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### Women Counselor Educators' Experiences of Microaggressions

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## Women Counselor Educators' Experiences of Microaggressions

### Abstract

This phenomenological study explored seven women counselor educators' experiences with committing and receiving microaggressions within the context of their professional roles and academic responsibilities. The following themes emerged: continuum of awareness, responding to microaggressions, power in academia, impact of microaggressions, and intersection of identity. Implications and recommendations for counselor educators and administrators are provided.

### Keywords

Microaggressions, women, counselor education, phenomenology

The Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association of America (TIAA) reports that the number of women in faculty positions increased 109.7% between 1993 – 2003 (Finkelstein, Conley, & Schuster, 2016). Currently, women account for 44% of faculty members at private and public universities across the United States (U.S.) (Kena et al., 2016). However, among Council for Accreditation and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), the largest accrediting body for counselor training programs, the majority (i.e., 60.53%) of faculty in accredited counselor training programs are women. Considering the aforementioned statistics (CACREP, 2017), one could argue that women faculty are relatively well represented, particularly in counselor education. However, even though women are numerically represented, and in the case of counselor education, are the actual majority, they face unique challenges in their professional roles because of their identities (Hill, Leinbaugh, Bradley, & Hazler, 2005; Valian, 2005). For example, some of the recognized challenges for women faculty, in particular, include a slower pace of advancement in academia for women compared to men, pay inequity, and the challenges in balancing career and family (Hermann, Ziomek-Daigle, & Dockery, 2014; Valian, 2005). In *Presumed Incompetent*, a collection of personal narratives, more than 40 women of color working in academic positions disclosed challenges they have faced during their career. Contributors recalled accounts of discrimination from peers and students and biases in hiring and tenure procedures. Given these challenges, it is necessary beyond the data and look more closely at the experiences of these women in the academe.

Often, these discriminatory and inequitable experiences directly impact women faculty career trajectories and matriculation through the academic ranks (de Lourdes Machado-Taylor, White, & Gouveia, 2014; Deutsch & Yao, 2014). In fact, women reported being less satisfied with their careers in higher education (de Lourdes et al., 2014). Deutsch and Yao's (2014)

longitudinal study revealed women faculty, in a small liberal arts college, had a higher attrition rate than their male colleagues. Moreover, although women account for 44% of all faculties, the proportion of women faculty decreases as academic rank increases. *The Condition of Education Report* (2016) reported that, across disciplines, women account for 55% of instructors and 34% of full professors (Kena et al., 2016). Although scholars have explored the issue of women in academia throughout the years, the literature focusing on women counselor educators, and their experiences as faculty, is relatively scarce.

### **Women Faculty in Counselor Education**

Women counselor educators are not exempt from challenges related to their gender and professional role and, in fact, are often on the receiving end of discriminatory remarks. For example, in Trepal and Stinchfield's (2012) phenomenological study of 20 female counselor educators, participants recalled colleagues making statements that questioned their competency and productivity because they were taking parental leave. Incidents such as these may be particularly harmful to women counselor educators as they tend to thrive in healthy work relationships and express dissatisfaction with unhealthy working environments and conflict with colleagues (Hill et al., 2005). Hill et al. (2005) asked 115 women counselor educators to complete surveys that measured quality of life and overall well-being as members of their counselor education programs. The researchers found that the participants greatly valued relationships with colleagues and that healthy relationships improved their overall satisfaction, while toxic interactions had a negative impact. The participants valued autonomy and were discouraged when they felt they were "over controlled" (i.e., lack of independence) by peers. In the discussion and implications, the authors noted the experiences of women in counselor education as nuanced compared to their male colleagues (Hill et al., 2005).

Challenges faced by women faculty can occur in overt and covert ways. For example, overt discrimination is blatant and obvious and may comprise actions such as actively denying a female faculty member an opportunity with the stated reasoning that she is pregnant. In contrast, covert discrimination is more subtle. Comments can be made that are not easily identifiable as discriminatory in nature. This type of discrimination can also include microaggressions. This current study focuses on covert ways women counselor educators experience discrimination.

### **Microaggressions**

Microaggressions are common, everyday slights and comments that relate to various intersections of one's identity such as gender, sex, race, ethnicity, and age, among other aspects. They are thought to spring from unconsciously held prejudices and beliefs which may be demonstrated consciously or unconsciously through daily verbal interactions (Sue & Capodilupo, 2008). Microaggressions can manifest through verbal comments or behaviors within the structure of an institution or environment (Sue, 2010).

The effects of overt discrimination on marginalized individuals are typically immediate and easily identifiable (Sue, 2010). However, due to their subtle nature, the impact of microaggressions becomes more apparent after a series of incidents. Researchers found that the cumulative impact of microaggressions results in deleterious effects in physical health, emotional wellbeing, and cognitive processing (Schmaling, 2007; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000).

### **Responses to Microaggressions**

While much is known about microaggressions and their harmful effects, less is known about how individuals respond to these incidents. In fact, Sue (2010) stated that most people do not respond for many reasons. Nuance of intention, high levels of anxiety, and ambivalence all impact the decision to respond when experiencing a microaggression. Although it appears that a

response is warranted, most often individuals on the receiving end are placed in an uncomfortable and isolating position. Whether it is a one-time incident or repetitive microaggressive encounters, recipients experience internal dissonance when deciding how to appropriately respond due to the potential repercussions (Sue, 2010). Specifically, within higher education settings, this reticence to respond may be heightened due to the culture and fear of negatively impacting one's career.

### **Higher Education and Microaggressions**

Academia consists of multiple hierarchies in which faculty and students may be in positions of power, privilege, and oppression simultaneously (Young, Anderson, & Stewart, 2015). There is also a demonstrated lack of diversity in administrative and faculty positions as academe continues to struggle with increasing the recruitment and retention of racial and gender minorities (Duntley-Matos, 2014). Nadel et al. (2015) identified assumptions of power and intentions of isolation as factors embedded in the motivations behind microaggressions. Given this intersection of systemic power, lack of diversity, and prevalence of power higher education settings may be ripe for the prevalence of microaggressions. As we begin to explore intersections of power, it is also necessary to discuss how ethnicity impacts the presence of microaggressions in academia.

Although much research has been conducted about microaggressions and their effects (Hernandez, Carranza, & Almeida, 2010; Schmalings, 2007; Solorzano et al., 2000; Sue, 2010; Sue & Capodilupo, 2008) these incidents have been minimally explored in the higher education settings. Scholars (i.e., Cartwright, Washington, & McConnell, 2009; Constantine, Smith, Redington, & Owens, 2008) examined racial microaggressions experienced by Black and African American faculty in counselor education, counseling psychology, and Council on

Rehabilitation Education (CORE)-accredited rehabilitation education programs. Participants in both of the studies identified common themes related to their experiences with microaggressions. For example, the participants reported having their credentials questioned by colleagues and students. Pittman (2012) studied African American faculty's experience of microaggressions at a primarily White university and also found that these incidents emanated from both students and peers. Subsequently, these experiences resulted in a lack of acceptance and cultural isolation (Pittman, 2012).

Individuals report difficulty in determining whether microaggressions are race or gender based (Cartwright et al., 2009; Constantine et al., 2008) which supports the notion that identity is intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989). Nadal et al. (2015) found that women of color in higher education are barraged with microaggressions that target both their gender and race. This intersectionality of race and gender creates an environment in which female faculty members of color must be aware of the prevalence of microaggressions while also attempting to differentiate which part of their identity may have triggered the offense.

### **Coping with Microaggressions in Academia**

According to Constantine et al. (2008), the most common microaggression coping strategy for Black faculty members was seeking support from friends, family, colleagues, and others. Pittman (2012) found that African American faculty members cope with racial microaggressions by accepting the responsibilities attributed to their idealized knowledge of race and race related issues and began conversations about these issues. Thus, they combat racial oppression by creating safe spaces for students of color to dialogue and support one another in the process of altering the campus climate (Pittman, 2012). While this coping strategy may be implemented in an effort to perpetuate change amongst the culture of academia, some of the

responses to microaggressions often mirror acceptance and interpersonal withdrawal. Constantine and colleagues (2008) reported that minority faculty members on the receiving end of racial microaggressions often separate themselves from individuals that perpetuate racial inequalities or accept that racial slights and injustices will remain a constant within the culture of higher education. Thus, although experiences with racial microaggressions of Black and African American faculty in counselor education and counseling psychology programs have begun to be explored, information about diverse faculty member's experiences, women in particular, is more scarce. Given the lack of information available related to women counselor education faculty in particular we chose to explore their experiences and the potential implications microaggressions have on their experience in academia.

### **Theoretical Foundation: Intersection of Identity**

One of the hallmarks of qualitative inquiry is its grounding in a particular theoretical foundation to frame the study (Hays & Singh, 2012). Although the currently study focused on gender, it would be disingenuous to neglect other aspects of participants' identity. Therefore, Intersectionality framework (Crenshaw, 1989) served as a grounding for the study. Intersectionality assumes that race, gender, class, sexuality, etc. do not operate in isolation of one another. Instead, it is the *intersection* of these identities that form an individual and impacts their experience in the world. For example, it is misguided to ask a Black woman scholar to reflect on her experience in the academe solely from the perspective of gender, as other aspects of her identity, such as race or socioeconomic status, are inextricably connected and impactful (Crenshaw, 1989). Similarly, in Nelson, Englar-Carlson, Tierney, and Hau's (2006) grounded theory study of the impact of social class on the experience of academics, the authors recommended that multicultural theories expand to include how race, class, and ethnicity



influence each other. In regards to the current study, although all of the participants are women they represent a diversity of other cultural identities. We contend that it is the combination of these identities that shape their experiences with the subject matter. Therefore, the interview questions allow for the flexibility for participants to speak from any of these parts of themselves. Moreover, the results should be interpreted from this perspective as well.

### **Method**

The research question that guided the current study was, “What are the experiences of women counselor educators with microaggressions in their professional roles?” We chose a qualitative inquiry based on the open-ended nature of the current question and the limited availability of existing empirical works. Specifically, phenomenology presented as an appropriate methodological fit and provided a guide for the research process from data collection to interpretation. This approach allows researchers to “understand the depth and meaning” (Hays & Singh, 2012, p. 352) of participants’ experiences with a particular phenomenon. For the current study, we considered the phenomenon to be women counselor educators’ experiences with microaggressions in academic contexts. Results from this investigation will provide the groundwork for future research studies.

### **Research Team**

The research team is an important aspect of the qualitative inquiry process. It is important that we provide a thorough description of the composition of the team as well as our prior experiences with the phenomenon and expectations for the current study (Hays & Singh, 2012). The research team included four individuals: one African American female assistant professor, one White female associate professor, one Hispanic female doctoral student, and one African American female doctoral student. As one of our first steps in the process we discussed

everyone's level of expertise with phenomenological research. Although the last author did not have any direct experience with qualitative, she read material to help build her knowledge base.

***Bracketing.*** Prior to collecting and analyzing data, we bracketed to help minimize researcher bias (Hays & Singh, 2012). Bracketing requires members to openly discuss their experiences with a phenomenon and identity expectations and biases that may impact the research study (Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). We all had some experience both with being the victim and perpetrator of microaggressions. We discussed how being a team of women may also impact our perspective, especially given that all of the participants were also women. Our bracketing continued throughout various phases of the research process as we continuously discussed biases and reactions to the data during the data analysis process to hold each other accountable.

Some of the participants, in the current study, experienced low levels of perceived power when deciding how and when to address microaggressions. This struggle resonated with research team members and aligned with their own personal experiences. The culture of higher education greatly impacts the voice of individuals who experience microaggressions and have multiple marginalized identities. The experiences of these participants were surprising to the research team because counselor education is a field that is founded on the importance of self-awareness and intentionality. Also, although we had individual experiences with microaggressions we were still surprised by some of the explicit discrimination that our participants reported.

## **Participants**

We received approval from our university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before collecting data. Additionally, we adhered to ACA (2014) Code of Ethics. We recruited participants through our initial quantitative study, announced on a national counselor education

list-serv, by asking those interested to provide contact information if they would like to be contacted for the qualitative portion of the study. In order to qualify for the study, participants needed to identify as a full-time counselor educator. Participants did not receive any compensation for their participation. The first and second author contacted individuals who expressed interest and provided their e-mail addresses. We sought to recruit at least five to seven participants for this part of the study, which is a suitable amount for a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013). Our final study sample involved seven participants who agreed to a phone or Skype interview. The first two authors conducted these interviews.

All seven participants identified as heterosexual females teaching at a CACREP-accredited counseling program. Participants' years of experience in higher education ranged from 4 to 16 years (median = 7 years). Included in our study sample were four assistant professors, two full professors, and one associate professor. Two participants identified as Caucasian, three as African American, one Latina, and one Japanese American.

### **Data Collection**

We collected data via phone interviews. The participants reviewed the IRB-approved information sheet that contained details (e.g., time commitment expectations) about the study. We used existing literature and our own personal experiences with microaggressions to inform the interview questions. The interview was semi-structured and included the following questions: (1) What is your definition of microaggressions? (2) Tell me about a time (related to your faculty role/duties) when a microaggression was committed against you. (a) Which faculty role? (b) How did this impact your faculty role? (c) What did you decide to do about it? (d) If you brought the incident to the attention of the person who committed the microaggression, what was their response? (e) What was the resulting impact on the relationship? (3) Tell me about a time

(related to your faculty role/duties) you have committed a microaggression. (a) Which faculty role? (b) How did this impact your faculty role? (d) What did you decide to do about it? (e) If the person upon whom the microaggression was committed brought it to your attention, what was your response? (f) What was the resulting impact on the relationship? (4) Share your strategies for self-reflection/processing afterwards. (5) What was it like talking about these experiences in this interview?

### **Data Analysis**

We followed Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological data analysis approach as also outlined in Hays and Singh (2012). First, we transcribed the interviews. Then, we began the process of *horizontalization*. In this stage, we identified each statement that seemed vital to understanding the participants' experience. Next, we participated in *reduction and elimination* to determine if each statement identified in horizontalization met the criteria to be considered an invariant constituent. We asked ourselves if each statement was necessary to understanding the phenomenon and if it could be labeled. After we identified the invariant constituents, we grouped those that appeared to be related. This step in the process is referred to as *clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents*. The final steps in the process involved creating a *textural description* and a *structural description* for each interview. These are then combined to construct the final *structural-textural description*.

All the researchers participated in coding transcript one in order to gauge how each team member approached the analysis process. During this initial coding meeting, we discussed our interpretations of the participants' words and decided on potential emerging themes. We divided the remainder of the transcripts among the research team, did the analysis process individually, and then reconvened to discuss our findings and provide feedback to each other. Each team

member completed all of the phenomenology steps for their interviews. Each member gave a summary of the interview they coded and reported the themes they identified. Then, the other members of the team provided feedback and asked questions in order to refine the themes and minimize the influence of bias. We discussed our individual findings and their fit with other emerging themes. From these conversations, we solidified the final themes.

### **Trustworthiness**

We used a variety of methods to achieve trustworthiness. These included an auditor, member checking, research team bracketing, and a thick description of the data included in the results section (Creswell, 2013). Throughout the data collection and analysis phases we bracketed our assumptions, reactions, and expectations. We provided a list of themes to the participants for member checking (Hays & Singh, 2012). No participants suggested any changes to the findings. One participant suggested that researchers consider the type of institution (e.g., Historically Black College and University) and how that may influence the experiences of microaggressions. The auditor was a female doctoral student who has interests in gender considerations in academia and had familiarity with some of the related literature regarding power, discrimination, and higher education working environments. She was also a research assistant and had taken a qualitative research course.

### **Findings**

Five themes emerged related to counselor educators' experiences with microaggressions. These included: (a) continuum of awareness, (b) responding to microaggressions (c) power in academia (d) impact of microaggressions, and (e) intersection of identity. We will discuss each theme and provide supporting participants' quotes in the section below.

#### **Continuum of Awareness**

The participants felt that counselor educators are at different points on that continuum, with some having a lack of awareness of when they commit microaggressions, when microaggressions are committed against them, and their prevalence in academic settings in general.

Savannah explained:

We all use microaggressions at some point whether it's passively or un-passive level and so it reminded me that I have to be aware of what's going on with myself because I'm not perfect and I have to be able to check myself and you know I say things like that or make assumptions or have biases.

Overwhelmingly, the participants felt that this issue warrants heightened awareness and self-reflection among counselor educators and within the context of academia.

The participants noted the lack of self-awareness among counselor educators regarding microaggression. They suggested that this lack of awareness may be related to the fact that counselor educators may be naïve to the prevalence of microaggressions because of the profession's emphasis on diversity. Moreover, they noted that counselor educators may feel they are multiculturally competent and, therefore, are not committing microaggressions, Olivia stated, "What I think is frustrating that I've realized within microaggressions is that counselor educators because they've taken multicultural or they've worked in diverse populations or whatever it may be that somehow they are not able to do microaggressions."

### **Responding to Microaggressions**

According to the participants, microaggressions are often uncomfortable to discuss, both when one is the perpetrator and the recipient. People who commit microaggressions may feel

guilt, shame, defensiveness, and embarrassment, which may result in them not admitting they have committed a microaggression. On the other hand, people who are victims of microaggressions could experience similar emotions including fear of what may happen if they respond. Savannah asserted that talking about microaggressions “would actually cause more frustration for me because she wouldn’t be receptive.” Mya expressed a similar sentiment:

I would try to have conversation about it and sometimes I could and sometimes it didn’t go anywhere. I didn’t frame it as a microaggression I would do it in counselor speak, you know when you do this I feel that. For the female faculty they’re very open and accepting, for male faculty sometimes defensiveness.

Further, because microaggressions are difficult to prove, participants felt hesitant to confront perpetrators. Therefore, many of these incidents remained unaddressed. On the other hand, even though microaggressions were difficult to address, talking about them proved beneficial. Mya recalled a time when she committed a microaggression against a colleague and he addressed it directly with her.

Thank God [he] had the temerity to meet with me privately and say you know that was really offensive when you did that. And I was like ‘Oh my God, I am so sorry you’re absolutely right,’ that that was probably my most humiliating [moment] I would say.

Because it is often difficult to converse about microaggressions, the ways in which our participants chose to respond varied from nothing at all to confronting the perpetrator. For example, Claire stated, “We never talked about it again. I just brushed it off. I can see myself making that mistake just because of the culture that we are in and everything. So I brushed it off I didn’t bring it back up.” Even when people did not address the perpetrator directly they seemed to access their support systems and use those relationships to process the incident. Savannah

recalled a time when she did not confront the perpetrator; however, she spoke about the occurrence with peers and colleagues:

We did talk about it and the interesting thing is they had similar situations with her as well. But it was kind of like when you think about families and keeping a family secret everybody knows what's going on but they didn't want to say anything about it and so everybody was experiencing some of the same things. And that's the interesting thing about it because it wasn't just me but nobody said anything and so I never addressed it directly with her. I did talk to other faculty about frustrations in general that I was having and I tried never really to put anybody under the bus or call anybody out but I did talk about some of the frustrations that I was having in general with other faculty and it was normally with one other faculty who was an African American male.

Participants engaged in personal reflections to determine if a response was warranted and worth the discomfort and potential consequences the conversation may cause. According to Claire, "you know I just kind of in my mind just weigh it out, as to is this something I should address or just let it slide?" After considering all of the potential consequences, many of the participants spoke about fear of repercussions if they advocated for themselves. For instance, Mya recalled, "...she's like you can't say anything you can't do anything, you just have to wait until you get tenure." Further, for some participants their response justified the person's actions and excused the microaggression. For example, Claire said, "And, I said, 'that's okay' because I was thinking to myself, 'I might of made the same mistake as well.'" Moreover, a response could involve self-reflection and self-preservation rather than a discussion with someone else. Linda asked herself:

How can I help bridge the gap? How can I do something different and not contribute to



what's going on and not worry about what they're doing or how they're handling it? So basically I take care of the 12 inches around me. I don't take care of what other people are going through or doing.

### **Complexity of Power**

One of the primary contributing factors to the difficulty conversing about microaggressions seemed to be the complexity of power that exists within the academic system. For instance, participants were especially leery of confronting those in positions of power (e.g., full professors, administrators, faculty from majority populations), both real and perceived. Many of the participants noted being hesitant to speak with administrators and senior faculty regarding these issues because they feared negative consequences that could be reflected in evaluation processes such as tenure and promotion. Much of the tension appeared to exist amongst untenured and tenured faculty. Karen recalled, "...she kept saying you should ask what the process is. And a lot of it I let her other co-chair handle cause he had been there. He's a full professor, he has a lot more power than I do." Savannah stated,

How come she doesn't view me as an equal? Why doesn't she view me as an equal or why she feels she has to say mean things to me? A little bit of isolation too because the dynamic of the department that I was in the majority of faculty members were tenured. There was just two of us that were untenured and one was on their way out of the university they were leaving. And a lot of people defer to this one particular faculty member. Just even the other tenure faculty deferred to her so it was a little intimidating because she was the person that made the decision even though she didn't have that title but it was an assumed authority that she had.

Interestingly, much of the power participants talked about was covert and, therefore, made it

even more difficult to navigate. Mya stated, “I got to deal with everybody’s problems with each other, and then you have no power over anyone. You can’t make a full professor do anything. You have will power over people who were not tenured but after that it’s over...”:

Power, and the lack of it, also seemed to be associated with cultural identities. For instance, in our study, White male faculty members were often seen in positions of power regardless of their academic rank. Mya stated, “without imposing their own stuff on it, it really is more than anything not a 100 percent, but it’s the men in our department, not all of them, men are the ones we who we all struggle with, all the women in the faculty, without any exception there might be one exception say beg me please never step out of the role as chair.” Thus, the issue of power in academic relationships was further complicated for people with less privileged identities when they consider confronting those with more privileged identities.

### **Impact of Microaggressions**

The impact of microaggressions can vary depending on the person, their perception of the microaggression, their role within academia, and their self-awareness. Our participants noted a range of impacts, some of which were personal and others were related to their professional roles. Participants spoke of both emotional and psychological impacts. For instance, Karen stated, “And just the impact of like these you know some of them are little things some of them are big things obviously like people getting killed. So people just don’t realize the power of those kinds of microaggressions because they’re everywhere and they’re so prevalent that it really becomes hard to understand what’s a safe place, who’s a safe person, and what’s not.” Mya stated, “I definitely experienced really aggressive racism as well, but it’s the microaggression that were in some ways more toxic...”.

Notably, the participants felt that responses to microaggressions were far-reaching and

influenced career decisions and work relationships. In the case of Olivia, the build up of these negative occurrences led her to switch positions. She stated, “I had adjuncted at other universities but it was my first full time position and then I left and I took a visiting professor somewhere else because I wanted to see like is it better somewhere else and it was.” As for the impact on department dynamics, Linda shared, “It’s caused some problems in the program relationship wise but everyone is still cheeky.”

### **Intersection of Identity**

Participants described microaggressions related to a variety of identity statuses including race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability. Claire recalled a time when she was misidentified as a secretary, “She came and said hi, I said hi to her. She was a White female and she asked me was I his secretary. And so, I just sat there and looked at her and I kind of looked up where the door jam or whatever is and has my name right above and when she saw it she was terrified. She said, ‘I am so sorry.’” Claire perceived this to be a microaggression based on race in that the student did not assume she was a faculty member. Rather, the student assumed that she was the secretary, presumably because Claire is a female and African American.

It is important to note that not only did the participants talk about the microaggressions committed against them, they also recalled instances when they committed them against others. Mya recalled a time when she committed a microaggression against a student related to her disability.

I was so humiliated that I couldn’t believe I did it and it was with a student in a wheelchair. I was not aware of my discomfort with her being in a wheelchair. It was the first student we had, or that I had in a wheelchair and if I’m walking backwards I make the ‘beep, beep’ noises like trucks do going backwards and I made that noise.

Karen gave an example of a time when she committed a microaggression against an African American male colleague, “He said, “Can I stop by your office?” And I was working on this like really tedious, ridiculous document that I had to get turned in. I was like oh yeah feel free I’ll be here just slaving away.” Similar to moments of being the victim of microaggressions, when counselor educators were the perpetrators the incidents centered around a range of identity statuses (e.g., race, disability).

### **Discussion**

The current study investigated women counselor educators’ experiences with microaggressions. These experiences included times when they were the recipients of microaggressions as well as instances when they had committed them against colleagues and/or students. Overall, the participants seemed more readily able to recall instances where microaggressions were committed against them as opposed to when they committed microaggressions, so many of the current findings reflected their experiences as recipients rather than perpetrators.

### **Relationship of Current Findings to Existing Literature**

It is important to discuss the findings from the current study within the context of how they relate to what is known about microaggressions from existing literature. The experiences of women counselor educators with microaggressions confirm some existing literature and provide additional information. First, the findings from the current study indicate that women counselor educators experience microaggressions and even commit microaggressions against others. This confirms existing studies that focused on Black and African American faculty (Cartwright et al., 2009; Constantine et al., 2008). The current findings suggest that microaggressions are not exclusively racially motivated as participants in this study represented diverse racial and ethnic

groups.

Further, the current findings add to the literature regarding the responses stemming from microaggressions. The participants' responses supported existing literature that asserts that the most common response to microaggressions is no response (Sue, 2010). The participants, in most situations, did not challenge the perpetrator. Their reasons ranged from feeling apprehensive because they could not actually prove the discriminatory nature of the microaggression to fearing potential negative consequences on their careers. Similar to Constantine et al. (2008) our findings indicate that women counselor educators chose to place their energy in seeking support from friends, family, colleagues, and others instead of confronting the perpetrator.

Within the culture of academia, the complexity of power may help explain some of the dynamics in our results. Faculty may feel especially vulnerable in confronting those in positions of power. For example, pre-tenured faculty in the study seemed hesitant to confront tenured faculty and those with more seniority. It is also important to note that one's academic position or role in the department did not necessarily create a sense of safety and power for the women. For example, two of the participants were female, racial/ethnic minority department chairs and yet experienced microaggressions from their colleagues. These microaggressions challenged their authority as department chairs and left them feeling hopeless about enacting change. Most of the insults and undermining of power came from their male colleagues. It is not enough to simply address power differentials within academia. One must also consider how faculty's intersections of identity (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity) also contribute to their experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). Researchers report that aside from being underrepresented in higher education, African American faculty are often situated into positions of service, with increased responsibility and minimal power (Cartwright et al., 2009; Constantine et al., 2008; Pittman, 2012). Female faculty

are often relegated into caretaking roles within their department, university, and among students (Valian, 2005). Underrepresented faculty tend to struggle with the imposter syndrome, feeling as if they are unworthy to hold the positions they have earned. These feelings of unworthiness are problematic as they can hinder success amongst faculty of color (Dancy & Jean-Marie, 2014). Microaggressions may exasperate these feelings of not belonging and perpetuate systems that make it difficult for women to be successful in higher education settings.

### **Implications for Counselor Educators**

Within counselor education, there exists a great need to increase education and awareness about microaggressions. The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies challenge counselors to be aware of the ways in which they are privileged and oppressed (Ratts, Singh, Nassar-McMillan, Butler, & McCullough, 2016). Having an awareness of self first, may be an important step in recognizing the existence and impact of microaggressions in the counselor education profession. An increased awareness may then drive counselor educators to seek additional education on microaggressions (Arredondo et al., 1996). Malott, Paone, Schaelfe, and Gao (2015) suggested several activities specifically focused on racial microaggressions within counselor training. We propose that these activities could be expanded to address a variety of types of microaggressions, in order to account for diversity and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and should not only be done with students but faculty as well. Counselor educators could utilize participants' experiences in the current study to develop case scenarios to facilitate dialogue between colleagues on their reactions and hypothetical and ideal response(s) and resolutions.

As the search for minority representation amongst faculty within higher education continues to increase, the lack of sufficient support remains. Although faculty may yearn for

mentoring and these relationships prove to be beneficial for faculty from underrepresented groups (Lloyd-Jones, 2014) the underrepresentation and challenging experiences of minority and women in the professoriate may complicate the process of finding a mentor. Systemic oppression and microaggressions in higher education, compounded with position-related pressures, evaluations, and promotion and tenure stress renders a demanding work environment (Pittman, 2012). Based on participants' experiences in this study, it is likely that microaggressions may be an important contributor to these more toxic and stressful environments. As a result, Cartwright et al. (2009) stressed the need for mentoring relationships between faculty, as a tool for coping with the incidents and effects of microaggressions. Our findings indicate one of the most popular responses from women counselor educators is to seek support from each other and/or other allies when microaggressive incidents occur. This may be problematic for two reasons. The lack of diversity may make it difficult to identify culturally relatable peers and if they are experiencing microaggressions themselves they may feel overwhelmed and less able to provide support. Mentoring relationships are often held outside of the counseling fields, due to the lack of minority representation amid the faculty, as well as strained cross-cultural relationships (Cartwright et al., 2009; Constantine et al., 2008).

### **Implications for Future Research**

There are a plethora of opportunities to expand the current research study to investigate the phenomenon of microaggressions in counselor education. Specifically, since the sample only consisted of women participants, future researchers could replicate the current study and include men counselor educators. In addition, future studies could examine the experiences of faculty at different types of institutions (e.g., HBCUs, HSIs, faith-based, teaching-focused, research intensive) and programs (e.g., master's level, doctoral level). Also, it seems that the complexity

of power in academic systems was a focal point for the participants. Future researchers could study power more in detail. For example, researchers could compare experiences of doctoral students with those of faculty members. Future research could also consider the intersection of other identities such as ability status and sexual orientation for women in counselor education. Since qualitative research often serves as a foundation for future quantitative studies, researchers could investigate factors (e.g., racial identity development) that may predict counselor educators' experiences, both committing and responding to microaggressions.

### **Limitations**

It is important to acknowledge the limitations that exist within the current study. First, we only collected data from single interviews. Focus groups could have potentially added more to the findings. The study included seven participants. While this is an acceptable number in qualitative traditions, it is possible that having more participants may have contributed to the breadth and depth of the data. Moreover, all of the interviews were conducted via phone rather than face-to-face. It is unclear how this method of data collection may have impacted the participants' responses. Also, although we used a semi-structured interview protocol, interviews were conducted by both the first and the second author individually. The difference approaches in interviews may have impacted the process in some way. These limitations may inform future research possibilities.

### **Conclusion**

This study explored women counselor educators' experiences with microaggressions. Investigating the sending and receiving of microaggressions in the academic environment can illuminate aspects of academic culture related to the concepts of power, privilege, and marginalization at intersections of one's identity. As higher education continues to focus on



recruitment and retention of diverse faculty, studies such as these, help provide important contextual information to the experiences of underrepresented faculty. Specifically, because of the deleterious effects of microaggressions, it is important to continue to learn more about why they occur, how people respond, and the resulting impacts on relationships in academic settings.

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