

Microaggression in the Workplace: the Hidden Play of Gender Stereotype

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Abstract

The study tries to understand the interplay of Gender stereotype and Microaggression experienced at workplace and what are the coping strategies that are applied by those who experience this. The study also tries to answer certain questions pertaining to the impact of Gender stereotype on microaggression at workplace, How Employees Cope with or Respond to Gender-Based Microaggressions in Their Professional Environment, If Gender-Based Microaggressions Influence Employees' Decisions to Stay in or Leave Their Jobs, If gender based micro-aggression is gender specific? The research uses a phenomenological research design, where 14 participants (7 male, 7 female) between the age range of 25-40, were collected using snowball sampling technique. A set of semi-structured interview questions was formed and the selected participants were interviewed. The interviews were transcribed and Thematic Analysis was used to Analyse the data. At the end of the analysis, 5 themes and their sub-themes were also attained, i.e- Perception of Gender Stereotype (Perception of competence; Expectations of Behaviour; Emotional Impact), Nature of microaggression (Subtlety of microaggression; Frequency of occurrence; Types of microaggression), Emotional and Professional Impact (Emotional toll of microaggressions; Impact on Job satisfaction; Coping Strategies), Coping Mechanisms and Response (Direct confrontation; Diplomatic approach; Seeking support and resources), Call for organizational change (Promoting open discussions; Creating a supportive environment).

Keywords: Gender stereotype, Microaggression, coping strategies, Workplace, Thematic analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The workplace encompasses multiple factors that mould an individual and form an employee's identity. Microaggression and gender stereotypes are among those factors, which knowingly or unknowingly impact individuals.

Microaggression

Aggression is an intentional behaviour meant to harm others, either physically or psychologically. Microaggression, a subtler form of harmful behaviour, was first defined by Chester M. Pierce (1970) as subtle, stunning, often automatic and non-verbal exchanges. Originally used to describe racial discrimination, the term has expanded to include marginalised groups such as women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities. Microaggressions often stem from stereotypes and biases, leading to emotional distress, decreased productivity, and workplace dissatisfaction.

Microaggressions in professional settings often come from colleagues or superiors in the form of

questions, statements, or jokes that target gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, or mental health. These subtle insults contribute to stress, anxiety and burnout. The study (Washington, 2024b) found that 7 out of 10 workers reported wanting to leave their jobs due to workplace microaggressions. Common phrases like “Man up”, “Smile more”, “That’s so crazy” reflect hidden biases.

Types of microaggression –

1. Microassault – Direct and intentional discriminatory act (ex- name calling, purposeful exclusion).
2. Microinsult- Subtle remarks that demean identity or heritage.
3. Microvalidation- Statements that dismiss an individual’s thoughts or experiences.

While sexism is a broader, recognised form of discrimination, gender-based microaggression is more subtle and often overlooked. It fosters Imposter Syndrome, causing individuals to question their self-worth and abilities.

Microaggression, though subtle have significant emotional and professional consequences. Addressing them requires increased awareness, open discussions, and workplace reforms to foster inclusivity.

Gender Stereotype

Gender stereotype, when defining this term, it talks about a preconceived notion to what is expected out of a particular gender, assigning them attributes or characteristics and roles as to what they are supposed to do in a society. It is the practice of assigning an individual woman or man specific attributes, characteristics, or roles. A gender stereotype is, at its core, a belief that causes its holder to make assumptions about members of the subject group, women and/or men. In contrast, gender stereotyping is the practice of applying stereotypical beliefs that one hold towards another person. “Women are from Venus, men are from Mars” is a phrase that is often used towards. The question, however, is to what extent of their differences reflect the differentiating line the way men and women essentially are, and to what extent they result from how we think men and women differ from each other because of gender stereotypes. Identifying the nature of gender stereotypes clarifies the fact that they not only describe differences between men and women, but also prescribe what men and women should be and how they should behave in different life domains. By looking at and understanding the origin and the implications of gender stereotypes it helps us understand how these relate to gender differences in our society. In the past times it could be seen how women were viewed only to sit at home and take care of their families while their roles were only limited to kitchen, men were expected to go out and work and make a living for the families. While men were seen as bread winner’s women were told to be homemakers. Gender is considered a primary feature in person perception. Children and adults immediately and implicitly cluster unknown individuals by their gender, even when this categorization is not relevant to the situation and has no informational benefits (e.g., Bennett et al. 2000, Ito & Urland 2003). Humans are assigned with genders right at their birth, and as a child grows they are assigned further roles as to what they are supposed to do, act, stereotyping begins right at a young age teaching individuals how to act, sit, laugh, talk and eat. In simple gender stereotyping separates humans on the basis of assigning them roles and keeping them in a bubble by projecting as what one gender is supposed to do and what another is not supposed to do.

Significance of the study

Most researches concentrate on the impact of these variables in the western context, while there is a lack of understanding about what happens in the non-western countries. Comparative studies across different countries and cultures will give a more global perspective.

While there are considerable research articles that talk about the impact gender based microaggression has on women, there are fewer studies that equally prioritize men as well.

While other research articles talk about the immediate effects of microaggression due to gender stereotype, there are fewer research papers which talk about the long-term career progression and professional development impacts.

Methodology

Objectives of the study

- To examine the interplay between Gender stereotype and microaggression.
- To understand the microaggression experienced at workplace.
- To understand the coping strategies used by the employees who faced gender-microaggression.

Research Question

- Does Gender stereotype impact microaggression at workplace?
- How Do Employees Cope with or Respond to Gender-Based Microaggressions in Their Professional Environment?
- How Do Gender-Based Microaggressions Influence Employees' Decisions to Stay in or Leave Their Jobs?
- Is gender based micro-aggression gender specific?

Research design

- The study employed a phenomenological research design. Phenomenological research designs helps researchers have a deeply understand how individuals experience a particular phenomenon.

Procedure

The procedure for this study will begin with the identification of potential participants who are working in an organization. Once potential participants express interest, a structured interview was formatted and interview was conducted . After collecting the responses, data analysis will be conducted using thematic analysis. Ethical considerations will be observed, informed consent will be obtained from all participants, and measures will be taken to ensure that personal information is protected and that participants can withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Results

The study aimed to explore the qualitative inquiry into the understanding, Microaggression in workplace: The hidden play of Gender stereotype. The study was conducted among fourteen individuals, 7 males and 7 females between the ages 25-40. The data was collected by using an interview method. Questionnaire was prepared by the investigators and was reviewed by experts who have knowledge in the field of study. The selected participants were chosen based on the screening questions analysing their experience of gender based microaggression. All fourteen participants were briefed about the study and their roles before the interview, and their confidentiality has been maintained.

The analysis of the data collected gathered several themes and sub themes. Five major themes have been derived from the analysis: 1) Perception of Gender Stereotype 2) Nature of microaggression 3) Emotional and Professional Impact 4) Coping mechanisms and Responses 5) Call for Organizational change

From the theme Perception of Gender Stereotype, four sub-themes were derived: Perception of competence, Expectations of Behaviour, Emotional Impact, Influence on Job satisfaction. From the theme

Nature of microaggression, four sub - themes were derived: Subtlety of microaggression, Frequency of occurrence, Types of microaggression, Emotional Toll. From the theme Emotional and Professional Impact, three sub-themes were derived: Emotional toll of microaggressions, Impact on Job satisfaction, Coping Strategies. From the theme Coping Mechanisms and Responses, four sub-themes were derived: Direct confrontation, Diplomatic approach, seeking support and resources, Learning opportunities. From the theme Call for organizational change, three sub-theme was derived: Need for training and awareness programs, Promoting open discussions, Creating a supportive environment.

Perception of Gender Stereotype:

1. Perception of competence: Participants stated how, they were considered to, be not competent enough based on their gender.

Brescoll and Uhlmann (2008), in “Can an angry woman get ahead? Status conferral, gender, and workplace emotion”, state that how women’s emotions are perceived differently, impacting their perceived competence in professional settings.

Ernst and Herm-Stapelberg (2020), in “Gender stereotyping’s influence on the perceived competence of Siri and Co”, state that male assisted voiced counterparts were considered to be more competent than female assisted voice in practical implication of designs and development of devices.

2. Expectations of Behaviour: Participants stated how, they were expected to be more aggressive, have same level of technical knowledge as their male counterparts, while men were expected to be more assertive and competitive.

Eagly and Karau (2002), in “Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders”, state that there are two forms of prejudice, ‘Perceiving women as less favourably than men for potential leadership roles’, ‘Placing a lower value on actions that fit the requirements of a leadership job when they are performed by a women.

Hentschel et al. (2019), in “The multiple dimensions of Gender stereotypes: A current look at men’s and women’s characterizations of others and themselves”, state that male raters described women as less agentic, women raters rated women as less assertive than men, and both men and women rated themselves high on instrumental competence.

3. Emotional Impact: Participants stated how, micro-aggression affects their self-esteem, sense of worth, and the pressure to maintain professionalism while feeling undermined.

Plant et al. (2000), in “The gender stereotyping of women”, state that some researches state how women were expected to experience emotions such as sadness, fear or sympathy more often than men, than express them.

Chaplin (2014), in “Gender and Emotion Expression: A Developmental Contextual perspective”, state that there is an influence of bio-psycho-social model in influencing the expression of emotions among men and women from childhood.

Nature of microaggression:

1. Subtlety of microaggression: Participants stated how, micro-aggression even though seems very subtle in nature, does have very strong impacts on the ones facing them. The micro-aggression is so subtle that it overlooks the women’s ideas and competence. Some comments even tell them to be more approachable or pleasant as they are women, while telling men to be more assertive and commanding.
2. Frequency of occurrence: Participants stated how, frequent the occurrence of micro-aggression are

commonly seen during meetings. The statements are not only common but also cumulative, leading to long term emotional impact. Even if the frequency is not that common, one experience is enough to shatter the self-esteem and self-efficacy of someone experiencing it.

3. Types of microaggression: Participants stated how, the types of micro-aggression varied depending on the situation.

Sue et al. (2007), in “Racial microaggression in everyday life: Implications for clinical practise”, state how there seems to be three types of microaggression, which includes- microassault, microinsult, microvalidation.

Emotional and Professional Impact:

1. Emotional toll of microaggressions: Participants stated that, however subtle the statements were, they were strong enough to emotionally bring the person emotionally down.

Soni (2022), in “A study of gender based micro-aggression at workplace”, state that how women experience gender discrimination at work, leading them to feel unsafe at work. They are capable enough to land the ones experience in depression and anxiety attacks.

Nadal et al. (2014), in “The impact of racial microaggression on mental health: Counseling Implications for clients of colour”, Stated that racial-microaggression is significantly correlated with depressive symptoms and negative affect.

2. Impact on Job satisfaction: Participants stated how, how the experiences affected their job satisfaction undermining their qualifications and contributions. Which further made them contemplate about leaving their jobs, indicating a significant impact on job satisfaction.
3. Eagly and Karau (2002), in “Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders”, state that the attitudes are less positive towards female leaders than male leaders.
4. Coping Strategies: Participants stated that they, try to maintain composure and self- assurance when faced with gender based microaggressions or else they assert themselves in conversations to ensure that the contributions are recognized and valued.

Nadal et al. (2014), in “The impact of racial microaggression on mental health: Counseling Implications for clients of colour”, Stated that validation, psychoeducation, Community engagement will be beneficial to empower clients and enhance mental health by counsellors.

Coping Mechanisms and Responses:

1. Direct confrontation: Participants stated how, they had to directly confront the behaviour immediately, leading to an acknowledgment of the issue. Direct confrontation also leads to a positive outcome as one participant had mentioned, stating the perpetrator apologized and never repeated the action.
2. Diplomatic approach: Participants stated how, they had to focus on maintaining professionalism while confronting gender-based microaggression in a respectful manner. A balance between assertiveness with diplomacy in responding to gender-based microaggression is important.
3. Seeking support and resources: Participants emphasized the importance of training programs to educate employees about microaggression and their impact. The importance of creating safe spaces within the workplace dynamics was also given importance to. Structured training can provide employees with tools, that can help them identify microaggression, as well taken appropriate steps when faced with such situations.

Nadal et al. (2014), in “The impact of racial microaggression on mental health: Counseling Implications

for clients of colour”, Stated the importance of friends, family, or mental health professionals when experiencing microaggression.

Call for organizational change:

1. Promoting open discussions: Participants stated how, the organizations should emphasize on more discussions related to microaggression as well as gender stereotype. Establishing safe spaces for individuals to express their concern without fear of retaliation, training and discussions would also enhance awareness. This would further reinforce improving workplace culture regarding gender- based microaggression.
2. Creating a supportive environment: Participants stated how, a supportive organization is key to making sure that gender-based microaggression are minimal or don't take place at all. Effective training, open discussion, safe workspace, encouraging work culture, inclusivity and diversity drives at the organization would be beneficial.

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