuracy of the data collected and to ensure validity (Davis
Other methods of increasing validity throughout this study included triangulation of the methodology (Creswell, 2015) and researcher reflexivity (Lub, 2015).

The online data-collection method was another limitation. First, collecting data online may allow for data collection from a diverse sample of participants but, one drawback was the oversampling of a specific demographic (Lewis & Neville, 2015). Specifically, middle class Black women who work in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area, with at least a bachelor’s degree were overrepresented due in part to the data collection method used; also, there are social disparities when it comes to internet access. Second, recruiting specifically from groups (BIG and LinkedIn) with admission and posting restrictions, versus using general social media (Twitter) where more people have access, is another limitation and also a catch twenty-two. On one hand, recruiting from groups with admission and posting restrictions increases the accuracy of validity of each participant because they have to meet certain criteria to be admitted to the group. However, this limited the number of potential participants and made recruiting slightly challenging due to the inability to post recruiting messages in one of the groups. Also, recruiting Black women who are government workers also limited the generalizability, and the results may not be applicable to all Black women in the workforce. Generalizability was also limited because, the region in which participants worked did not vary. Most participants worked in the Eastern region of the U.S.

Having an asynchronous focus group also hindered the fluidity of the discussion (Zwaanswijk & van Dulmen, 2014). First, the requirement of having to sign up to be a part of the focus group prior to participating, though it confirmed consent, may have deterred some people from participating. Secondly, some participants did not answer questions in their entirety, and by the time the researcher noticed, a few days had gone by and the participant was no longer willing
to continue participating. Whereas in a face-to-face focus group setting, the researcher may have more opportunity to stimulate dialogue. The researcher sent email reminders every other day to participants for one week to increase participation (Ferrante, et al., 2015). Another limitation was the time of year that this study was being conducted. During the end of the summer right after a national holiday, some people were ending their fiscal year at work and did not have the time to participate in the study. Other people may have been on vacation, and one BIG member notified the researcher that the organization was planning their annual conference. Another limitation was not being able to confirm that each isolated experience was specifically due to race because the researcher did not consistently ask that question and non-Black employees were not a part of this study to serve as a comparison.

**Conclusion**

The occurrence of racial microaggressions that Black women face primarily as government workers should be further explored because of the identified gap in the literature, the increase in Black women employed by the government sector, and the increase of racially charged discriminatory actions reported by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Conducting key informant interviews, and online focus groups and administering questionnaires to Black female government workers across the United States gave more insight into the effects of experiencing racial microaggressions on their work performance. The next chapter highlights the results from each phase of this study.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Given the actions of the current administration as it relates to people of color, specifically Black women, it is important that the government as an employer to Black women focus on improving professional development opportunities and creating processes to combat racial microaggressions. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the connection between society’s perception of Black women and their unique experiences of racial microaggressions across the government sector, and to explore the effect these experiences have on their work performance. This study addressed two research questions: how do Black female government workers perceive the connection between society’s perception of them as being Black women, and the occurrence of racial microaggressions, and how does experiencing racial microaggressions affect the performance of Black female government workers?

The researcher divided the study into three phases. First, a demographic and racial microaggressions online questionnaire was administered via Google Forms, and was made available to participants for a month. Next, participants who agreed to participate in phase two of the study were emailed to choose a date and time that was most convenient for them to be interviewed. The researcher conducted all interviews within one week. After phase two, the interviewer sent an email to all participants from phase one asking for their participation in phase three of the study, the online focus group. The focus group questions were available to all participants for one week. The results from each phase of this study are shown below.
Results and Data

Demographic Data

Figure 4.1 and Figure 4.2 illustrate the basic demographic data of the 18 participants in this study. Participants’ ages ranged from 25 to 54 with 67% being between 25-34 years old. Fifty-six percent of participants had a bachelor’s degrees, 33% had master’s degrees, and 11% had juris doctor degrees.

![Participants' Age and Level of Education](image)

*Figure 4.1. Participants’ age and level of education*

The annual income for participants ranged from $50,000 to more than $150,000 with 50% of participants earning between $50,000-$74,999; 22% of participants earned between $75,000-$99,999; 22% earned between $100,000 and $149,999, and 6% earned more than $150,000 annually. Six percent of the participants were divorced, 22% were married, and 72% were single. When looking at the level of government in which participants work, 78% worked in the federal government and 22% worked in the state government. Seventy-two percent of
participants who worked in the federal sector of the government were in Washington, D.C., 14% worked in Maryland, 7% worked in Virginia, and 7% worked in Texas. Fifty percent of the participants who worked in the state sector worked in Washington, D.C., and 50% worked in Maryland. Participants also had different professions within the government sector including: analysts, working in grants and procurement, the IT field, communications, law, foreign affairs, research, public health, and the military.

Figure 4.2. Participants' income, level of government and state of employment

All participants stated that they believed that subtle racism and discrimination exists in the United States. Figure 4.3 and 4.4 illustrates the demographic information for those participants who indicated that they experienced racial microaggressions. Sixteen participants (89%) said that they experienced racial microaggressions in their place of employment, one
participant (6%) said that she was not sure and one participant (6%) indicated that she did not experience racial microaggressions. Figure 4.3 shows that 81% of participants who experienced racial microaggressions worked in the federal sector across the states of Maryland, Virginia, and Texas, and the District of Columbia. The participants who worked in the state sector of the government (19%) worked in Washington DC and Maryland.

*Figure 4.3. State of employment and sector of government of participants who experienced racial microaggressions*

When looking at the racial and gender demographic of participants’ workplaces, Figure 4.4 shows that those who experienced racial microaggressions indicated that they worked with a mix of men and women (50%) and a mix of multiple races (38%). Six percent of participants noted that they worked with very few Black co-workers and worked with mostly women; 19% worked with mostly men and from a range of racial diversity. Participants who worked with
mostly Black co-workers (19%) noted that they mostly worked with a mix of men and women (67%).

**Figure 4.4.** Racial and gender demographic of workplace for participants who experienced racial microaggressions

Figure 4.5 shows the number of raises and promotion that each participant who experienced racial microaggressions received at their place of employment. Thirty-eight percent indicated that they had received a raise and increase in work responsibilities, but they had not received any promotions or actual changes in work title; 25% stated that they received more than one raise and promotion; 19% indicated they received only one raise and promotion; 13% indicated they received more than one raise but had not had a formal promotion; and 6% had not received a raise or promotion since being employed for a year at their place of employment. Figure 4.5 also shows that a majority of the participants (63%) had a mid-level position. Forty percent of those participants indicated that they received a raise but had not received any
promotions or change in title despite having an increase in responsibilities at work. Figure 4.5 also shows that despite being categorized as entry-level, a majority of those participants (63%) received at least one raise. Nineteen percent of participants who experienced racial microaggressions had a senior-level position; of those participants, 67% had more than one raise and promotion.

![Graph showing number of raises/promotions, length, and level of employment of participants who experienced racial microaggressions]

**Figure 4.5.** Number of raises/promotions, length, and level of employment of participants who experienced racial microaggressions

**Key informant interview participant codes**

Fourteen of the 18 participants agreed to participate in phase two of the study. Next, every other participant within each region was selected to be interviewed, resulting in seven participants being asked to participate in the key informant interviews. Five of the seven people
responded and participated in the key informant interviews. Before providing a detailed
description of the themes, a brief description of each interviewee is detailed below to illustrate
the codes (work environment, their length of time at their place of employment and if they
experienced racial microaggressions) and provide a better understanding of how the phenomenon
aligns with different types of Black women. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the
participants; detailed personal information will not be shared. Next, data from both the key
informant interviews and the online focus group, that align with the research questions are
presented. Being that the participants of the focus group answered more general questions
relating to their experiences. Descriptions of the eight focus group participants are not included.

Participant M is a Black woman between the ages of 25-34 with her bachelor’s degree.
She is a mid-level analyst who works in the state of Maryland in the federal government. She has
worked at her job for one to three years and has received one raise but no formal promotion. She
works with mostly women, and her work environment is racially and culturally diverse with
varied socioeconomic backgrounds. She has experienced racial microaggressions at her current
place of employment. She mentioned incidents relating to her hair, being asked about Black
culture, the mispronunciation of her name, and being called sassy. Throughout her interview
Participant M explained that she felt like she was always performing, and it was always about
making her White co-workers comfortable. She said, “I’m always performing and not just with
White people but with other non-Black people of color. I realized non-Black people of color had
their own perceptions also, and I had a different performance for them and a separate
performance for White people.” She even mentioned some expectations placed on her by some
of her Black co-workers stating, “within the Black race, at work, being expected to have a certain
comradery with other Black women when all we are, are just colleagues. And if [we don’t have
that relationship] it is seen as a problem and there must be a level of disrespect.” Participant M also explained that even though people worked well together in a professional sense, and she felt comfortable talking about cultural differences, she still experienced racial microaggressions and didn’t feel included. She said “[co-workers] are very friendly but not inclusive…[because] they don’t actively think beyond what the standard White corporate male's interests are.” Participant M expressed that she feels like she is walking on eggshells and has to constantly work to disprove stereotypes about Black women. She said that she thinks she experienced racial microaggressions because “I work in a corporate world and this world wasn’t set up for me to be in. When they allow us to be in it they didn’t do an overhaul to create a new space to be inclusive. We’re navigating territory that was never meant for us.” Further relating to her experiences with racial microaggressions, she commented that she tolerates racial microaggressions to maintain security of job and keep the peace, stating “pay means more to me than going through a microaggression so after this incident [with human resources] you know I’m definitely not going to them about a microaggression.” Experiencing racial microaggressions did not affect her work performance, but it affected her mentally. She commented

“[my work performance] usually enhances because I know there’s a level that’s expected from me that’s not on paper but is communicated in other ways. It would make me feel dejected about my job if experiencing microaggressions was the biggest issue. Luckily, I can mask and outweigh that feeling but if not, I’d feel dejected and unmotivated and it would affect my mental wellbeing.”

One important conclusion from this interview was how the diversity of the human resources (HR) department plays a role in creating a culture of inclusion. Participant M mentioned that she was treated differently when asking about raises; a HR employee told her supervisor that she was
inquiring and that made her uncomfortable with ever speaking with them about an issue if she had one. She also stated that “HR is filled with people who aren’t going to get it, no. It is within my team where I feel most comfortable talking about things like this because there are more people who look like me and we can get our venting sessions out.” Despite Participant M noting her appreciation for professional development opportunities, she still experienced racial microaggressions and did not feel included.

Participant H is a Black woman between the ages of 35-44 with her master’s degree. She is a senior-level foreign affairs officer who works in Washington D.C. in the federal government. She has worked at her job for four to seven years and has had more than one raise and promotion. She works with mostly women, and her work environment is racially and culturally diverse. There are three other Black female employees and two Asian female employees. Participant H experienced racial microaggressions at her previous place of employment which included her being patronized, talked down to, referred to as ‘girl’, and denied the same opportunities as her co-workers. She experienced gender-based microaggressions at her current place of employment which included being spoken over, being ignored, or male co-workers making sexist comments. When asked about stereotypes associated with Black women, participant H commented “I think they’re aspects of society that see Black women as unprofessional, less educated, less articulate. And accomplished Black women are seen as an anomaly versus seen as something that a lot of Black women could do.” Throughout her interview Participant H explained that she is constantly reminded of her differences at work and felt like she was always having to be overprepared and takes the effort to always choose her words carefully. She stated that “You tailor to your audience no matter what when you’re giving a presentation, but part of the tailoring is what are they going to think of me as a woman or as a
Black woman and how do I adjust. That’s always in the back of my mind. I have to prove myself when I’m going to meetings or sending out documents.” Participant H believes that this isn’t the case for her White co-workers. She states that “there are less assumptions with my non-Black co-workers compared to myself. Less stereotypes that they have to deal with. They’re starting at blank state. So, I don’t see them experience many microaggressions that I am aware of.”

Participant H has also commented on having to deal with the intersectionality of ageism and expressed that she knew she experienced microaggressions at her previous place of employment due to race but currently it is because of her gender. Further relating to her experiences with racial microaggressions, she explained that she didn’t speak out about racial microaggressions at her previous job because “it was a job that I really wanted to keep and didn’t want to make any waves, so I let it go.” At her current job she notes that her male co-workers don’t get reprimanded for their actions, and “when it’s at the microaggression level it is seen as small and doesn’t rise to the level of complaint and is brushed off as not a big deal...Raising awareness of things that should be let go because it creates a culture that promotes it and that’s education that can be given to management and employees.” Although experiencing racial microaggressions did not affect her work performance, participant H mentioned that “I never felt held back from promotion opportunities but, I have felt held back from career development opportunities.” She also said that at her previous job, she lost trust for her deputy director, and was less motivated to do the work because of how she was treated. At her current job she feels angry, “frustrated, morale goes down and I feel burned out.” One important conclusion from this interview was the need for mentoring from people who share racial and cultural similarities. Participant H said, “I think it’s taken for granted that some groups get mentoring and there’s a lack of mentoring that I
see at my agency and when I’ve been mentored by people who look like me it’s made a huge difference in confidence for me and its opened up new opportunities for me.”

Participant J is a Black woman between the ages of 25-34 with her bachelor’s degree. She is a mid-level communications specialist who works in the state of Maryland at the state level. She has worked at her job for one to three years and has earned one raise but no formal promotion. She works with a mix of mostly White men and women, and her work environment is not diverse; there is only one other Black female employee. She has experienced racial microaggressions at her current place of employment relating to her contributions not being heard or respected and being reprimanded more harshly compared to her non-Black co-workers. Similar to the other participants, Participant J mentioned that her employer works to create a friendly environment, but the work culture isn’t diverse or inclusive. She notes,

“Every day it’s an uphill battle because there are a lot of White people where I work, and they don’t look to me for my opinion. So, when I speak up in meetings, everyone is always taken aback because they aren’t expecting me to speak…even though I speak up and share my opinion, the way I see it, it goes in one ear out the other. They always say, ‘oh we’ve been doing it this way for 50-something years, so yes your opinion sounds great, that sounds awesome, but we’re not there yet’.”

When asked why she thinks she experienced racial microaggressions participant J noted

“I think a lot of companies claim to be progressive and diverse but when it comes to actually doing the work, I am not sure a lot of companies are ready or prepared to actually do the work. A lot of people go off of stereotype of what a Black woman is. And they may not notice that they’re doing this.”
She goes on to talk about stereotypes associated with Black women and explains that “[society] sees Black women as [being] tough. Because when you’re in this setting, you have to be the best and you have to make sure people hear you, and you have to make as few mistakes as possible just because of who they may think you are. You have to debunk any stereotypes or myths they may have about you, so you have to be on you’re a-game all day every day. There is no off day.”

Regarding work performance, similarly to the other participants, participant H mentioned that experiencing racial microaggressions did not affect her work performance and “I don’t want anyone to catch me slipping whether they have these preconceived notions about me or not, I don’t want to prove them right.” Participant H also commented on the importance of having a diverse HR department and notes her positive experiences with HR and feeling comfortable with personnel (two Black employees) because of how they spoke with her and assured her that she could speak with them about anything.

Participant O is a Black woman between the ages of 25-34 with her bachelor’s degree. She is a mid-level administrative personnel who works in Washington D.C. at the state level. She has worked at her job for seven to 10 years and has more than one raise but no formal promotion. She explained that due to the regulations of the government, receiving formal promotions in her field of work does not normally occur. Instead, people receive step increases/raises. She works with mostly Black women. She has experienced racial microaggressions at her current place of employment, but it was only one incident, and it occurred when she first started working at her place of employment. Also, the co-worker (older White woman) no longer works with her.

Participant O’s experiences were similar to Participant H’s experiences in that they both were being talked down to and patronized. The difference is that Participant O spoke to her supervisor and had a meeting with her co-worker who treated her wrongly. Afterward, the co-worker
changed her behavior towards Participant O. Participant O notes that although she feels included, she still feels the need to keep up a performance and not confirm any of the stereotypes related to Black women. She mentioned that stereotypes related to Black women depend on their level of education:

“because a lot of time people will perceive women of a certain grade as lazy and don’t really want to work and got the job through networking and not through merit. And then the women at the top are definitely seen as more cut throat…Definitely cut throat or lazy either or… There is definitely colorism. A darker skin supervisor is perceived to be angry, cutthroat, and strict. My previous supervisor was a fair skinned woman, and she said when she started in the government lots of people always said she only had her job because of her skin complexion.”

Participant O also talked about the intersectionality and the different experiences with microaggressions among her Black co-workers and stated, “I do notice though, there is a social gap within that circle based on the women who have a degree versus those who don’t.” When asked about work performance, Participant O commented that experiencing racial microaggressions did not affect her work performance. Relating to professional development she noted that there were a variety of opportunities that she has taken advantage of. Relating to HR, she mentioned that they have processes for submitting complaints, but she is not aware of them because she has not needed to use those resources.

Lastly, participant F is a Black woman between the ages of 35-44 with her master’s degree. She is an entry-level analyst who works in Washington D.C. in the federal government. She has worked at her current job for a little over a year and has not had a raise or promotion. She works with mostly White men, a few White women and Black women. She noted on her
questionnaire that she has not experienced racial microaggressions, but throughout the interview it she described her experiences with microaggressions and described her Black female co-workers’ experiences with racial microaggressions. She had experiences relating to co-workers telling her that they don’t see color, and management assigning secretarial duties to only her and the other two Black employees but not to any of the White employees. Despite these experiences, Participant F still feels included at work, because her co-workers “are very flexible with me and they like to include me in little things even if I’m not familiar with that particular area of work. They like to include me and get my opinion on things or how I think things can be improved.” Similar to participant J, Participant F works in a White male dominated environment; however, participant F feels as though her voice is being heard and her opinions are being taking seriously. She stated that her being one of the three Black women in the office “makes me feel stronger because its only three of us in the office. It is White male dominated, so it gives me an actual voice.” She also said that she attributes her speaking up for herself to the reason behind her not explicitly experiencing racial microaggressions at work, noting that her having only worked there a year may also play a role. She did state that she witnessed one of her Black female co-workers experiencing racial microaggressions when a White male co-worker “made it seem like [the Black female co-worker] did the worst thing ever [by] saying ‘I lost faith in you and I can’t trust you to do things like I can other people in the office’ and that raised eyebrows for me and made me think what does that even mean.” Despite not experiencing racial microaggressions like the other participants, participant F did discuss some stereotypes associated with Black women by stating “[society] may view us as inferior or not as smart as other races or not as knowledgeable and not as approachable or helpful. Because I see or hear all the time ‘Oh I can say this to
a White person without them getting offended but if I see a Black woman I would be scared to say that to them because they may respond negatively or harshly.’ So, I think society views us as being mean or even bitter.”

When asked about her work performance in relation to receiving a raise or promotion, participant F noted that she had not received the annual raise that is granted to each employee once they complete their first year of work. She noted that she did not receive that raise. She also commented on the fact that all co-workers except the other two Black female employees received their raise. One employee had not because she had not reached her one-year mark, and she did not know the reason for the other employee. Participant F did state that when she asked her supervisor for an explanation none was provided but, she received a bonus instead of the full raise and was told that she would receive the full raise next year. She commented

“I guess right now, I feel a little indifferent just because, I know everyone else got their yearly increase and I didn’t. So, I don’t know if it was an oversight or what, but I feel indifferent…I can’t really say if I’m angry or if I think its race related. And I don’t know if me getting a bonus now and getting my increase next year is good enough compensation for me because I still don’t know the real reason why I didn’t receive an increase.”

Relating to professional development opportunities Participant F stated that none were presented to her; therefore, she is unaware of the opportunities. When asked why she hasn’t sought out opportunities she said “I’ve thought about it, but maybe it’s just timing, or opportunity hasn’t presented itself. If the opportunity presented itself, I think leadership would be open.” Participant F is aware of the HR process for submitting complaints related to racial microaggressions if needed and is satisfied with the process.
The description of the key informant interviewees begins the process of illustrating the connection between the phenomenon and the experiences of the participants. The data presented below illustrates how both the focus group participants and the key informant interview participants shared common themes and experiences when asked similar questions related to racial microaggressions.

**Themes relating to stereotypes about Black women**

Below are perceived stereotypes about Black women in the government sector as described by participants in the key informant interviews and the focus group. Participants of the online focus group indicated that some common stereotypes of Black women are being: aggressive, loud, and or combative, often times being referred to as a bully, lazy or unproductive at work, incompetent, inarticulate and or uneducated often times assuming that Black women have service-level positions or are secretaries; and unprofessional with bad attitudes. When asked the question “How do you think society perceives Black women in relation to being in a professional government setting?” interview participants responded by stating the following:

“It seems like they put us in a box and they seem to be shocked when I’m able to chime in on conversations and they would respond and say, ‘oh we didn’t know that you would be interested’ and why wouldn’t I be?”

“Sometimes they may view us as inferior or not as smart as other races or not as knowledgeable and not as approachable or helpful.” Because I see or hear all the time ‘oh I can say this to a White person without them getting offend but if I see a Black woman, I would be scared to say that to them because they may respond negatively or harshly.’ So, I think society views us as being mean or even bitter.”
“There are aspects of society that see Black women as unprofessional, less educated, less articulate. And accomplished Black women are seen as an anomaly versus seen as something that a lot of Black women could do.”

“They keep seeing us like we’re an exception. Or every time they meet a new Black woman who is successful, she’s seen as an exception or a star of her demographic. When you are Black and a woman you know ‘this is what we do, we’re just as good if not better’ and it’s not something we need a gold star or to highlight that we made it out of something. At work, they see us as opportunities to work for them and their edification and a preview into the black culture. We are also seen as expendable because once we make any mistake there’s always some White person more capable who can take our place.”

“I don’t feel like I have to deal with anyone…not taking my ideas seriously because I am a woman and a Black woman. I don’t have to worry about the angry black woman stereotype because I work around so many Black women.”

“People will perceive women of a certain grade as lazy and don’t really want to work and got the job through networking and not through merit. And then the women at the top are definitely seen as more cut throat. And if the Black woman isn’t married with children they’re seen as being a lesbian. Definitely cut throat or lazy either or.”

“There is definitely colourism. A darker skin supervisor is perceived to be angry and cutthroat and strict. My previous supervisor was a fairly fair skinned woman and she said when she started in the government lots of people always said she only had her job because of her skin complexion.”
Exploring participants’ perception of how society views them as Black women in a professional setting served as a precursor to better understanding their behaviors at work along with how they interacted with both their Black and non-Black co-workers.

**Behavioral themes of participants at work**

The researcher highlighted common behavioral themes evoked by participants as it relates to being in a work setting as illustrated in Table 1. Participants also discussed how they interacted with both Black co-workers and non-Black co-workers at work. The common behaviors shared by key informant interviewees and participants of the focus group include:

1) Code Switching/Not being your complete self
2) Performing under a lens
3) Hesitation with speaking out against microaggressive behavior
4) Speaking up
5) Navigating intersectionality

**Table 1**

*Common Behaviors of Black Women at Work; Theme Clusters*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Behaviors</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Code Switching/ Not being complete self</td>
<td>Conforming to the standards and expectations of non-Black co-workers, to make sure everyone else is comfortable around you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performing under a lens</td>
<td>Walking on eggshells; making sure you always put your best foot forward and avoid making mistakes out of fear of confirming stereotypes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hesitation with speaking out against microaggressive behavior
Fear of being black-balled, labeled “angry,” or seen as a “problem starter” forces women to silently deal with their experiences.

Speak up
Important to share opinions from a Black woman’s perspective to give a voice to Black women.

Navigating intersectionality
Having to avoid conforming to stereotypes about Black people in general, Black women; dealing with ageism, sexism, difference in SES status and educational level

| Code switching is the intentional linguistic alteration that Black women invoke when engaging with non-Black people, or the switch from standard English to Black English vernacular in the presence of other Black people (Davis 2015; Hudson, 2001). During interviews participants mentioned: |

[Being a Black woman and a government worker] “means that I have to frame myself in a certain way and I have to tone check when I’m delivering certain messages to superiors and my work needs to be grade-A because my mistakes hold more weight than the next person.”

“They don’t get my full self because I feel like they can’t handle it or I don’t trust them with my full self. I know they need to feel comfortable around me, so I work to make them feel comfortable for me to be in a good spot at work.”

“I learned to conform enough on the outside...I realized non-Black people of color had their own perceptions also and I had a different performance for them and a separate performance for White people.” |
“Choosing your words very carefully. You cater to your audience you know that they may have some preconceived notions about you.”

“I can tell by the way the higher ups work with and talk to [my non-Black co-workers] versus how they interact with me. In terms of the way I work with them, there’s a lot of code switching and finding things that we have in common to get things accomplished.”

“I have one other Black female who is on my team. She is the ultimate code switcher. She’s been here for a few years, but I haven’t had many conversations with her though. She fits in quite perfectly because she conforms to what [the non-Black co-workers] are, and she does it really well too. I don’t have the desire to do that.”

“With my White co-workers I have to code switch, and I’m always on edge because I just never know.”

Performing under a lens in this study signifies participants’ feelings of being watched more closely at work and having to pay extra attention to their work performance in an effort to avoid confirming common stereotypes about Black women. Below are quotes from participants that align with this theme:

“It’s expected that Black women have a certain countenance to combat stereotypes.”

“I’m walking on eggshells, and I’m always more cognizant about my actions and words. My non-Black co-workers have the luxury of doing their job to the best of their ability and worried about nothing else. Whereas I’m worried about doing my job to the best of my ability, presenting myself the best way I can; because how I present myself is an added layer to my job performance, whereas their job performance is what is seen first and foremost.”
“There's always trying to be overprepared to make sure there’s nothing to comment about.”

“It’s tough to come in to work every day and be excited. It makes me feel like I’m walking on eggshells. I don’t want to have to be silenced or change who I am.”

“When you’re in this setting, you have to be the best, and you have to make sure people hear you, and you have to make as few mistakes as possible just because of who they might think you are. You have to debunk any stereotypes or myths they may have about you, so you have to be on you’re a-game all day every day.”

“I often monitor my actions, reactions, speech, and body language far beyond my non-Black/male colleagues.”

“Most of the time I feel like I have to indirectly prove that I smart/intelligent/worthy enough to have my position/sit at the table/ be a part of the conversation. Also, that I am articulate/know how to speak.”

Hesitation with speaking out against microaggressive behavior coincides with performing under a lens. Participants wanted to avoid being labeled as an “angry Black woman” or confirm any other stereotype. It’s similar to being black-balled, because they believed that their co-workers would disassociate themselves if they spoke out. Participants said:

“Speaking up will deem me as being unsatisfied.”

“It was a job that I really wanted to keep and didn’t want to make any waves, so I let it go.”
“Yes, if I do not like the tone and/or language used by my non-black co-workers, I am yes likely to address the situation given that has not worked out so well for me in the past. You are labelled/negatively labelled when you speak up for yourself (speak up in general).”

Conversely, some participants felt it necessary to speak up, not only about microaggressive behavior, but in general to let their voice be heard, and to show their confidence. Some participants commented:

“[Working in a smaller office] gives me the opportunity to let my voice be heard more and be taken seriously… I let it be known that just because I am a young Black female, you can’t take advantage of me or say anything to me and get away with it.”

“It’s not very diverse… so me coming in to the team and giving that different perspective, has been a bit of a challenge because that’s not a part of this culture.”

“[Being Black] means having a voice and being able to sit at the table and share my feelings and my insight. It’s somewhere that I’d never think I’d be especially as a Black woman.”

“Every day it’s an uphill battle because there are a lot of white people where I work, and they don’t look to me for my opinion, so when I speak up in meetings, everyone is always taken aback because they aren’t expecting me to speak.”

A few participants also shared their struggle of having to navigate their workspace and deal with the intersectionality of being both Black and a woman. There were other issues participants faced like, ageism, a difference in socioeconomic status, and level of education. Below are a few quotes relating to participants behavior regarding intersectionality.
“A part of the tailoring is [thinking] ‘what are they going to think of me as a woman or as a Black woman and how do I adjust.’ That’s always in the back of my mind.”

“I feel like I also have a lot to prove because I look very young (not my actual age) and I am young (29 years old) holding a leadership position.”

“I do notice though, there is a social gap within that circle based on the women who have a degree versus those who don’t.”

When discussing their interactions with their co-workers, participants generally mentioned that they felt more comfortable interacting with other Black co-workers, specifically Black female co-workers or women in general, but they were hesitant to interact with non-Black co-workers, specifically White co-workers, or they avoided interaction all together. Below are a few quotes from the online focus group and interviews:

“It is slightly annoying to me and causes some internal discomfort in my interactions with non-Black people and men.”

“They make me not want to associate with non-person of color. I isolate myself at times.”

“The microaggressions have caused me to shut down and not interact with other employees.”

“When working with Black co-workers I tend to be a little more relaxed and comfortable. With my White co-workers [I’m on edge]. I’m the type of person that can befriend anyone, so it isn’t really tough for me to interact with non-Black co-workers.”

“One of the White males he’s homosexual. He and I talk a lot. Between the Black females, I talk to them a lot more, especially the one that I share an office with. We can
relate to a lot of things. I guess because I just have a lot more in common with them. I had a White female co-worker I did speak to often, whether it was work-related or non-work related; but it’s very few White females I interact with.”

“There are three Black women that I work with, two Asian women and the rest are White women...I know race is a topic that is brought up a lot only in the right circles like amongst other Black women. But it’s not necessarily experiences with microaggressions, but it could be a racial topic that was brought up and now they’re commenting on it in a Black woman only circle.”

“I just try to avoid the conversation altogether and stay to myself.”

“I tend to be standoffish and not trustworthy of them [my non-Black co-workers].”

“It really only affects intersections with the person who performed the microaggression. But it does make me not want to communicate with my non-Black co-workers at all.”

“I am extremely cautious when building new relationships with non-POC. I intentionally avoid them at times.”

“Shut down and not interact with other employees.”

“I interact with the non-black females more and they are also more willing to help me if I need something.”

**Themes related to racial microaggressions participants experienced**

A coding method outlined in Creswell (2015, p. 245) was used to generate over-arching themes as it relates to the three tenets of the Critical Race Theory, or Intersectionality/Black Feminist Theory and sub-themes as it relates to beauty standards (hair), communication style and
cultural differences. The types of racial microaggressions that participants faced, all over-arching themes and sub-themes are highlighted below in Table 2. The types of racial microaggressions highlighted below are experiences shared by both interview and focus group participants. Table 3 and Table 4 highlight the number of times each microaggression was mentioned across participants, and the number of times each theme and sub-theme was identified throughout participants’ responses. The most common type of racial microaggression that was mentioned by participants was doubting competence; being seen as incompetent or uneducated. The most common overarching theme was permanence of racism and the most common sub-theme were microaggressions relating to cultural differences and communication style.

Table 2

*Racial Microaggressions, Theme Clusters*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Racial Microaggressions</th>
<th>Overarching Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Asked about every new hair style/touching hair without permission</td>
<td>Experiential knowledge</td>
<td>Hair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intersectionality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black Feminist Theory</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Having to explain aspects of Black culture and lingo</td>
<td>Experiential knowledge</td>
<td>Cultural Differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Told to have a certain countenance (dress, communication style).</td>
<td>Permanence of Racism</td>
<td>Cultural Differences Communication Style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Doubting competence. Seen as incompetent or uneducated.</td>
<td>Permanence of Racism</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Not getting equal promotions or treatment as all other Non-Black co-workers received.</td>
<td>Permanence of Racism</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6) Not listened to. Opinions aren’t taken seriously.  

Permanence of Racism  

N/A

7) Backhanded Compliments  

Permanence of Racism  

N/A

8) Talked down to in a patronizing way. Referred to as 'girl'.  

Permanence of Racism  

Black Feminist Theory  

N/A

9) Unfair treatment is ignored/ no consequences; no explanations. Non-Black employees specifically White people's words are trusted/hold more weight  

Permanence of Racism  

N/A

10) Assumption about you based on stereotypes  

Permanence of Racism  

Black Feminist Theory  

N/A

11) Called aggressive despite speaking similarly as other employees  

Intersectionality  

Communication Style  

Black Feminist Theory

Table 3

*Racial Microaggressions, Sub-Themes and the Number of Times Mentioned*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Racial Microaggressions</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
<th># of Times Mentioned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Asked about every new hair style/touching hair without permission</td>
<td>Hair</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Having to explain aspects of Black culture and lingo</td>
<td>Cultural Differences</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Told to have a certain countenance (dress, communication style)</td>
<td>Cultural Differences</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communication Style</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Doubting competence. Seen as incompetent or uneducated</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overarching Themes</td>
<td>Number of Times Occurred</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiential knowledge</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersectionality</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanence of Racism</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Feminist Theory</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorblindness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

_Overarching Themes and the Number of Times They Occurred_
Permanence of Racism aligns with experiences that occurred based off of stereotypes of being Black, with no clear reason behind the action. For example, participants stated:

“The main difference is that when I switch my hairstyles or nails I get odd looks. Sometimes I'm complimented in a condescending way.”

“I've noticed that a lot of times White people would assume I was the secretary for my management.”

“It started with little things like calling me ‘little girl’ and she would be overjoyed if I did an assignment correctly in a very patronizing way; kind of like ‘look at you, look what you were able to do’ and she didn’t give those comments to other people.”

“When I reach out to HR it is treated a little differently than if someone from another race reaches out. I reached out to HR to inquire about the pay range that I was categorized as. Immediately they contacted my supervisor to let them know that I was inquiring about that…Now I don’t feel comfortable going to HR because if I do, I will probably be seen as angry, ungrateful Black and a woman.”

Experiences that aligned with Experiential Knowledge were those in which people expected participants to be the expert on Black culture and lingo. Quotes from participants that align with this overarching theme include:

“There are also follow up conversations when someone else changes their hair it’s like they ask me ‘what does she have going on there’ and then I have to be the spokesperson for my demographic.”
“My superior or other people on my team who are mostly White, come to me and ask me to explain to them about Black culture. I had to explain ‘on fleek’ to my team lead my second week here…he just automatically assumed I would be the one to know.”

“I’m seen as the spokesman for my race in terms of social questions.”

Intersectionality aligned with experiences that occurred due to participants being Black and a woman and having to deal with other types of discrimination. Participants noted:

“[Being afraid to speak up] …because I’m Black and a woman and being young doesn’t help either.”

“In a meeting, having to fight for the opportunity to speak, whereas male counterparts speak freely. And if I do get a chance to speak, it’s ‘speak up your voice is so soft.’ I’ll explain something and then my male counterparts will say the same thing but louder and try to get credit for the same idea.”

Microaggressions that aligned with the Black Feminist Theory were experiences that only occurred specifically to Black women. Examples of participants’ experiences include:

“When I first started, I had long blonde box braids and the next week my hair was natural, then the next week it was in a bun. I’m not sure they know what to grasp from me. They always try to make my hair a talking point.”

“Every hairstyle change is a conversation. Whether it’s ‘oh did you cut your hair’ when I didn’t, it’s just a new style, Or, ‘how is it installed’ ‘how is that done’ and assuming everything is a weave. It’s a conversation every single time I change it, and because I am a Black woman that change happens every two to three months and multiple times in a year.”
“The word sassy is always used to describe Black people. Even the other day I was called sassy because I changed my hairstyle; a co-worker said, ‘you have a very sassy hairstyle’ and I asked her what she meant, and she said it’s just really nice...A Black man said, ‘you’re so brave to wear a natural afro.’ It caught me off-guard and he said, ‘you’re so brave to do that, to wear your hair like that’.”

“Tasked with certain assignments they feel require minimal thought. Employees of other races appear to be tasked with assignments that require more detail and interaction with leadership.”

“White women tend to make outlandish ‘compliments’ about my hair since I tend to switch up the styles. For example, ‘I wish I had the time to commit to changing my hair, how does it get straight then nappy’?”

“I have had people touch my hair without asking.”

Microaggressions that aligned with Colorblindness were if someone told one of the participants that they do not see color. Only one participant experienced this. She noted that she did not experience racial microaggressions and associated her lack of experience by stating “I’m not sure if it’s because I’m still new to the team, or because I am very outspoken about how I feel about certain things.” Although she didn’t identify with experiencing racial microaggression, as the interview progressed she shared incidents that aligned with some of the theoretical frameworks. She stated that some of her co-workers have said to her that “they don’t see color,” and “Sometimes I feel that they may have us [Black employees] do minimal work or things that don’t require a lot of thought… we have a lot of people who travel so we have to go to the different embassies to pick up visas, and I do notice they never ask any of the White co-workers
to do that.” She also mentioned that all non-Black employees received their annual raise but her and another Black female did not. When she asked there was no explanation given. When the interviewer asked if she thought she deserved her annual raise she stated “Absolutely. There was one point in time I was doing the work of three different people working above and beyond not only while they were out but helping to train other people as well.”

Though only one of the participants experienced racial microaggressive behavior related to colorblindness, key informant interviewees were asked “How does it make you feel when people say they don’t “see color”? ” Below are participants’ responses.

“I think that’s BS. I want you to see color and I want you to see me. I don’t ever want you to say, I don’t see color. See it, recognize it and understand the differences and try to understand things that you don’t know, ask questions.”

“Telling me you don’t see my color, means that you’re not acknowledging that I am different from you. People [who] don’t acknowledge color, they aren’t sensitive, or they aren’t culturally competent. So, they don’t know how to treat people, they don’t know some things may not be appropriate to say.”

“If they have to say that, sometimes it makes me feel like they actually do see it. Because its only three of us in the office so for you to make that statement it makes me feel like you do see color and I’m already pre-judged.”

“It’s not very meaningful for me when people say that because there’s no way to not see color.”

“It’s not a badge of honour its an admittance of ignorance and it makes me feel like they expose the level of privilege that they don’t even realize they have. They’re admitting
that they don’t have to see color, because it’s not a part of their world. The phrase means ‘because I don’t have to’ and it annoys me. What they think they’re saying is that they see everyone equally, but you can see everyone as equal while seeing their color.”

When the researcher asked participants why they thought they experienced racial microaggressions, some participants noted that they weren’t quite sure why they had those experiences, others attributed racial microaggressions to intimidation and race or perceived stereotypes and noted:

“At my job there’s an invisible need to be non-contrary. People see your differences and will talk about them but not too much because it’s not socially acceptable anymore that’s why they have to be micro, because if they were allowed to be openly aggressive, they would be; because they were, they have been historically and microaggressions are the left over from blatant racism.”

“A lot of people go off [stereotypes]. And they may not notice that they’re doing this. I don’t think this is something that they’re maliciously doing. It’s not even something that they think about which is even worse.”

“I personally think it was more about intimidation… I had a private conversation with my supervisor and was told that my former White co-worker treated a lot of Black women like how she treated me even her own supervisor.”

“At the previous job I attributed it to race. But at this job the microaggressions I feel are more related to being a woman more so than being Black.”
When asked how were racially microaggressive behavior handled at their job, some participants stated that they confronted the person themselves, some participants spoke to management about their experiences, some participants went to HR and others did nothing. Below are some quotes relating to each course of action.

“I decided to slowly distance myself from a White female co-worker because her behavior and microaggressions made me uncomfortable. Rumours that she spread led me to report the situation to HR. I expressed to HR that I felt unsafe and anxious around this individual. I also noticed a pattern of her conflicts and habit of spreading lies about other women of color at our job. Ultimately, HR determined that her behavior was ‘unprofessional but did not rise to the level of discipline’.”

“I went to my supervisor and told her how I felt, and the supervisor (a Black woman) assembled a meeting between me and the woman. I’m not sure why [my supervisor] told me to leave out the part about saying I felt like she was treating me that way because I’m Black. She wasn’t reprimanded; her behavior just changed.”

I asked for clarification as to why [I wasn’t granted clearance to submit an application] and she didn’t have a good explanation for me she just kept repeating what she said. So, I couldn’t figure out why she would reject me; it wasn’t her program for her to even grant me acceptance. So, I concluded it was based off of race through process of elimination and in asking her questions she said no it wasn’t for any other reason.

“I never asked [my co-worker] why she was acting that way towards me…I let it go.”

“I didn’t let them know that I was uncomfortable. I usually give them a statement to make them uncomfortable like ‘it’s crazy that you say that I am the resident Black
woman to educate you on weave’ and then go ahead and give them the mini education session or answer whatever question they have…What I get from them is a nervous chuckle and I follow it up with some kind of reassurance literally like I’m doing a shuck and jive. It’s like having a child. I give them a small correction then a metaphorical hug so that they know they can come and talk to me again later. Because I don’t want them to talk bad about me around the office.”

After confrontation or lack thereof, co-workers who evoked racially microaggressive behavior either changed their behavior, avoided the participant, or the participant began avoiding them. Participants mentioned:

“My behavior changed towards her first. My guess is that she probably would’ve treated me the same way. I don’t think she saw anything wrong with the way she was treating me. But I started to be more aloof and standoffish because of the denial, and I think she reciprocated it as well.”

“But HR [personnel] are too White for this to sound like a problem or be seen as problematic. [They won’t get it].”

“I had a discussion about the email with two higherups in the agency, and now one of them doesn’t even look me in the eye anymore.”

**Effects of experiencing racial microaggressions on participants’ work performance**

Figure 4.6 illustrates the connection between the societal perceptions of Black women, their behavior at work, their experiences with racial microaggressions and how that affects their work performance.
**Figure 4.6** Connection between stereotypes of Black women, their behavior at work, their experiences with racial microaggressions and work performance
When exploring how experiencing racial microaggressions affected participants’ work performance, most participants mentioned that those experiences did not affect their work performance, some stated that it served as motivation, others noted that experiencing racial microaggressions affected them emotionally; it either affected how they viewed themselves, or how they viewed their jobs. Participants noted:

“It’s kind of tough to come into work every day and be excited, that you have to deal with that and deal with being chewed out. So, it kind of puts you on eggshells. I know this isn’t somewhere I’ll be for long.”

“It doesn’t affect it. I keep those things separate. The issues that I have I don’t let that affect my work. Again, I want to always be on point.”

“It is [annoying and makes me uncomfortable]. However, my work performance is minimally impacted.”

“It has caused a lot of anger and self-doubt of my capabilities.”

“It made me work harder to prove that I am qualified.”

“Sometimes it makes me try harder to prove people wrong about their assumptions.”

“It doesn't affect my work performance, but it does make me not want to communicate with my non-Black co-workers at all.”

“In environments where there was a lot of microaggressions, it tended to make me not as productive anymore. I would do the bare minimum because working hard or being an overachiever wasn't getting me anywhere professionally.”
Summary

This chapter invoked a combination of phenomenological methodology of Creswell (2015) and Moustakas (1994) to develop common themes to describe the experiences of Black female government workers as it related to the phenomenon of experiencing racial microaggressions. This chapter has also described how Black women’s perception of what society thinks about them influenced their behaviors at work, how those perceptions were aligned to the microaggressions they experienced, and how those experiences effected their work performance. The next and final chapter presents the analysis of the data, conclusions of this study, implications, and recommendations for future studies.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to explore the connection between society’s perception of Black women and the occurrence of racial microaggressions, and the effects of experiencing those racial microaggressions on work performance. The overall themes highlighted were related to participants’ perception of how society views them as Black women, and how that influenced their behavior at work, along with their interaction with their co-workers. Themes were also developed for the different types of racial microaggressions participants experienced, how those experiences affected their work performance and how they aligned with the theoretical framework.

Essence: The connection between society’s perception of Black women and the occurrence of racial microaggressions

Based on the data collected from key informant interviews and the online focus group, some of the common stereotypes noted by participants aligned directly with the racial microaggressions participants experienced. All the perceived stereotypes cited by participants were negative and were rooted in the perception that Black women were incompetent and unintelligent, similar to results found by Smith and Joseph, (2010); loud and aggressive similar to results identified in a study conducted by Lewis and Neville (2015) and mean. Participants also expressed that they were always viewed under a microscope and defined by their countenance, and their hair as also described by Awad, et al. (2015). One participant also mentioned that there was a stereotype rooted in colorism, which signified that lighter-skinned women were nicer and acquired their positions due to their looks, darker-skinned women were thought to be meaner and worked really hard to acquire their position. This aligns with a study
that found that possessing a dark complexion for African-American women has less favorable perceptions, based on society’s Euro-American beauty standard (Mathews & Johnson, 2015), including the perception that lighter-skinned Black women are more confident due to the belief that women with light skin are privileged (Mathews and Johnson, 2015). The Black women in this study all shared the idea that people they interacted with were shocked that they worked for the government. No matter their level of education, the government sector in which they worked, the state, or the position/type of job they had, all participants experienced some type of microaggressive behavior from their co-workers.

These stereotypes have led Black women to be cognizant of their countenance at all times, and mindful of the way they speak at work (code-switching), and how they perform, the way they dress, and the way they wear their hair in an effort to make their non-Black co-workers comfortable around them. This is similar to data found in studies conducted by Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto, (2015); Johnson, Godsil, McFarlane, Tropp, and Goff, (2017). Participants also noted that they felt like they had to present a different version of themselves at work. This behavior aligns with a study published by the Deloitte University Leadership Center for Inclusion, which found that Black people and women feel the need to downplay their identities at work for fear of drawing unwanted attention or making their coworkers uncomfortable due to their differences (Clark & Smith, 2014). Participants noticed the difference in the way non-Black and White co-workers carried themselves at work and noted that it was as if White co-workers specifically, were starting with a blank slate, and did not have to worry about disproving people’s stereotype or worrying that those stereotypes would somehow affect their ability to do and keep their job. The one participant who noted that she works primarily with Black women also expressed that she felt as though she did not have any room to make mistakes. This in turn
made these Black women lose trust in their co-workers, become hesitant to interact with their non-Black co-workers, or refrain from interacting at all.

There was a direct connection between the stereotypes mentioned by participants, their behaviors and their experiences with racial microaggressions. All racial microaggressions aligned with the Permanence of Racism overarching theme, because most of these actions occurred because of implicit biases or stereotypes which were developed due to deeply rooted societal racism as noted by Millner (2017). This connection also aligns with Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS), which is a cognitive disorder that explains behavioral patterns, beliefs and emotions of Black Americans stemming from slavery, and shares the same beliefs as permanence of racism about deeply rooted societal racism (Brand, Schechter, Hammen, Robyne, & Brennan, 2011). This syndrome stipulates that the biases and stereotypes that persisted throughout slavery and the Jim Crow era are still present in the current lives of Black Americans, at both conscious and unconscious levels (Brand, Schechter, Hammen, Robyne, & Brennan, 2011). One symptom of this syndrome is that Black Americans are likely to minimize, ignore, and deny certain aspects of their cultural experience, to conform to the greater society, as a coping mechanism to escape the emotions associated with race-related stressors (Sule, et al., 2017).

Some racial microaggressions aligned with both Permanence of Racism and Black Feminist Theory like comments about hair, being called “girl,” and being seen as a secretary or ‘the help.’ These are experiences that only Black women would have as it is a racist mentality that has been a part of societal norms in the United States since slavery and the Jim Crow eras (Saxton, 2003). During slavery, White families sought younger slave women or “girls” as a cheaper option for help at their homes and this labor was stigmatized as "negroes" work (Saxton,
The term “girl” was then used to refer to Black women (Saxton, 2003). A Black woman was also seen as a ‘mammy’ during the Jim Crow era (Woodard & Mastin, 2005). A ‘mammy’ was a loyal domestic servant to White people (Woodard & Mastin, 2005). This stereotype was further perpetuated due to the depiction of Black women in the media as being submissive and incompetent (Isaksen, 2012) and in real life because they were confined to domestic service jobs (Woodard & Mastin, 2005).

Microaggressions relating to navigating being spoken over, experiencing ‘mansplaining’ (explanation provided by a man most of the time without sufficient knowledge about the topic), or male co-workers who “hepeated” (a man repeating the same idea a woman said but getting the credit), or receiving sexists comments about appearance overlapped with Intersectionality Theory and Black Feminist Theory themes because a lot of women have shared these experiences at work (Preda, 2017), not just Black women. A study conducted by the Harvard Business Review (Hewlett, Marshall, & Sherbin, 2013) highlighted that women, people of color, and other minorities who work in less diverse workplaces were less likely to receive support for their ideas and contributions. A key informant interviewee experienced this and mentioned that she worked with mostly White men and her opinions we not taken seriously, and when she asked for a title change the request was denied without an explanation despite her previous work experience. Exploring the connection between stereotypes, and participants’ behavior and interaction with their coworkers, set the tone to further explore how these experiences affected their performance at work.

**Essence: The effects of racial microaggressions on work performance**

Most people felt motivated by their experiences with racial microaggressions and felt the need to prove their competence and abilities even more. Participants also explained that they
ignored those experiences because having job security and stable income was more important, so they endured them. This aligns with a study conducted by Davis and Maldonado, (2015), which found that even through adversity, the Black women in their study mentioned that they could carry out their responsibilities but often in an atmosphere where they constantly must prove themselves.

Microaggressions faced by minorities can affect more than just career opportunities; they can also cause a feeling of being an outsider in society that can affect self-esteem and self-worth, confidence, work ethic, and morale (Awad, et al., 2015; Del Carmen Triana, Jayasinghe, & Pieper, 2015; Hall & Fields, 2015; Osanloo, Boske, & Newcomb, 2016). Similarly, although participants used their experiences to motivate them to prove their competence even more, most women mentioned feeling dejected, doubtful of their abilities, and discouraged about going in to work due to experiences with racial microaggressions. Both the perceived stereotypes of incompetence and unintelligence coupled with the racial microaggressive behaviors stemming from these stereotypes aligns with the Awad, et al. (2015) study noting that stereotypes relating to beauty standards promotes low-self esteem and self-doubt. Participants also commented that experiencing racial microaggressions made them hesitant to interact with non-Black co-workers, specifically White co-workers, or they avoided interaction all together. These findings were similar to two studies which found that Black faculty members at a predominantly White university who experienced racial microaggressions avoided interaction with their colleagues, did not feel comfortable approaching their aggressors, experienced stress, and lost faith in their peers and administration (Louis, et al., 2016; Pittman, 2012).

The researcher described similarities between herself and the participants of this study after analyzing the data and thinking through personal experiences. She also drew conclusions
about the dynamics of the phenomenon of racial microaggressions experienced specifically by Black women.

**Époché**

I, the principle investigator of this study, am a Black woman pursuing a doctoral degree in educational leadership. I was also a Senior Accreditation Specialist for a non-profit accrediting agency located in the northeastern part of the U.S. where I was employed for almost four years. I have experienced racial microaggressions through personal and professional interactions.

After analyzing the data from the interviews, I realized that my experiences were very similar to some of the participants’. I have experienced racial microaggressions that align with all three sub-themes of hair, communication style, and cultural differences, which fall under the overarching themes of Permanence of Racism, Experiential knowledge, Intersectionality Theory, and Black Feminism. I also realized that experiencing racial microaggressions did not affect my work performance in a negative sense. Like the participants of this study, I felt annoyed and sometimes angry, but it motivated me to further prove my competence and abilities. I noticed that I needed specific professional development because I did not have a close of a relationship with the executive and deputy directors as some of my non-Black co-workers did. Their personal relationships with leadership allowed them to have consistent informal and ad-hoc performance evaluations and coaching, and they were informed of organizational changes before all other staff members. Because of this realization, I have had to find things that I shared in common with my White co-workers and leadership and engage in conversations that I otherwise felt were too personal to discuss, like details about my dating life for example. I resonated with a participant’s experience in which she said...
“I’ve said plenty of times that you have to meet them where they are and find ways to connect with them and see that there are things you share in common or force yourself to have things in common because when you do there’s a connection and the less you get treated differently.”

This also aligns with the behavioral theme of always having to conform and struggling to find the balance between being comfortable enough to share some of yourself with co-workers but not too comfortable being your full self and confirming any stereotypes.

Comparing my experiences with the participants of this study illustrated that despite the type of job you have, the field in which Black women work, level of education, or level of job (entry, mid, senior), working in diverse settings as a Black woman could bring about racial microaggressive behaviors among White co-workers. This study has shown that to decrease the occurrence of racial microaggressions, leadership should actively work to educate employees about implicit bias and what microaggressions are, and actively try to make non-White employees feel included rather than subtly forcing minority employees to conform to the standards of leadership. The data also illustrated that although experiencing racial microaggressions did not directly affect work performance, it brought about feelings of incompetence and self-doubt, strained interactions with co-workers/isolation which may over time affect work performance. As revealed by previous studies, there are number of methods and processes that can be administered to combat the occurrences of racial microaggressions in the workplace.

**What can be done?**

Participants were asked what could be done to reduce the occurrence of racial microaggressions at their jobs. Most participants mentioned that education and raising awareness
of racial microaggressions and their effects on those who experience them would help to make non-Black co-workers refrain from this behavior. This aligned with the idea proposed by Bezrukova, Jehn, and Spell (2012); Skrentny (2014); and Sue, et al., (2007), that employers should acknowledge racial differences and actively educate all employees about working with diverse co-workers to create a culture of inclusion.

Some participants suggested that employers should invoke mentoring specifically for Black women and should actively try to create an inclusive environment. One participant commented that although her team was diverse, and everyone worked well together, she did not feel included and still experienced racial microaggressions. This aligned with Permanence of Racism because racism or forms of racism is innate and need to be consciously addressed similarly to implicit biases. Another participant explained that because her co-workers and managers actively asked her for her opinion and included her in conversations, she felt empowered and included, like her voice was being heard. This aligned with Black Feminist Theory, because this theory gives Black women a voice and an opportunity to express themselves (Hall, 2016). Collins (1991) also declares that a basic principle of Black Feminist Theory is that African American women cannot be fully empowered unless intersecting oppressions such as racism, sexism and classism are eliminated.

Implications and Recommendations for Action

Decreasing the occurrence of racial microaggressions is the responsibility of the employer and not the employee. According to the results of this study active efforts to create a culture of inclusion; educating employees; accountability for inappropriate actions; and mentorship are effective methods that can help to reduce the occurrence of racial microaggressions in the workplace. Based on the responses of participants, having good
professional development opportunities, or friendly employees or diverse employees alone does not equate to employees feeling included. Despite these things, participants still experienced racial microaggressions. An inclusive culture allows individuals to be themselves at work, which encourages employee engagement and enhances job performance and satisfaction (Gephardt, Grassi, McCormick, & Shelton, 2016). Participants in this study corroborated this by stating that due to lack of inclusion they do not feel comfortable being themselves at work, they are hesitant to engage with non-Black co-workers or they disengage completely, and they doubt their own competence and work capabilities.

Understanding Black women’s experiences could allow leaders in the government to better understand their Black female employees, so that they can work to create a culture of inclusion and avoid racial microaggressions in the workplace. Studies have highlighted that Black women have learned to cope with these experiences (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016; Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015), however experiencing racial microaggressions is mentally taxing and decreases morale over time (Berk, 2017; Hall & Fields, 2015; Nadal, Griffin, Wong, Hamit, & Rasmus, 2014; Osanloo, Boske, & Newcomb, 2016; Salvatore & Shelton, 2007; Sue et al., 2008; Torres & Driscoll, 2010; Wells, 2013). Therefore, it would be beneficial to employees and the overall organization to educate all employees about racial microaggressions and implicit biases to prevent people from engaging in this behavior (Holroyd, Scaife, & Stafford, 2017). This could boost employee morale, which may then enhance performance and increase productivity (Hunt, Layton, & Prince, 2015), serving as a major financial benefit for corporations and more profitable return on their investments (Hunt, Layton, & Prince, 2015). High employee morale promotes team collaboration, increases productivity, and helps companies to recruit and retain productive employees (Hunt, Layton, & Prince, 2015). Companies could also be more in
tune with the needs of their customers, and deliver sustainable growth (Hunt, Layton, & Prince, 2015).

Educating all employees including management about implicit bias and racial microaggressions helps to not only create and promote a culture of inclusion but may in turn attract and retain diverse employees (Gephardt, Grassi, McCormick, & Shelton, 2016; Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015; Hunt, Layton, & Prince, 2015; Moore, 2018). McKinsey and Company, a consulting firm, found that companies that are gender, racially and ethnically diverse are 35% more likely to outperform less-diverse companies (Hunt, Layton, & Prince, 2015). Employees, who are a part of diverse teams, have greater opportunity for professional development because they are exposed to different viewpoints, learn more, and make better decisions (Gephardt, Grassi, McCormick, & Shelton, 2016). But, unhappy employees are more likely to quit their jobs specifically due to lack of diversity and inclusion (Deloitte, 2017). Seventy-two percent of respondents of a Deloitte inclusion survey said they would leave or may consider leaving an organization for one that was more inclusive (Deloitte, 2017). According to the US Labor Department, 3.6 million workers quit their jobs in as of July 2018 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2018). A study conducted by the Center for America Progress, estimates the cost of losing an employee to be 16% of their salary for hourly, unsalaried employees, to 213% of the salary for a highly trained position (Boushey & Glynn, 2012). Along with education, diversity and inclusion must become a part of everyday practice for companies, which can be achieved by hiring diverse people for management positions and implementing diversity and inclusion task forces as a part of the organizational structure (Bezrukova, Spell, Perry, & Jehn, 2016; Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Task forces would be the gatekeepers for managing diversity and inclusion related education among employees ensuring its consistency and
accuracy (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Working to reduce the occurrence of racial microaggressions requires first acknowledging the problem exists, educating employees about this problem and its effect on Black female colleagues, and then holding employees accountable for their actions.

Corporate diversity task forces help to promote social accountability by focusing on areas that need attention as it relates to diversity and developing solutions. A task force also inadvertently causes managers and other employees to think about their actions particularly relating to recruiting hiring and inclusion efforts, because it is assumed all decisions will be reviewed under the lens of diversity and inclusion (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). It is also important for managers to proactively have conversations about inclusion with those that they lead to ensure all employees feel included and to ask for feedback and ways that things may be improved (Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015).

Mentoring between leadership and employees who do not hold leadership positions can be beneficial as it allows for managers to be engaged with those that they lead and as a result helps to reverse their implicit biases (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). A mentor will be more likely to believe the abilities and level of competence of someone that they mentor, because they played a direct role in grooming their mentee (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). Participants of this study made an observation that non-Black employees received mentorship from people who were culturally and racially similar to them, which helped them to be confident and more knowledgeable in their field. Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto, (2015) found that minority participants in their study expressed that having sponsors and mentors helped them to feel empowered, validated their presence in the workplace, and validated their feelings associated with experiencing racial microaggressions. Mentoring programs on average increase the representation of Black, Hispanic, and Asian-American women, and Hispanic and Asian-American men, by 9% to 24%
in the workforce (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). The results of this study can be instrumental to governmental organizations in their efforts to increase inclusion among their employees and decrease the occurrence of racial microaggressions, by furthering the knowledge about Black female government workers’ experiences with racial microaggressions.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

Future research is needed to further examine the complexities of experiences of racial microaggressions by Black female government workers. Researchers could garner richer data by recruiting from a variety of predominantly Black women groups, and by using social media. This would allow for a greater number of women from different regions of the U.S. to participate in the study. As recommended by Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto (2015), exploring the differences among participants as it relates to participants’ country of origin would also help to provide a richer perspective of the types of racial microaggressions experienced.

Future studies could also adopt a longitudinal methodology to explore the psychological effects of experiencing racial microaggressions as it relates to work performance. The key informant interview and focus group sessions could also include questions about other Black female employees and their experiences with racial microaggressions and inquire about who participants typically receive racial microaggressions from, and why do they think these incidents were race-based. Researchers could take a different approach and explore intersectionality and the different types of microaggressions that may affect Black women in the workplace.

Ways in which this study could be enhanced include allowing participants to choose the type of racial microaggressions they have experienced from a pre-populated list, to ensure that they truly understand the definition of racial microaggression. One participant in this study
explained that she was not sure if she experienced racial microaggressions, and another participant stated that she did not have those experiences but throughout the key informant interview revealed incidents that aligned with the definition of a racial microaggression.

Lastly, a comparative study similar to McCabe (2009) and Smith and Joseph (2010), exploring the microaggressions that White female government workers experience would also be interesting to highlight the Black Feminist Theory. The study could assess the stereotypes that White women have about themselves being both White and a woman along with questions exploring how does where they grew up influence their interactions at work and who they receive microaggressive behavior from (considering both gender and race).

**Conclusion**

This phenomenological qualitative study provided insight into forms of racial microaggressions, stemming from racist societal stereotypes and implicit biases about Black women in the U.S. Results of this study illustrated that regardless of a Black woman’s level of education, age, socioeconomic status, level of job or type of job, she is likely to experience some form of racial microaggression in the workplace. This study gives voice to the racial microaggression that 18 Black female government workers experienced. The Black women respondents were often put in a box and viewed as being one-dimensional, aggressive and incompetent. These women expressed frustrations with constantly having to denounce their true selves by presenting a conformed and polished version of themselves to fight against stereotypes and avoid the possibility of experiencing racial microaggressions.

Despite the gender and racial composition of their work environment, the friendliness of their co-workers, or the level of diversity, these Black women still felt excluded and experienced racial microaggressions. Most of these experiences aligned with the Critical Race Theory and
were rooted in the doubt of Black women’s competence, their hair and their countenance. These experiences affected their interactions with coworkers making them more hesitant or unwilling to form connections with their non-Black co-workers. These women also felt dejected, doubtful of their abilities, and discouraged about going in to work due to experiences with racial microaggressions. Despite these negative emotions, most women felt motivated by their experiences with racial microaggressions and felt the need to prove their competence and abilities even more. Participants also naturally repressed the emotions connected to those experiences in an effort to maintain their jobs and not be seen as a target. The lived experiences expressed through participant quotes aligned with racial microaggression themes found in previous research with Black women in professional contexts (Berk, 2017; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby, 2016; Doyin & Singh, 2010; Hall & Fields, 2015; Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015; Salvatore & Shelton, 2007; Smith & Joseph, 2010; Sue et al., 2008; Torres & Driscoll, 2010; Osanloo, Boske, & Newcomb, 2016). These narratives extend the understanding of the impact of racial microaggressions not only on the individuals experiencing them, but on the bottom-line of the overall organization due to decrease in morale, employee interaction and possibly higher rates of employee turnover.

This study contributes to the expansion of research on racial microaggressions by specifically examining these experiences from the perspective of Black women within the government sector and by utilizing the context of the Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, and the Black Feminist Theory. This study also provides further exploration of how societal standards can influence the behavior of Black women in a work setting and increase the occurrence of racial microaggressions which negatively affect their emotional views about themselves and their jobs.
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Appendices

A. LINKEDIN AND B.I.G. RECRUITMENT MESSAGE

Hello,

My name is Samantha-Rae Dickenson and I am conducting a study about racial microaggressions (Insulting messages sent to people of color. These messages may be sent verbally ("You speak good English."), non-verbally (clutching one's purse more tightly) or environmentally (symbols like the confederate flag)) that Black women face in the government sector, for my dissertation. If you are a Black woman who is a state or federal government worker and would like to participate in the study by completing a brief 15-minute survey, please use this link to complete the survey. If you have any questions about the details of the survey, feel free to email me at sdickenson@une.edu or send me a personal message. Thank you in advance for your participation.

B. DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE AND RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS SURVEY

Demographic Questionnaire and Racial Microaggressions Survey

This survey is phase 1 of a qualitative study about racial microaggressions in a government work environment, conducted by a doctoral candidate from the University of New England. The researcher will be exploring Black women’s experiences with racial microaggressions at their workplace.

Email Address: ____________

CONSENT

Please provide your consent to participate in this study before completing this survey. The researcher will be using pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and to protect your identity and the identity of your employer. Please note that you may request to be removed from this study at any point without penalty. All information that you provide will be safely kept electronically in a password-protected GoogleDrive Account. You will remain anonymous and any information that
you provide will not be shared with your employer. For more information about this study you may contact Samantha-Rae Dickenson at sdickenson@une.edu. You may also request a copy of your questionnaire and any results of this study by contacting the researcher.

I agree to participate in this study about racial microaggressions. (Please print your name and the date below)

________________________

DEMOGRAPHICS

What is your race? (If you are more than one race, choose the 'other' option and type which race you are mixed with.

☐ Black or African American ☐ Non-Hispanic White ☐ Other

What is your age?

☐ 20-24      ☐ 25-34      ☐ 35-44      ☐ 45-54      ☐ 55-65      ☐ 65 or older

What is your highest level of educational attainment?

☐ Some college, no degree      ☐ Bachelor’s degree

☐ Master’s degree      ☐ Doctoral degree

What is your annual income?

☐ $25,000-$34,999      ☐ $35,000-$49,999      ☐ $50,000-$74,999      ☐ $75,000-$99,999      ☐

☐ $100,000-$149,000      ☐ More than $150,000

What is your marital status?

☐ Single      ☐ Married      ☐ Divorced

☐ Common Law partnership

How many children do you have?

☐ 0      ☐ 1      ☐ More than 1

Where did you grow up?

☐ The Northern Region of the US

☐ Southern Region of the US☐ East Coast ☐ West Coast ☐ Outside of the US ☐ Other

What state do you work in?

________________________
Do you work for the government (State or Federal)?
☐ State ☐ Federal ☐ N/A

What is your profession?
_________________

What is the racial demographic of your workplace?
☐ Mostly White employees ☐ Mostly Black employees ☐ A mix of multiple races ☐ Very few Black employees ☐ I am the only Black employee ☐ Other ______

What is the gender demographic of your workplace?
☐ Mostly men ☐ Mostly women ☐ A mix of men and women

What is your current position at your organization?
☐ Entry-level ☐ Mid-level ☐ Senior-level ☐ Director ☐ Executive director/Owner/CEO ☐ Other ______

How long have you been working at your organization?
☐ 0-1 year ☐ 1-3 years ☐ 4-7 years ☐ 7-10 years ☐ 10+ years

How many number of promotions/raises have you had since being employed at your current organization?
☐ None
☐ I’ve had at least one raise but no promotions (change in title)
☐ I’ve had at least one raise & an increase in work responsibilities, but no formal promotion (change in title)
☐ I have had at least one raise and one promotion
☐ I’ve had more than one raise but no promotion
☐ I’ve had more than one raise and promotion
☐ Other ______

**QUESTIONS ABOUT RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS**

Please complete the following two questions related to your experience with racial microaggressions.

Racial microaggressions can be defined as "Brief slights or insulting messages sent to people of color by well-intentioned White people who are unaware of the hidden messages being
communicated. These messages may be sent verbally ("You speak good English."), non-verbally (clutching one's purse more tightly) or environmentally (symbols like the confederate flag or using American Indian mascots).

Subtle racism and discrimination exist in the United States?
☐ I agree ☐ I disagree

Have you ever experienced racial microaggressions at your current job?
☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Not Sure

Would you be willing to share the details of your experiences in phase 2 of the study?
☐ Yes ☐ No
## Appendix B: Group A and Group B Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group A Interview Questions</th>
<th>Group B Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do you like about the culture of your work environment as it relates to diversity and inclusion?</td>
<td>What do you like about the culture of your work environment as it relates to diversity and inclusion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does your employer actively create an environment to promote diversity and inclusion?</td>
<td>How does your employer actively create an environment to promote diversity and inclusion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What does it mean for you to be a Black woman in your work environment?</td>
<td>What does it mean for you to be a Black woman in your work environment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does it make you feel when people say they don’t “see color”?</td>
<td>How does it make you feel when people say they don’t “see color”?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe your experiences with racial microaggressions at your current job.</td>
<td>Describe your experiences with racial microaggressions at your current job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did you do after the incident(s)? What was/were the outcome(s)? Were you satisfied with the outcome(s)?</td>
<td>Why do you think you have not experienced racial microaggressions at your workplace?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are your experiences and interactions with microaggressions at work similar and/or different from your non-Black female counterparts?</td>
<td>How are your experiences and interactions similar and/or different from your non-Black female counterparts?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do you think you experienced racial microaggressions?</td>
<td>How do you think your non-Black coworkers perceive you in the workplace?</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you think society perceives Black women in relation to being in a professional government setting?</td>
<td>How do you think society perceives Black women in relation to being in a professional government setting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where did you grow up? How does where you grew up influence your views about society’s perception in regard to race?</td>
<td>Where did you grow up? How does where you grew up influence your views about society’s perception in regard to race?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How do you feel about your performance at work in relation to promotions, raises and upward mobility?</td>
<td>How do you feel about your performance at work in relation to promotions, raises and upward mobility?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
D. FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What are some ways you are treated differently due to your race and your gender at work?

2. What are some stereotypes about Black women who work in the state and federal government?

3. What are some ways you are treated differently due to stereotypes about Black women?

4. What are some microaggressions you have experienced at work?

5. Are there any distinctions between how you are treated by male or female non-Black co-workers?

6. How have these experiences affected your work performance?

7. How have these experiences affected your interactions with your non-Black co-workers?

8. What do you think can be done to decrease the occurrence of racial microaggressions toward Black women in the governmental workplace?