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Understanding gender roles in the workplace: a qualitative research study

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UNDERSTANDING GENDER ROLES IN THE WORKPLACE

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored female leaders' experiences with gender norms, implicit bias and microaggressions that they have experienced over the course of their careers. Research questions explored what gender norms exist, how they show up behaviorally in the workplace, and how gender norms, implicit bias and microaggressions impact women. 12 women participated in the study and were asked 12 interview questions. Participants' answers to these questions were coded to highlight themes. Themes were identified as communication, diplomacy, leadership style, family commitments, physical appearance, and pink roles for data analysis. Key themes were summarized, and key research findings were discussed. Key recommendations for organizations and OD practitioners highlight the need for organization members' awareness on current gender norms, bias, and microaggressions, learning and development for all levels of leadership to prevent and address issues, and ways to review current organization structure barriers and creating opportunities for representation within an organization.

Keywords: gender norms, gender bias, implicit bias, microaggressions, women's leadership

Table of Contents

Abstract ..... *iii*

Table of Contents ..... *iv*

List of Tables ..... *vi*

Chapter 1: Introduction *1*

Purpose of Research 4

Importance of this Research 4

Research Setting 5

Organization of this Research Report 6

Chapter 2: Literature Review *7*

Origin of Gender Norms 7

Early Childhood 9

Education 10

Entertainment 11

Religion 12

The Impact of Prescriptive Gender Stereotypes 13

Implicit Bias 15

Microaggressions 17

Summary 18

Chapter 3: Methods *20*

Research Purpose 20

Study Method 20

Interview Protocol 21

Interview Population 22

Administration 23

Data Analysis Procedure 24

Summary 25

Chapter 4: Results *26*

Key Themes 26

Summary 37

Chapter 5: Discussion *38*

Summary 38

Conclusions 39

Recommendations to Organizations & OD Practitioners **42**
Limitations **45**
Suggestions for Future Research **46**
Final Notes **47**
References ***48***
Appendix A: Recruitment Script ***56***
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form ***58***
Appendix C: Interview Protocol ***62***

List of Tables

Table 1. Correlation Between Research and Interview Questions…….. 22

Table 2. Existing Gender Norms……. 27

Table 3. Key Themes…….. 28

Table 4. Company Tolerance for Bias and Microaggressions……..... 35

Table 5. Recommendations……. 36

Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1848, the first women's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, NY. While this was not the first women's rights meeting on record, it has been noted to be the beginning of the women's suffrage movement in the United States. For nearly 70 years, women like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton petitioned Congress to enfranchise women and earn the right to vote (Seaver, 2018). This movement led to the formation of two organizations, the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) and the National Woman's Party (NWP). These groups campaigned in individual states, picketed the White House, and lobbied Congress to pass a woman suffrage amendment. Due to their combined efforts, the 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920, finally giving women the right to vote, a mere 72 years later.

Over 170 years have passed since that first women's rights meeting in Seneca Falls, NY. Looking back over the last two centuries, women have made progress from where they began. In the November 2018 elections, a record number of women were elected to Congress. While this is a historic number of women in office, there is still a significant gap in the representation of American women. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, women comprise 50.8% of the entire U.S. population. While the 2018 elections will still be considered a pivotal moment in U.S. history, half of our population representing only 23.7% of congressional seats after nearly 100 years of having the right to vote seems less momentous. The political sector is not the only place where women are underrepresented.

In 1964, when the Civil Rights Act first passed, only 6.8% of the total female population had completed a four-year college degree, but in 2018 that number rose to

35.3% (Statista, 2019). Women's participation in higher education surpassed men's in 2014 and has been since 2014. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, women earned approximately 57% of the bachelor's degrees awarded by U.S. institutions of higher education in the 2016-2017 academic year. Since more women are graduating with a four-year degree or higher, one would assume a similar growth is happening at work. Unfortunately, women remain underrepresented in the workplace (Dreher et al., 2011).

Women in the Workplace, an annual report created by McKinsey & Company and Lean In.org, suggest progress for women at work has stalled (2017). According to this report, women represent 48% of entry-level employees. Meanwhile, women have earned at least 57% of all bachelor's degrees since 1999 (U.S Department of Education, 2017). As an individual develops in their career, female representation continues to diminish for every position level, from entry-level to the C-suite. Women are significantly outnumbered in senior leadership roles; for example, in 2015 only 5% of companies in the Standard and Poor's 500 index had female CEOs (AAUW, 2016).

Women are entering the workforce at roughly the same rate as men, but they are not being promoted to higher levels of responsibility at the same pace as men (McKinsey, 2017). Why is this happening? If the candidate population exists, why are women not being promoted? Existing gender norms may lead one to think that women are leaving the workplace to start families. However, attrition is not a problem. Women and men are leaving their organizations at similar rates and have similar intentions to remain in the workforce (McKinsey, 2018). An extensive amount of research has been dedicated to understanding why men and women are treated differently at work.

Gender norms refer to social expectations about how men and women should behave and can be understood in terms of agency and communion (Johnson, Murphy, Zewdie, & Reichard, 2008). Society has reinforced stereotypical behaviors for both men and women (Bowles, Babcock, & Lai, 2005; Eagly, 1987). Women are expected to fulfill feminine gender norms such as soft, dainty, niceness, warmth, kindness, unselfish, emotionally expressive, and sensitivity to the needs of others. Prescriptive norms place women in a subordinate status to men who are stereotyped as the providers (Bowles et al., 2005). Positions of power and influence in society have traditionally been occupied by men, while women have historically held positions of a lower status (Eagly, 1987). Gender norms lead to stereotyped gender expectations and roles.

The division of labor has given rise to consensually shared beliefs about what women and men usually do and what they should do, known as gender roles (Eagly, 1987). According to role congruity theory, one outcome of gendered social roles is less favorable attitudes towards women in positions of power and leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002). There is ample evidence demonstrating that people's attitudes toward women in positions of authority can be an important predictor of gender-biased leader evaluations (Rudman & Kilianski, 2000; Simon & Hoyt, 2008) and these biases contribute to the remaining disparity for women in leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Heilman & Eagly, 2008).

One potential cause of this stereotyping is implicit bias, sometimes referred to as unconscious bias. Implicit bias occurs when a person consciously rejects stereotypes but still unconsciously makes evaluations based on stereotypes (AAUW, 2016). Implicit bias is unintentional and operates below our conscious awareness (Golbeck et al., 2016). Most

people have some implicit bias about gender and gender norms. Implicit bias can exist for all groups and can be especially detrimental for marginalized groups. Implicit bias impacts how we make hiring, pay, promotional, and succession planning decisions (Golbeck et al., 2016).

Women also experience more subtle bias, known as microaggressions, in the workplace. Microaggressions were first written about by a Harvard psychiatrist, Chester Pierce, in the 1970s to describe the subtle insults he heard from students of different ethnic backgrounds (Sue, 2010a). Microaggressions have been expanded to include other marginalized groups. A microaggression is a subtle, often unintentional, form of prejudice. Rather than an overt declaration of racism or sexism, a microaggression often takes the shape of an offhanded comment, an inadvertently painful joke, or a pointed insult (Runyowa, 2015). Such communications are usually outside the awareness of the perpetrators (Sue, 2010a). Microaggressions may not be ill intentioned; however, they can inflict insult or injury (Runyowa, 2015).

Purpose of Research

This research project is an exploration into the journey and experiences of female leaders as they have made their way through the corporate pipeline. This study seeks to understand existing gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions that women experience in the workplace. While there has been extensive research that these types of bias and discrimination exist, this study is looking to understand how they impact women and their careers.

Importance of this Research

Women make up 50% of the United States population. In an increasingly competitive marketplace where only the strongest of organizations can survive, companies should not limit their potential labor force. Achieving gender parity is also a matter of fairness. Leaders are influential, so when women are excluded from top leadership positions they are denied the power to make a difference in the world they live in (AAUW, 2016). Furthermore, having women at all levels of an organization can support the improvement of the bottom line.

A study conducted from 1996 to 2000 by Catalyst.org, a global nonprofit dedicated to improving workplaces for women, studied the financial performance of Fortune 500 companies (2000). They found that the group of companies that had the highest representation of women on their senior management teams had a 35% higher return on equity and a 34% higher total return to shareholders than companies with the lowest women's representation (Hill, 2016). This indicates that there is a financial advantage for having gender diverse and inclusive workplace teams. There is significant research showing that discrimination and bias against women exist, but the research is lacking information regarding how these barriers impact women's ability and desire to continue their career growth (Heilman & Eagly, 2008). Understanding the barriers women experience as they climb the corporate ladder can support removing those obstacles for future female leaders.

Research Setting

Since the goal of this research is understanding a person's 'lived experience,' this thesis will use a qualitative research approach. 12 females will be interviewed at different stages in their careers. The primary reason for choosing a qualitative method is because it

allows continued exploration of topics that have not been fully researched or about which there is scant literature (Creswell, 2014). In this situation, the qualitative research probed into experiences, attitudes, and beliefs. Interviewees were asked about how their career has progressed, their own understanding their career goals, understanding what bias and discrimination they have faced, and which discriminatory barriers they anticipate as they continue to develop in their career. For this study, the job levels in the corporate pipeline are: Entry Level, Manager, Director, VP, SVP, and C-Suite. The women were recruited from my network, with women interviewed also providing names of others who could be interested, otherwise known as a snowball sample approach.

Organization of this Research Report

This chapter explored historical context of the women's movement and the lack of gender equity in the workplace and why this study is important. Chapter 2 will discuss existing literature and theories regarding gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions. Chapter 3 focuses on the research design and methodology, research setting, data collection, and analysis. Chapter 4 examines the results of the research and data analysis. Chapter 5 provides a summary of findings and draws conclusions. Recommendations for organizations and OD practitioners are made. Limitations are cited and suggestions for further research are presented.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This research project was conducted to understand how gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions impact women and their career trajectory. This study addressed the question: How do gender norms impact women in the workplace? The purpose of this research was to understand the impact existing gender norms have on women in the workplace with the following research objectives:

1. Understand existing gender norms in the experience of the participants
2. Describe how gender norms show up behaviorally in the workplace
3. Discover the impact of gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions experienced by women in the workplace
4. Discover what organizations do or could do to minimize the negative impact of gender norms, bias, and microaggressions from showing up in the workplace.

The review of the literature is organized as follows: understanding existing gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions.

Origin of Gender Norms

Often, sex and gender are used interchangeably. For the sake of this study, sex is referred to as the anatomical or biological differences between men and women. These differences develop when a child is in the womb and continue on through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Physical difference in sex can be identified by genitalia, hormones, and hair growth, to name a few. While sex identifies biological concepts, gender is a social construction (Bishop & Wahlsten, 1997).

Gender refers to the social and cultural difference society assigns to people based on their biological sex. Gender norms refer to society's expectations of people's behavior

and attitudes based on whether they are female or male. How individuals think and behave as females and males is not determined by biology, but rather it is a result of societal expectations based on gender identity (Eliot, 2011). Gender identity reflects "people's understanding of themselves in terms of cultural definitions of female and male" (Wood & Eagly, 2015, p. 461). It can be represented as self-ascribed personal traits that are stereotypical of men or women, or as categorization of oneself as female or male and the importance of this categorization for one's self-definition (Wood & Eagly, 2015; Zheng et al., 2018).

Because gender role identity is likely more influenced by life experience than biological sex, such findings may help identify particular types of education, practice, and training that contribute to average male-female differences in both the brain and behavior (Bourne & Maxwell, 2009). These historical gender expectations continue to show up later in adult life through gender bias and stereotypes (Eagly et al., 2018).

According to gender stereotypes, men, more than women, are agentic; that is, masterful, assertive, competitive, and dominant (Spence & Buckner, 2000). Women, more than men, are communal; that is, friendly, unselfish, concerned with others, and emotionally expressive. With regards to their female gender role, women are expected to display more communal characteristics, such as being affectionate, helpful, kind, sympathetic, interpersonally sensitive, nurturant, and gentle (Bakan, 1966; Eagly, 1987). These stereotypic beliefs are surprisingly evident across cultures, with some variation (Best & Thomas, 2004; Williams & Best, 1990). These gender stereotypes persist because members of a society value particular attributes for men or women. The attributes will serve as gender ideals that society members may internalize and strive to

achieve (Witt & Wood, 2010). Gender stereotypes influence behavior when they are incorporated into men's and women's self-concepts and thereby become gender identities (Wood & Eagly, 2009, 2010).

Gender norms are shaped through various influences in society and impact individuals throughout their lives. Biological differences separate boys and girls throughout their youth and men and women throughout adulthood. The differences they experience are not limited to their sex alone. Engendered expectations are seen in early childhood development and are further enforced through a child's education, the media and entertainment they consume, and the religious upbringing they experience.

Early Childhood

Gender norms are socialized at such an early age, an individual would be hard pressed to remember a time without them. From birth, young girls are dressed in pink and play with dolls, while young boys wear blue and are expected to play with trains and Legos. Gender norms are so deeply rooted in humans' psyche that they may be resistant to change (Tinsley, Howell, & Amanatullah, 2014). Eliot (2009) argues that infant brains are so malleable that small differences at birth become amplified over time, and ultimately reinforce gender stereotypes.

It is also important to look at how gender norms have been identified over time. Specifically, American parents' perceptions of their newborn babies has changed over the years. In the mid-1970s, when parents were asked to rate their newborns on a wide variety of traits, girls were rated softer, finer featured, littler, and more inattentive than boys (Deutsch, 2007; Rubin, Provenzano, & Luria, 1974). Fathers were more likely to stereotype their babies and, in addition, rated their daughters weaker and more delicate

than their sons. Fast forward more than 20 years later, parental stereotypes of newborns still existed, but there were fewer and the differences between fathers' and mothers to stereotype nearly disappeared (Deutsch, 2007; Karraker, Vogel, & Lake, 1995). Early biases and perceived differences like this can grow over time.

Such differences contribute to each gender's well-known toy preferences, which surface in the second year of life (Servin, Gohlin, & Berlin, 1999). Boys prefer more active playthings like trucks and balls, while girls chose more verbal relational toys, like dolls. In each case, boy-girl differences are magnified through parental treatment. Parents encourage more physical risk-taking in sons than in daughters (Morrongiello & Dawber, 2000). Mothers generally talk more to preschool-aged daughters than sons (Leaper, Anderson, & Sanders, 1998) and parents discourage 'gender-inappropriate' play, especially in terms of boys showing too much interest in sister's Barbie collection (Lytton & Romney, 1991). These differences are important to highlight because each activity is beneficial, but because of early experience on children's brain wiring, the differences between typical 'boy' and 'girl' play have deep consequences for cognitive and emotional function (Eliot, 2010).

Education

When it comes to academic achievement, and even classroom behavior, gender is a poor predictor of any individual student's performance (Eliot, 2010). However, society cannot ignore the gender gaps in academic performance. Girls have outperformed boys in reading and boys have outscored girls in math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in every year since 1971 (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). Similar gender gaps exist on an international scale (Else-Quest, Hyde & Linn, 2010). Initially,

this suggests there is something inherently different about the academic abilities of boys and girls. However, upon further inspection, the gaps vary considerably by age, ethnicity, and nationality (Eliot, 2010). Access to education plays a larger role in the differences than gender alone.

While it is challenging for parents or teachers to remain truly gender neutral, attempts at gender equity do make a difference. Students develop more stereotyped attitudes in classrooms that emphasize gender (e.g., lining up boys and girls separately, single sex education) and more egalitarian attitudes where it is deemphasized (Hilliard & Liben, 2010). Gender segregationists have distorted basic research findings to persuade parents and teachers that boys and girls are categorically different types of thinkers and learners (Chadwell, 2010; Deak & Barker 2002; Gurian et al., 2001; Sax, 2005). However, real science of gender difference does not come close to supporting such conclusions. Such beliefs promote gender stereotyping, the belief that genders are hardwired, and the more people hear about said difference, the more likely they are to anticipate each gender living up to a predetermined type (Eliot, 2011).

Entertainment

Media is also a strong influence on gender norms and stereotypes. According to See Jane 2017, an annual report developed by the Geena Davis Institute of Gender in Media, male characters outnumber female characters two-to-one when it comes to leading roles. When reviewing popular children's programing, women are scarce and are portrayed in less than favorable ways. The Muppets, for example, have ten main characters and only one is female. The only female character, Miss Piggy, is described by as temperamental, diva, domineering, and demanding (Finch, 1993). The other male

characters have various occupations including a stunt performer, a musician, a scientist, and a reporter.

Another popular children's program, Sesame Street, notably lacks positive representation for women. Sesame Street has been on air at PBS since 1969 and did not initially have a female character. In 1970, one female character was introduced, Prairie Dawn. She is a driven young girl who loves to direct pageants for her friends. It was not until 1993 that a second female character was added, and not until 2006 when the production company introduced additional female characters to respond to public scrutiny about the lack of female representation (Dominus, 2006). This lack of positive female representation in media for young children impacts how girls and women are perceived in society.

Media can play a powerful role in shaping children's interests and ambitions early in life and influencing decisions of what they become as adults (Encanto, 2017). Young people are particularly vulnerable to these messages as they are in the process of developing their identity and finding their place in the world. Showing characters that are based on stereotypes can perpetuate those stereotypes into a child's adult life.

Religion

A Gallup poll conducted in 2017 shows that two thirds of Americans identify as either moderately or highly religious and three-quarters of Americans identify with a Christian faith (Newport, 2017). Christian religions refer to the Bible as the basis of Christian beliefs. Women are marginalized throughout the Bible (Morgan, 1988). One of the most prominent and well-known sections in the Old Testament is the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments were written to men and not women. The wife

is identified as her husband's property and is listed with slaves and animals (Deuteronomy, 5:21; Exodus, 20:17). This representation continues in Proverbs, when the readership is warned to beware of the evil seductress. At no point is one warned of the male seducer (Proverbs, 5; Rollston, 2012).

The New Testament continues to marginalize women. Women are instructed to dress modestly and decently. This certainly puts women at a significant disadvantage when three-quarters of Americans identify with a faith whose main source of information encourages controlling women's dress. The book of Timothy continues to get worse for women, stating, "Let a woman learn in silence and full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to be silent" (1Timothy, 2:15). Based on the insights into gender norms in early childhood, these religious messages delivered to a massive population in the United States will have a major impact on the expectations of women and their roles in society.

The Impact of Prescriptive Gender Stereotypes

Gender norms refer to social expectations about how men and women should behave and are examined in terms of agency and communion (Johnson et al., 2008). These expected roles continue into adulthood and for years men were expected to be the primary wage earners for their families while women were the primary caretakers (Eagly & Wood, 1999).

Society has reinforced stereotypical behaviors for both men and women (Bowles, Babcock, & Lai, 2005; Eagly, 1987). Women are expected to fulfill the feminine gender norm of soft, dainty, niceness, warmth, kindness, unselfish, emotionally expressive, and sensitivity to the needs of others. Men are expected to be highly agentic, including being

independent, masterful, assertive, and instrumentally competent (Eagly, Makhijani, & Klonsky, 1992). Prescriptive norms place women in a subordinate status to men who are perceived to be the providers (Bowles et al., 2005).

Prescriptive gender stereotypes can have an adverse effect on women in leadership roles. Research on the evaluation of women and men who occupy leadership roles found there was a tendency for subjects to evaluate female leaders less favorably than male leaders when women lead in a communal and democratic way (Eagly et al., 1992). In addition, women in leadership roles were devalued relative to their male counterparts when leadership was carried out in a stereotypically masculine style or autocratic way. By going against the stereotypical gender norm, respondents reacted negatively.

Societal stereotypes of 'leader' are based on the premise of 'think manager-think male' and are more agentic than communal or neutral (Koenig et al., 2011; Schein, 2001). Thus, women who aspire to and occupy leader roles are often expected to demonstrate agency in order to match the role expectations of leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Johnson et al., 2008; Zheng, et al, 2018).

Female leaders need to be seen as both sensitive and strong to be perceived as effective, while male leaders only need to demonstrate strength (Johnson et al., 2008). Women are penalized more than men for expressing identical dominant behaviors when that behavior is seen as counter normative behavior for women (Williams & Tiedens, 2015). The dual demands for agency and communion can generate tensions for women leaders, because agency and communion are not always consistent and compatible. At a

conceptual level, agency and communion denote “two fundamental modalities in the existence of living forms” (Bakan, 1966, p. 14).

Specific to the agency-communion tensions, attending to both agency and communion has been shown to enhance mental health, moral development, and generativity (Frimer et al., 2011; Lefkowitz & Zeldow, 2006; Mansfield & McAdams, 1996). With a paradox mindset that holds both agency and communion into consideration, women leaders may learn to devise ways to integrate agency and communion into one coherent sense of self, which may strengthen their resilience, or the continued ability to resolve these tensions as they emerge (Zheng et al., 2018)

Cultural stereotypes can make it seem that women do not have what it takes for important leadership roles. The cultural mismatch, also known as role incongruity, between women and the perceived demands of leadership underlies biased evaluations of women as leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These stereotypes are often a barrier to women’s advancement to leadership positions (Koenig et al., 2011). For example, a survey of 705 women at the vice president level or above in Fortune 100 corporations found that 72% agreed or strongly agreed that stereotypes about women’s roles and abilities are a barrier for women’s advancement to the highest levels (Wellington, Kropf, & Gerkovich, 2003).

Implicit Bias

As noted earlier, women are outperforming men when it comes to college education. Women are earning 57% of all bachelor’s degrees annually (AAUW, 2016). Yet, in McKinsey’s annual Women in the Workplace study, which evaluated 279 companies employing nearly 13 million people, women comprise only 48% of all entry

level employees (2018). That number continues to drop at every level in the corporate pipeline. The most significant drop is from Entry Level (48%) to Manager (38%).

One potential cause of this is implicit bias, sometimes referred to as unconscious bias. Implicit bias occurs when a person consciously rejects stereotypes but still unconsciously makes evaluations based on stereotypes (AAUW, 2016). Implicit bias is unintentional and operates below our conscious awareness (Golbeck et al., 2016). Most people have some implicit bias about gender and gender norms. Implicit bias can exist for all groups and can be especially detrimental for marginalized groups. Implicit bias impacts how we make hiring, pay, promotional, and succession planning decisions (Golbeck et al., 2016). Implicit bias is commonly written about in relation to gender and race, but also exists with age, education, and socioeconomic standing, among others.

Existing research situates leadership gender bias within a role congruity perspective which conceptualizes bias as emerging when stereotypic beliefs about members of a particular social group are viewed as being incongruent with a social role (Eagly, 2004; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). Thus, prejudice against women in leadership ensues from the incongruity between the female gender role and associated stereotypes and the perceived leadership role Implicit theories and role congruity requirements (Eagly, 2004).

Women are associated with communal characteristics that emphasize a concern for others, whereas men are viewed as possessing agentic characteristics that focus on confidence, self-reliance, and dominance (Deaux & Kite, 1993; Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000; Williams & Best, 1990). This was confirmed by research that directly tested role congruity processes associated with attitudes toward women in authority and

subsequent gender-biased leader evaluations (Hoyt & Burnette, 2013). The research demonstrated that biased leader evaluations in favor of men were predicted from greater perceptions of the leadership role as requiring agency, a greater male stereotype, and a greater discrepancy between leader prototypes and female gender stereotypes.

When gender norms and stereotypes exist, it can have a negative impact on the marginalized group. Implicit bias has been studied in employment interview judgements and decisions for marginalized groups. A study found that applicants with an ethnic name and speaking with an accent were viewed as less positive by interviewers (Purkiss, et al., 2006). While this was not explicitly expressed, candidates with similar qualities and similar responses to interview questions were treated differently. The bias based on identity in these interviews was similar to how men and women have been treated in salary negotiations. Society rewards and reinforces different types of behavior for men and women (Eagly, 1987). Female candidates were penalized by evaluators more than male candidates for initiating salary negotiations when gender was known to the evaluators (Bowles, Babcock, & Lai, 2005).

Microaggressions

Women also experience more subtle bias, known as microaggressions, in the workplace. A microaggression is a subtle, often unintentional, form of prejudice. Rather than an overt declaration of racism or sexism, a microaggression often takes the shape of an offhanded comment, an inadvertently painful joke, or a pointed insult. Experiencing microaggressions on a daily basis can be deeply stressful. The experience can also be unsettling, because the marginalized person may struggle to understand if the comment was intentional and how to respond (Psychology Today, 2020).

Microaggressions are brief and everyday slights, insults, indignities, and denigrating messages sent by people who are unaware of the hidden messages being communicated (Sue, 2010a). These hidden messages may invalidate the group or communicate they are lesser human beings because they do not belong to the majority. Such communications are usually outside the level of conscious awareness of the perpetrators. Examples of gender microaggressions (Sue, 2010b):

- An assertive female manager is labeled as a "bitch," while her male counterpart is described as "a forceful leader." The hidden message is that women should be passive and allow men to be the decision makers. This messaging aligns with the previously mentioned role incongruity theory.
- A female physician wearing a stethoscope is mistake as a nurse. The hidden message is that women should occupy nurturing and communal role; women are less capable than men.

Microaggressions are closely linked to implicit bias that is outside the level of conscious awareness, making them invisible and visible (Runyowa, 2015). Microaggressions are not experienced by women alone, they can also be based on race, sexual orientation, religious minorities, and those with disabilities. Often, they expose the internalize prejudices that lurk beneath the surface. Microaggression matter because they may be symptoms of larger structural or cultural problems.

Summary

The literature provides a wealth of information related to the influences of gender norms. The content highlighted within this chapter included the influences of gender norms and how gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions show up for women in

the workplace. It is apparent that gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions exist for women in the workplace. However, the literature would benefit from additional research that probes for explicit examples of how these experiences show up behaviorally in the workplace and how this impact the women experiencing them. It appears that it would be helpful to the organization development field and diversity and inclusion efforts to identify how organizations are currently contributing to these issues.

Chapter 3: Research Methods

This chapter describes the methodology used for the research project. It begins with a restatement of the research purpose, followed by a description of the study method. This chapter closes with a summary.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this research was to understand the impact existing gender norms have on women in the workplace with the following research objectives:

1. Understand existing gender norms in the experience of the participants
2. Describe how gender norms show up behaviorally in the workplace
3. Discover the impact of gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions experienced by women in the workplace
4. Discover what organizations do or could do to minimize the negative impact of gender norms, bias, and microaggressions from showing up in the workplace.

Existing research shows that expected gender norms, bias, and microaggressions towards women exists and can limit a woman's career growth (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Hoyt, 2010). While extensive research has been conducted on bias and women in general, research is lacking on the impact of bias on women. Therefore, this study explores how gender norms, bias, and microaggressions impact women, their career progression, and how norms show up behaviorally in the workplace.

Study Method

A qualitative research method was selected for this study. The primary reason for choosing a qualitative method is because it allows continued exploration of topics that have not been fully researched or about which there is scant literature (Creswell, 2014).

In this study, qualitative research methodology was utilized to probe the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of women in the workplace. Therefore, a qualitative method was also appropriate because it allowed participants to describe their experiences and opinions in their own words. The use of qualitative research is to explore and understand the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The research probed for clarification and explored responses to fully understand the individual experiences and how those experiences impacted the participants.

My purpose was to methodically gather data to acquire a description and gain meaning of an experience that will lead to new knowledge (Creswell, 2014). The researcher's central acts in phenomenological research are to (a) obtain descriptions of lived experiences and (b) seek the meaning of these experiences. In the phenomenological approach, the researcher must avoid using assumptions, avoid reducing a complex reality to a few variables, and avoid using instruments that could inadvertently influence the study (Creswell, 2014).

Interviews were conducted in June 2020. The following sections describe the interview protocol, interview population, administration procedures, and data analysis procedures in detail.

Interview Protocol

Table 1 presents the relationship between the interview questions and the research objectives, as well as a sample question for each objective. The full interview protocol can be found in Appendix C.

Table 1

Research Objectives and Corresponding Interview Questions

Research Objectives	Interview Questions	Sample Question
Understand existing gender norms in the experience of the participants	1, 2, 4, 5, 9	What are expectations for how women behave in the workplace?
Describe how gender norms show up behaviorally in the workplace	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11	How have you been rewarded or punished for acting outside of your expected gender role?
Discover the impact of gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions experienced by women in the workplace	4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11	Have you worked in an environment where gender-based bias or microaggressions were prevalent? What are characteristics of that organization's culture?
Discover what organizations do or could do to minimize the negative impact of gender norms, bias, and microaggressions from showing up in the workplace.	10, 11, 12, 13	What recommendations would you make to an organization to reduce and/or eliminate bias, and microaggressions women experience?

In order to identify existing norms, the participants were asked to share expectations for how men and women behave in the workplace and how they were either rewarded or punished for that behavior. There were also questions that explored their personal experience with gender norms, bias, and microaggressions and how those experiences impacted them. They were also asked to share recommendations to organizations looking to minimize the negative impact of gender norms, bias, and microaggressions in the workplace as well as advice they would share with women experiencing those issues.

Interview Population

Effort was made to enlist participants who were aspiring to continue to grow in their career path. Participants were identified from my professional network to identify female managers and above or equivalent; study participants were also asked to provide

names of others who could be interested, otherwise known as snowball sampling. Participants were required to meet several criteria to participate in the study: 1) They must be an English-speaking adult and 2) They must be female and currently working in a position of Manager title or a higher title (Manager, Director, VP, or C-suite Executive) or equivalent in any organization. These criteria together comprised of a definition of women in leadership roles, the target group of the study.

Administration

Initial contact was made via email request in June 2020 to women in leadership roles. The request stated the purpose of the research and the demographic criteria for the participants. The recruitment script can be found in Appendix A. 12 participants met the criteria and received the informed consent form prior meeting with me (Appendix B). This form acknowledges their participation in research being conducting through Pepperdine University, which was scheduled for June 2020.

The research included semi-structured, individual interviews over Zoom video conferencing. All interviews were conducted separately and lasted approximately 60 minutes. Data were collected in the participant's setting, to help put them at ease while being interviewed. I recorded handwritten notes and also audio recorded the interviews, in order to give full listening attention to the participant (Creswell, 2014). The audio recording was later transcribed. Each transcription was analyzed and coded to determine common themes.

Each interview began by providing the participant with a brief overview of the research purpose and operations definitions of key terms that would be used during the interview:

1. Implicit Bias: Also known as implicit social cognition or unconscious bias, implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control (Golbeck et al., 2016).
2. Microaggressions: the brief statements or behaviors that, intentionally or not, communicate a negative message about a non-dominant group—are everyday occurrences for many people (Suarez-Orozco, 2015).

Participants were advised that this interview data would be confidential and that the recordings would be stored in a secure location. After the interview, I sent an email of appreciation to the participant and an assurance that the participant would receive an executive summary of the interview data upon completion of the study.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data analysis consisted of building from particulars to general themes using open coding and axial coding. Open coding includes labeling concepts, defining and developing categories based on their properties (Creswell, 2014). Axial coding is the breaking down of core themes and is the process of relating codes or concepts to each other, via a combination of inductive and deductive thinking (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). The approach involved using a coding process to organize the material into chunks, manifest meanings, and find themes (Creswell, 2014). I began by grouping interview questions as they applied to each research objective. I then summarized the entire population's answers for each research objective based upon the experience of the

total interview process. Next, I recorded the themes that emerged from the summaries for each interview question.

Summary

This chapter presented the methodology used. It restated the research purpose, described the rationale for using a qualitative research approach, discussed data collection tools and procedures, and discussed data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 presents the results of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this research was to understand the impact existing gender norms have on women in the workplace. Interviews attempted to better understand the following research objectives:

1. Understand existing gender norms in the experience of the participants
2. Describe how gender norms show up behaviorally in the workplace
3. Discover the impact of gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions experienced by women in the workplace
4. Discover what organizations do or could do to minimize the negative impact of gender norms, bias, and microaggressions from showing up in the workplace.

This chapter presents the results of 12 interviews with female leaders and outlines key themes that emerged from the interviews.

Key Themes

Throughout the interviews, multiple themes emerged as notable. The following section highlights those key themes, discusses relevant similarities and differences between participants, and provides direct quotes from interviewees as appropriate for context. There were 12 questions upon which analysis discovered approximately 14 categories. Of these 14 categories, the most frequently discussed were the expectations of being mothers, physical appearance, pink roles (i.e., roles, tasks or assignments that women are expected to perform that are outside of their typical scope of work), leadership expectations, communication, organizational barriers, lack of representation, and family commitments.

Existing gender norms. The first research question sought to understand existing gender norms. During the data analysis phase of the study, I focused on the respondents' answers to interview questions 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 8 to answer this research question. Table 2 presents the themes that emerged from the interview data related to women's perceptions of existing gender norms for both men and women. The most common words and phrases have been separated by communal and agentic categories. There were no communal characteristics or behaviors identified for men by the study participants.

Table 2

Existing Gender Norms

Gender	Communal	Agentic
Men		Decisive Strong Firm Assertive Confident Results oriented
Women	Caring Empathetic Inclusive Respectful Compassionate	Logical Hard working

Gender norms in the workplace & impact of gender norms. Interviewees were asked to define current gender norms in the workplace and provide examples. The most common themes that emerged about gender norms for women involved communication, diplomacy, leadership style, family commitments, physical appearance, and pink roles. Pink roles was a termed identified by a research participant and refers to tasks more frequently assigned to women or roles women are expected to occupy over men. The

participants were also to asked to describe how those norms and expectations impacted them and their experience in the workplace.

Table 3

Key Themes

Theme	Sample comments	N	%
Communication	Listen to others Being direct can be perceived as bitchy Discuss facts, don't add feelings or emotions Allow others to speak first	11	91%
Diplomacy	Avoid conflict, try to be peacekeepers Be nice and likeable, not too aggressive Need to be able to hear all sides of the argument	11	91%
Leadership Style	Empathetic and nurturing Compassionate, but not emotional Reserved, collaborative and inclusive	10	83%
Family Commitments	Women are considered primary caregivers for children and elderly family members Women can be overlooked for opportunities because of family commitments Travel and work schedules don't support working mothers	9	75%
Physical Appearance	Present yourself professionally; wear high heels Be ladylike, have good posture Always be clean and polished; hair, makeup and clothing	6	50%
Pink Roles	Plan the celebrations for birthdays and retirements Cut the cake at parties Take notes and handle administrative duties	5	42%

***Communication*.** 11 of 12 interviewees shared examples of how women are expected to communicate in the workplace and how that may vary from how men are expected to communicate. The expectations of these behaviors have been expressed to the participants by both male and female colleagues. Women described moments when they were discouraged from speaking, their opinions being regarded as emotional versus based in fact and being talked over by their male colleagues. One research participant

that is a director in her organization shared her experience when sharing a dissenting opinion with others.

> I've been discouraged in just in speaking my opinion or saying something; I can be outspoken. But I think that I also have been able to be very tactful in sharing my thoughts, even if it's a dissenting opinion and there have still been times when even if it's tactful, that it's been discouraged.

Another participant that is a senior director in her organization shared her experience of being called emotional and the impact that has had on her:

> You know, the first thing that I generally hear is, 'You're being emotional' and so it's like your voice is always put to the side because they assume that you have emotions behind it and not actual data or facts […] I don't think they really want to hear your voice.

A third participant that is a VP in her current organization expressed how the expectation of her being quiet in a meeting or experiencing others speak over her made her feel.

> The expectation that you should be quiet and being talked over is definitely something that doesn't happen to the men. […] It kind of gives the women the perception that they shouldn't speak or that their opinion doesn't necessarily matter, that you are limited in expressing your true thoughts or understanding.

Diplomacy. The concept of diplomacy came up for women as they felt that they needed to be the calm and level-headed presence for their teams. Women acknowledged that they were quick to apologize for mistakes, even if they were not responsible in order to keep the larger group calm. They felt that they had to present themselves as nice and likeable for their teams at all times. One participant said,

> Women should be able to hear all sides. And if they say something and it's not taken the right way to say, oh, you know, I apologize […]. Or I didn't realize that this was what you were saying, you're able to have that conversation, which I think is very powerful and necessary compared to this machismo mentality that doesn't let you admit that you were at fault.

Leadership style. 10 of 12 women shared the stories of the expectations of female leaders. Most frequently noted was the expectation that women lead with compassion and

empathy and, without it, they are seen as ineffective. A woman is also expected to hold that role when in the company of men and are expected to make up for it where the larger group may be lacking. A female leader is also expected to be collaborative in her approach with her teams and solicit multiple opinions before she is allowed to make a decision. On the other hand, men are empowered to make decisions without input from the larger group. One example from a participant that is a director in her company is as follows:

> It's expected almost for women to be less of a decision maker themselves but collaborate and get everybody else's opinion first before making a decision […] rather than for men, allowing them to just make that decision. I do think compassion, is expected, I think empathy is expected. So that just becomes what's expected of them.

Another participant described her experience as the only female leader on an all-male team and how she has adapted her personal style. This participant said, "I have to take a more of a partnership approach in terms of decision making. I'm expected to check with the team and getting buy-in from them before moving forward. It feels like they don't trust me." Another participant spoke of how the expectations of how women should lead and the lack of female representation at all levels of leadership impacted her as a manager:

> I feel like I need to plan every single move which is exhausting […] I feel like I am not ready for the next step because I am not meeting their expectations […] I second guess myself, maybe I am not ready […] I am underrepresented, I wouldn't have anyone to support me if I moved up to that level, so I stopped trying because I feel like I would be alone.

The participants also described a paradoxical set of expectations that are placed on female leaders. There is an expectation that they are sensitive to the needs of their team but not too sensitive that it could be interpreted as weak. A participant that works as a

VP for a global organization stated “you know, if you're seen as being too macho too aggressive, you're considered bitchy as a leader. It is a fine line.” There is also the feeling that they need to overcompensate at times when they step out of the expected gender role and behave assertively. “I end up overcompensating or needing to feel like I overcompensate for that image of being seen as understanding and caring by being even further doubling down on that idea if I was told I was being too assertive.”

Family commitments. Another common theme that was mentioned by nine women interviewed were the challenges presented to mothers or women that were caretakers of elderly family members. One of the most frequently noted items was the difference between maternity and paternity leave. All respondents stated that their companies made a concerted effort to equalize the leave time provided to both genders and rename to family leave in order to be inclusive and expansive to all family types. Even with the changes to the policy and attempts to provide equal leave, women still face additional challenges. One participant said,

> When taking maternity leave, regardless of the time, you get a prorated bonus and less years of experience in your role which leads to a barrier when you do advance. If men chose not to take the leave, and its often encouraged for them not to, they are making more money and are considered to have more experience than a women that took maternity leave.

One participant is in a senior VP role within her global organization and shared a conversation she was a part of during a talent planning discussion with other vice presidents and senior leaders regarding a potential international relocation for a female employee. She said,

> Years ago, it was primarily men that were getting promoted into senior positions and stretch assignments. Now we are seeing more women being considered and open to the international assignments. One woman’s name was mentioned and during the conversation a concern was raised that she was married with children

> that made the move complicated and expensive […] they would have had to relocate the woman, her family, possibly their nanny and get a work visa for the husband. Instead they decided to offer the role to a single male because it would be a less complicated move [..] I have also witnessed discussions where it is assumed a woman won't want to take a role because she is planning to have a family, she is never asked, the decision is made for her.

The assumptions that women carry the burden of household duties, including childcare, interviewees noted as an obstacle for their work life balance and the ability to move ahead in the organizations. The participants also noted that they themselves and other women they had worked with self-selected out of promotional opportunities because they did not believe there was enough support within their organizations for working mothers. Specific examples provided were strenuous travel schedules, inflexible working hours and locations, and the pressure of having to "do it all."

Physical appearance. Six participants shared stories of how they were expected to present themselves in the workplace. Those women experienced comments from men complimenting their appearance or potentially acknowledging their lack of effort on their physical appearance. A senior director stated,

> I think there's an expectation of how you present yourself and being put together and I even think of in the sense of being professional that you're wearing heels. I think with everything that goes into just the appearance of looking like you are put together.

Another participant stated,

> There are expectations of being ladylike. You have to look neater. As women, we are still doing our hair even in quarantine, the men look like slobs [...] I think part of it is our posture, gesturing, walking, your gate, and all of that. Its stressful to have to feel like you are always on display.

Three of the women acknowledged that their looks and the way they dressed helped them gain access to people and experiences in their organizations they may not have normally

experienced at their job level. One woman acknowledges that her role in the onboarding of people in her organization was partly assigned because of the way she looks:

> How I present myself has allowed me a lot of entry into different places […] I am the front person for my company in a lot of ways. I meet people on their first day I have conversations with people […] I think that that has to do with me presenting myself in a certain way and because it's the idea of a woman should be feminine and pretty.

The impact of women being acknowledged for their looks had varying impacts. One manager shared, "I have been told, you're lucky you're pretty […] you're disregarding my idea and telling me in another way that my idea is stupid. I feel like what I am saying has no value." While another participant at a VP level shared the backlash, she experienced after expressing concern over the way a male colleague treated her, "I was told, 'What do you expect when you dress like that' […] I was blamed for wearing a short skirt. I was made to feel like I did something wrong."

Pink roles. When interviewing participants, the concept of pink roles came up in five interviews. Pink roles are jobs or tasks that women are expected to perform at work. Women described it first as official job roles that there were more women in human resources and administrative positions, "the assistants in my company, they are all women with the exception of two men, HR is all women, finance is almost all men." Pink roles also extend to unofficial jobs and tasks in organizations.

Women are expected to plan and host a variety of office parties and celebrations, including purchasing the card and cutting the cake. One participant said, "Who handles the celebrations of birthdays, like when somebody orders cake or buys a card that is somehow a role that defaults to women." In addition, the role of notetaking in meetings is

frequently delegated to the woman in the room, even if she is not the most junior. As one director stated,

> Who is taking notes, even if they are of the same level of the other people in the meeting, and then it turns to me. At the end of the meeting a male says, 'Oh, will you send those notes?' So, as we type it up, and send it to the group, those underlying behaviors are reinforcing our expected role.

Preventing bias. The research participants were asked to describe their current organization and how they handled gender norms, bias, and microaggressions. They were asked to rate the current organization on a scale of 1 to 10 for their company's tolerance of bias and microaggressions against women. They were also asked to provide justifications for their rating and describe characteristics of the organization. Table 4 notates the ratings provided as well as the most common comments on characteristics of the organizations' cultures and why the participants rated the companies. Half of participants noted male dominant leadership and a lack of opportunities for female advancement as an important component to the organization culture and the reasoning for their rating.

Table 4

Company Tolerance for Bias and Microaggressions

Rating	Sample Comments	N	%
2	Diverse leadership team; both women and people of color represented at all levels of leadership Zero Tolerance Policy exists and is communicated Open communication and access to HR support Emphasize hiring individuals that align with company values	3	25%
3	Speak up culture is respected Diverse leadership group	1	8%
4	Recently implemented unconscious bias training Making an effort to promote and develop women into senior roles Active conversations to try and change the culture	2	17%
5	Lack of HR presence to escalate or follow up on concerns People don't fully understand power dynamics in working relationships Male dominant leadership at all levels	2	17%
6	Policies against bias exist; not consistently enforced Only men in leadership roles; women aren't represented and don't get promoted Very competitive	1	8%
9	Male dominant leadership group at multiple levels Do not acknowledge there is an issue Organization lacks clear vision and purpose No psychological safety; people cannot speak up	3	25%
Total		12	100%

Note. Rating: 1 zero tolerance; 10 widely prevalent

Participants were asked to provide recommendations for organizations that were looking to eliminate gender-based bias and microaggressions. The answers provided were sorted into four distinct themes as seen in Table 5: training and development, representation, organization structure, and awareness.

Table 5

Recommendations

Theme	Comments	N	%
Training & Development	Mandatory training on implicit bias and microaggressions from the top leadership levels and down	12	100%
Representation	Hire women into all levels of leadership Provide mentorship opportunities Incorporate diversity and inclusion into career and succession planning	12	100%
Organization Structure	Develop employee resource groups Create a culture of openness through discussion and open-door policy Provide employee relations support	8	67%
Awareness	Analyze organization for potential barriers at all levels Solicit feedback from employees through opinion surveys and be transparent with answers Make an example of those that don't get on board	7	58%

Training and development. All participants recommended training and developmental activities for organizations looking to reduce bias. Unconscious bias training at all levels can help people identify the bias they carry and support open discussion and conversations. In addition, proper training for human resources and employee relations support staff would be appropriate so they can comfortably engage in conversations and support the organizational growth.

Representation. Companies need to remove any and all systemic barriers that exist within their organizations. This includes reviewing current talent mix at all levels of the organization to ensure there is adequate representation of female leadership. This effort can be supported by implementing changes to career and succession planning.

Organization structure. Companies need to strengthen their employee support infrastructure. This includes providing the human resources and employees relations teams with the tools necessary to receive complaints and work with leaders to resolve

issues timely. Suggestions included an open-door policy, an anonymous hotline and clearly defined representatives for all teams. Additionally, developing employee resources groups where people can self-organize and support an inclusive workplace.

Awareness. Seven of 12 participants recommended organizations review their own awareness of the culture within their company. One step is to analyze potential barriers at all levels of the organization. Another suggestion is to conduct an anonymous employee opinion survey to help determine potential gaps and to be transparent with employees about the results of the surveys. Lastly, it was recommended to make an example of violators of the intended culture or those who refuse to change their behavior. This action sets the tone for the company and the employees.

Summary

This chapter outlined the results of the research interviews and summarized key themes. Chapter 5 will conclude this study by discussing the research findings, considering if the research findings refute or support the content covered in the literature review, and will discuss the interpretations and implications of how women are impacted by the bias they face at work. Chapter 5 will also discuss limitations of this study and provide recommendations for further research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this research was to understand the impact existing gender norms have on women in the workplace. Interviews attempted to better understand the following research objectives:

1. Understand existing gender norms in the experience of the participants
2. Describe how gender norms show up behaviorally in the workplace
3. Discover the impact of gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions experienced by women in the workplace
4. Discover what organizations do or could do to minimize the negative impact of gender norms, bias, and microaggressions from showing up in the workplace.

This chapter will summarize the research findings, review the study conclusions, provide recommendations to organizations and organization development practitioners, highlight limitations of this study, and explore options for future research. While the findings of the study do not provide definitive answers, they did provide valuable insight into identifying how existing gender norms show up behaviorally in the workplace, how gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions impact women that experience them and ways organizations can minimize the negative impact of gender norms, bias, and microaggressions from showing up in the workplace.

Summary

The 12 interviews conducted for this research study yielded 14 themes that were further narrowed down to six major themes. The questions related to the interviewees' perceptions of existing gender norms for men and women, personal experiences with bias and microaggressions, and how those experiences impacted them and recommendations

they would make to organizations that are looking to eliminate gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions.

The interviewees believe that existing gender norms for women are primarily communal characteristics and behaviors. Specifically, they mentioned caring, empathetic, inclusive, respectful, and compassionate. They also mentioned two agentic characteristics, logical and hard working. This differed from the gender norms they identified for men which were all agentic: decisive, strong, firm, assertive, confident, and results oriented.

When asked to share their experiences with norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions and how those experiences impacted them. Themes emerged in six major categories: communication, diplomacy, leadership style, family commitments, physical appearance, and pink roles. A common theme that emerged through these interviews and across all categories was a paradoxical expectation of women and how they behave. One specific example is how women are expected to be kind and empathetic, but they cannot be seen as overly emotional for fear of not being taken seriously as a leader and decision maker in their organization.

When the interviewees were asked about how organizations can move forward to reduce or eliminate gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions, the following themes emerged: training and development, representation, organization structure, and awareness.

Conclusions

The findings from this research study do not contradict the various assertions discovered in the literature review. However, the research findings provide additional

clarity on how gender norms show up behaviorally in the workplace and the impact of bias and microaggressions women experience. The following section will explore some of the conclusions uncovered through this research study.

Communal behavior. The participants were asked to describe expectations for how men and women were expected to behave in the workplace. The words used to describe women were mainly communal, such as caring, empathetic, inclusive, respectful, and compassionate. The words they used to describe men were agentic, such as decisive, strong, firm, assertive, confident, and results oriented. These descriptions align with research that gender roles refer to social expectations about how men and women should behave in terms of agency and communion (Johnson et al., 2008). Women are expected to fulfill the feminine gender norm of soft, dainty, niceness, warmth, kindness, unselfish, emotionally expressive, and sensitivity to the needs of others. While men are expected to be highly agentic, including being independent, masterful, assertive, and instrumentally competent (Eagly et al., 1992). Further examples of this were described by the participants with regards to the way they are expected to communicate and lead.

The interviewees described how they are expected to communicate in the workplace. There are expectations that women are respectful and compassionate in the way they communicate with others. They shared examples of being expected to listen and allowing others to speak first. There was also the expectation that when in the company of men, women had to defer to them, leading women to feel that their opinions are not valued (Bowles et al., 2005).

The women shared examples of how females are expected to lead differently from men. Females are expected to lead with compassion and empathy, and without it are seen as ineffective or can be labeled a bitch. Participants also noted they are expected to be collaborative in their approach with their teams and solicit multiple opinions prior to making a decision, while male leaders are allowed to be less inclusive with their decision making.

The feedback from the participants aligns with the research. In the evaluation of women and men who occupy leadership roles, there was a tendency for subjects to evaluate female leaders less favorably than male leaders when women lead in a communal and democratic way. Women in leadership roles were devalued relative to their male counterparts when leadership was carried out in a stereotypically masculine style, or autocratic way (Eagly et al., 1992). Female leaders need to adopt a paradoxical perspective and be seen as both sensitive and strong to be perceived as effective, while male leaders only need to demonstrate strength (Johnson et al., 2008; Zheng et al., 2018).

Microaggressions. The participants shared examples of how their physical appearance played a role in how they were treated in their organizations. Women felt that too much value was placed on their physical appearance and how they presented themselves. They acknowledged that it can be difficult to emotionally process because there is a compliment in being told you look nice, but you are reminded that your value is in your appearance and not your knowledge or skill set.

The participants also shared stories of how certain roles or tasks were more frequently assigned to women over men. Women found themselves frequently being asked to do administrative tasks like taking notes or being responsible for planning office

celebrations. Roles that were infrequently and, in some cases, never asked of the men in their respective workplaces. The participants felt that these small actions over time put them in a submissive role to men and made them feel that they were not being utilized to their fullest capacity because of their gender.

Research on microaggressions states that they are brief and everyday slights, insults, indignities, and denigrating messages sent by people who are unaware of the hidden messages being communicated (Sue, 2010a). This supports the impact the women experienced when they were referred to by their attractiveness or physical appearance. The hidden message to these women was they were only valued for their appearance. These hidden messages may invalidate the group or communicate they are lesser human beings because they do not belong to the majority (Sue, 2010b). Microaggressions are closely linked to implicit bias that is outside the level of conscious awareness, making them appear invisible to the deliverer but apparent to the recipient (Runyowa, 2015).

Recommendations to Organizations & OD Practitioners

While every organization may look different, every team may have specific demands, and each environment may vary, existing literature and the findings highlighted throughout this research study provide clarity on what activities leaders should focus on first.

Awareness. In order to reduce and potentially eliminate gender norms, bias, and microaggressions in the workplace, an organization needs to assess their current expression of these barriers for women. A full-scale review of diversity of leadership and diversity of work teams should be conducted starting at the top of the organization down to the entry level. During the diversity review, an organization should also examine the

current talent development plans, succession plans, job descriptions, and recruitment strategies to identify potential process or structural gaps that allow gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions to flourish.

An organization should also evaluate their existing corporate values, compensation and rewards, benefits packages, and work policies. Participants shared that variation in parental leave policies and lack of transparency with pay scales put women at a disadvantage in the workplace. In addition, inflexible work schedules can put parents at a disadvantage. Organizations can also examine if certain behaviors are rewarded or punished. An example provided by a participant was that men in her organization were mocked if they left to take care of their child, when a women of similar status and title is expected to take on that role, but potentially misses out on assignments because it put into question her reliability. Having different standards based on gender, allowing, and encouraging behaviors like this will further enforce the negative impacts of gender norms.

An organization needs to fully understand their current state of affairs and identify potential gaps in their leadership diversity, barriers to success, culture, and organization structure. This can be done through an anonymous opinion surveys, focus groups, and interventions with the support of OD practitioners. As an organization is going through this investigative process, they should provide full transparency to their employee groups of their findings and plans to improve.

Learning and development. Depending on the results of a full organization assessment, training and development is recommended for employees at all levels. A first step is to begin training leaders about existing gender norms and how those influence

implicit bias and microaggressions women face in the workplace. It is important to start the education process at the highest levels of leadership and help them understand the negative impact gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions can have on people and their organization. In addition, learning and development opportunities can provide leaders with the tools and resources to have productive conversations with their employees and develop inclusive teams. After getting the buy-in of senior leadership, continue training and developmental opportunities at all levels.

Organization systems. In order to support new learning and development programs, addressing systemic issues within the organization that reinforce gender roles, bias, and microaggressions. This can happen at multiple levels within an organization. The first step is to review the existing policies and practices that exist within the organization to determine if they reinforce gender normative behaviors. This should include, dress codes, work schedules, parental leave policies, and pay equity.

In addition, creating a support system for women to report concerns of bias and microaggressions. This includes, but is not limited to, a zero-tolerance policy for gender-based bias, an open-door policy that provides women access to leaders and human resources support teams, and access to an employee relations support team that is prepared to respond to concerns and support leaders as they adapt. Lastly, creating employee led resources groups would allow women to connect and build a community within the organization. An employee resource group can also be an opportunity to provide support and contribute to personal and professional development in the work environment.

Representation. Organizations need to be representative of the communities they serve, and leadership teams should be representative of the teams they support. In order to limit gender norms, bias, and microaggression women face, organizations need to have proper equity and representation for women. This can be achieved by setting equity goals for leadership positions. Additionally, incorporating diversity and inclusion conversations into career planning and succession planning to help ensure success. This can also be done at the talent acquisition and recruitment level by setting expectations for the types of candidates sourced and presented for interviews. Lastly, providing women with equal access and opportunity for mentorship and sponsorship within the organization to support their career growth and trajectory.

Limitations

There are limitations to this study that are worth noting. First, only 12 women were interviewed, a small sample size built around my network. The participants' responses were not analyzed for variation based on race, religion, sexual orientation, or sexual identity. While I did not seek to capture demographic information, some of the women volunteered their racial identity. During the discussion, they acknowledged that some of their experiences could be because of their gender, their race, or a combination of both (intersectionality).

Although I took precautionary measures to ensure objectivity, there is room for error based on conversation flow, follow up questions, and interpretation of participant answers. The interview questions were open-ended, and responses depended on what the interviewee deemed relevant or remembered. Lastly, research was conducted during the COVID-19 global pandemic and during nationwide protests and riots against police

brutality and systemic racism, stemming from the murder of George Floyd. An outside coder could have looked at the data to ensure inter-rater reliability.

Suggestions for Future Research

Organizations, leaders, and teams will likely derive value from additional research on the impact of gender norms, bias, and microaggressions experienced in the workplace. First, to expand the depth and breadth of data, it would be helpful to do a large-scale study. This could complement the findings of this initial study and provide additional data points to develop a more holistic picture. Based on the discussion with some participants on intersectionality, it would also be valuable to collect specific demographic information to understand the differences in women's experiences based on race, religion, gender identity (expression), sexual orientation, and job type.

Second, this study only looked at women and how they are impacted by gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions. There is value in understanding how norms and biases affect men. Research into the impact on men could complement this initial study and provide data points to develop a comprehensive understanding of men's and women's experiences in the workplace. Additionally, it would be valuable to collect specific demographic information to understand the differences men experience based on race, religion, gender identity (expression), sexual orientation, and job type.

Third, it would be helpful to clarify differences between industries, and more research should be done within and across specific industries. Three participants referenced the progress in the entertainment industry stemming from the #MeToo movement, while another participant referenced working in a male dominated, high growth tech company. Conducting research based on industries or even job types could

help identify if certain characteristics or practices are more prevalent in particular industries and how they compare.

Final Notes

Understanding gender norms is important. Women make up half of the population and hold over 50% of entry level positions in Fortune 500 companies. As they move along the corporate pipeline, their representation at each level shrinks. Existing gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions create personal and structural barriers for women to progress in their careers. Understanding existing bias and the impact these factors have on individuals is crucial in order to make the necessary changes to create a diverse and inclusive workplace.

Through the literature review and interviews, it is clear that gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions exist in the workplace for women and have a significant impact on their career and wellbeing. Through the practices outlined, such as awareness, learning and development, organization structure and representation, leaders and organizations can play a significant role in minimizing or eliminating the norms, bias, and microaggressions that hinder women in the workplace.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Script

Dear [Name],

My name is Andrea Michel, and I am a graduate student in the Graziadio Business School at Pepperdine University. I am conducting a research study examining gender norms and how they impact women in the workplace, and you are invited to participate in the study. If you agree, you will be invited to participate in a one on one interview. The interview is anticipated to take no more than one hour and will be audio recorded.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your identity as a participant will remain anonymous and confidential during and after the study. Identifying information will not be recorded with the research data, recordings will be encrypted and securely stored.
If you have questions or would like to participate, please contact me at andrea.michel@pepperdine.edu.
Thank you for your participation,

Andrea T. Michel
Pepperdine University
MSOD student

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

PEPPERDINE
UNIVERSITY

Graziadio School of Business and Management

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

How gender norms impact women in the workplace

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by **Andrea Michel** under the supervision of Dr. Ann Feyerherm at Pepperdine University, because you are **female leader.** Your participation is voluntary. You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything that you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. Please take as much time as you need to read the consent form. You may also decide to discuss participation with your family or friends. You will also be given a copy of this form for your records.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to understand how gender norms impact women in the workplace by examining gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions that they may have experienced at work.

STUDY PROCEDURES

This is a qualitative study aimed at better understanding the experiences of females at work. If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to answer a series of open-ended questions geared towards understanding your experiences with bias, discrimination and microaggressions experienced at work and how those experiences have impacted you and your career. No identifying questions will be collected as a part of this study. Interview subjects will be audio recorded. If a participant does not wish to be audio recorded, they are still eligible to participate in the study.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no anticipated risks for this study.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

While there are no direct benefits to the study participants, there are several anticipated benefits to society which include:

- Details on the types of bias and microaggressions women experience in the workplace
- An improved understanding of how gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions impact women and their intended career path.
- Provide insights into ways to reduce or eliminate implicit bias and microaggressions facing women in the workplace

CONFIDENTIALITY

The records collected for this study will be confidential as far as permitted by law. However, if required to do so by law, it may be necessary to disclose information collected about you. Examples of the types of issues that would require me to break confidentiality are if disclosed any instances of child abuse and elder abuse. Pepperdine's University's Human Subjects Protection Program (HSPP) may also access the data collected. The HSPP occasionally reviews and monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research subjects.

The data will be stored on a password protected computer in the principal investigator's place of residence. The data will be stored for a minimum of three years. The data collected will be coded, de-identified, and transcribed.

Notes will be taken by the principal investigator. Attendance lists will not be shared with anyone and will be stored on the Gsuite drive of the principal investigator. Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. Your responses will be coded with a pseudonym and transcript data will be maintained separately. The audiotapes will be destroyed once they have been transcribed. The data will be stored on a password protected computer in the researcher's office for three years after the study has been completed and then destroyed.

SUSPECTED NEGLECT OR ABUSE OF CHILDREN

Under California law, the researcher(s) who may also be a mandated reporter will not maintain as confidential, information about known or reasonably suspected incidents of abuse or neglect of a child, dependent adult or elder, including, but not limited to, physical, sexual, emotional, and financial abuse or neglect. If any researcher has or is given such information, he or she is required to report this abuse to the proper authorities.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study.

ALTERNATIVES TO FULL PARTICIPATION

The alternative to participation in the study is not participating or only completing the items
for which you feel comfortable.

INVESTIGATOR'S CONTACT INFORMATION

You understand that the investigator is willing to answer any inquiries you may have concerning the research herein described. You understand that you may contact following if you have any other questions or concerns about this research:

1. Principal Investigator:
   Name: Andrea Michel
   Email: andrea.michel@pepperdine.edu
   Mobile: 1- 920-254-9339
2. Faculty Advisor:
   Name: Dr. Ann Feyerherm
   Email: ann.feyerherm@pepperdine.edu

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered before agreeing to participate in or during the study.

For questions concerning your rights or complaints about the research contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):

- Phone: 1(310)568-2305
- Email: gpsirb@pepperdine.edu

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

How do gender norms impact women in the workplace?

Objectives:

1. Understand existing gender norms in the experience of the participants
2. Describe how gender norms show up behaviorally in the workplace
3. Discover the impact of gender norms, implicit bias, and microaggressions experienced by women in the workplace
4. Discover what organizations do or could do to minimize the negative impact of gender norms, bias, and microaggressions from showing up in the workplace.

Intro Script: *Thank you for taking time to meet with me. The purpose of this interview is for me to better understand how gender norms influence your experiences as a woman in the workplace. Before we begin, I would like to learn a little more about you and your career. How long have you worked for your current organization? What is your current role (job level)? How many organizations have you worked for? Reflecting on your entire career, how long have you been in a leadership role?*

I am collecting data in order to provide data for a research project for my thesis as a requirement for my MSOD program at Pepperdine University. The interview is confidential -- this means that I won't use your name, but I will use the information you provide to report back data in aggregate. I will record your response to each question and read back to you what I have written, if requested. If I have misunderstood what you have said or inaccurately recorded your response, please let me know and I'll make corrections before moving to the next question.

To help ensure that I accurately capture your responses, I would like to record your interview. The recording will not be shared with anyone outside of me and my research advisor. Opting to record the interview is completely optional. Should you decide during your interview that you would like to stop recording, you may do so at any time. <u>May I record this interview?</u> Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. What are expectations for how women behave in the workplace? Of those expectations, which would you identify as positive and which ones do you view as negative? Why?	1
2. What are expectations for how men behave in the workplace? Of those expectations, which would you identify as positive and which ones do you view as negative? Why?	1
3. Are there implicit expectations for how women lead? How does that compare to expectations of men?	1, 2
4. What policies, procedures, and/or corporate values have your experienced that reinforce gender norms?	2
5. How have you been rewarded or punished for acting outside of your expected gender role?	1, 2, 3
6. How have you been rewarded or punished for acting within your expected gender role?	1, 2, 3

7. What microaggressions have your experienced? How has that impacted you? ***Definition:*** *A microaggression is a subtle, often unintentional, form of prejudice. Rather than an overt declaration of racism or sexism, a microaggression often takes the shape of an offhanded comment, an inadvertently painful joke, or a pointed insult. Experiencing microaggressions on a daily basis can be deeply stressful. The experience can also be unsettling, because the marginalized person may struggle to understand if the comment was intentional and how to respond. (Psychology Today)*	2, 3
8. Have you seen/experienced barriers? If yes, What barriers have you experienced that prevent qualified women from advancing within their organization?	1, 3
9. Have you worked in an environment where gender-based bias or microaggressions were prevalent? What are characteristics of that organization's culture? Why do you think is was prevalent?	2, 3, 4
10. On a scale of 1-10, where does your current company culture stand with gender-based bias and microaggressions? 1: zero tolerance; 10: it was widely prevalent and accepted What are characteristics of that organization's culture? Why did you rate the organization this way? Can you provide examples?	2, 3, 4
11. What recommendations would you make to an organization to reduce and/or eliminate bias, and microaggressions women experience?	4
12. What advice do you have for women looking to break the glass ceiling in their careers or organizations?	4